



# MIMESIS

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# IMAGES, PHILOSOPHY, COMMUNICATION

Aesthetics and Thought in Japan  
and the World

Edited by  
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## KIRE-TSUZUKI AND SHŌJI

### A Pictorial Analysis of the “Flower” as Image of Dis/Continuity between Life and Death

#### 1. Kire-tszuzuki, geidō and dao

The following essay will focus on the meeting points between image and philosophy in Japanese thought starting from the work of Ōhashi Ryōsuke *Kire. The beauty in Japan*.<sup>2</sup> In particular we will try and propose a reflection on the subject *kire-tszuzuki* (切れ・つづき) through an iconographic and symbolical journey based on the image of Japanese flowers. We will also attempt to put the notion of *kire-tszuzuki* in connection with some western pictorial experiences (van Gogh and Rembrandt), starting from the remarks of Martin Heidegger and Georg Simmel.

The Japanese word *kire* as a verb means “to cut” or “to separate”. As a noun *kire* means “cutting” or a “cut”, a “piece cut off”, a “slice”, a “section” or a “segment”. As an adjective, *kire* can today be used in the sense of “racy”, “sleek”, “dashing”, “edged” or “elegant” to characterise, for example, a car, a wine or a person.<sup>3</sup> The term *kire*, however, does not only refer to a static quality but also to a dynamic artistic action and an aesthetic *practice*: the “concept” or “aesthetic category” of *kire*

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1 University of Padova

2 Ōhashi Ryōsuke 大橋良介 *Kire no kōzō: nihonbi to gendai sekai* [*Kire. The beauty in Japan*] 『「切れ」の構造：日本美と現代世界』 (Tōkyō: Chūōkōronsha, 1986). In this paper we will refer to the recent Italian version of the text (Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Kire: il bello in Giappone*. [Milano: Mimesis, 2017], from now on: K). The Italian translation was based on the German version of the Japanese original text (Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Kire. Das Schöne in Japan*. [Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014]. The English translations are mine.

3 See Simon Frisch, ‘The Aesthetics of Flow and Cut in the Way of Film: Towards Transnational Transfers of East Asian Concepts to Western Film Theory’, in *Arts*, 8 (2019), p. 3.

is in fact primarily a procedure expressed in the peculiar action of cutting away and severing. This practice is contained in the expression *kire-tsuzuki* literally: “to cut and continue”, but also “cut-continuum” or “dis/continuity”. This expression describes a peculiar dynamic between nature and artistic figuration. As Ōhashi points out, the intervention of *kire* “cuts away” the spontaneous “naturalness” given to the object “in such a way that its original naturalness, that is, interior and intimate naturalness, is made visible and brought to light”.<sup>4</sup> “This act of liberating things from their natural ambience”, claims Frisch, “is considered to be a process of enlivenment or vivification. A specific way of cutting gives birth to things in a new way of being, which is considered essential. The concept of *kire* literally implies an act or process of ‘bringing something to life’, which can only be roughly captured by the translations used here”.<sup>5</sup>

The most immediate example of *kire*’s action is the image of the flower in *ikebana* compositions. It is not a matter of tearing the flower away from its natural context and destining it to death, but of bringing out the flower’s deepest and most essential naturalness.<sup>6</sup> The term *ikebana* (生け花) literally means “bring the flower to life”.<sup>7</sup> It is an art (芸道, *geidō*) precisely because natural life is “cut off”. As in the case of the compositions of the master Shuhō Sano (佐野珠寶), flowers in *ikebana* are considered a symbol of the moment, also called “appreciation of time”.<sup>8</sup>

4 K, pp. 16 and 238.

5 Simon Frisch, ‘The Aesthetics of Flow and Cut in the Way of Film’, cit., p. 3.

6 See K, pp. 87-88; Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治, ‘Ikebana. Über die reine japanische Kunst’, in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 98-2 (1991), pp. 314-320.

7 K, p. 87.

8 Regarding the collaboration between Ōhashi Ryōsuke and Sano Shuhō see Ōhashi Ryōsuke-Shuhō, *Kashin no kokoro. Hana to Zen [The Flower Message. Flower and Zen]* 『花信のこころ一花と禅』 (Kyōto: Shōwadō 昭和堂, 2009). “The master Shuhō”, writes Ōhashi, looked like a person in whom the flower spirit was hiding to let the artist put the flowers. Her book *Ippon-sō* (“The One Blade of Grass” 『一本草』 [Tōkyō: Tokuma shoten 徳間書店, 2016]) looks like this spirit expressed itself through the mouth of Shuhō”. Ōhashi Ryōsuke *Der Philosophenweg in Kyōto. Eine Entdeckungsreise durch die japanische Ästhetik* (Alber: Freiburg-München, 2019), pp. 12, 71-72. See also Stella Coe, *Ikebana : a practical and philosophical guide to Japanese flower arrangement* (London: Century, 1984); Josiah Conder, *The flowers*



With their finite and mutable nature, flowers – as we will see with cherry blossoms – are also a symbol of change, which is described as *mujō* (無常), the Buddhist term for impermanence. In Buddhism, the expression *mujō* indicates the mutable nature of all phenomena and experiences: all things are without substance and subject to change. This awareness, however, is not a reason for nihilistic despair, but rather encourages us to capture a particular beauty in instability and imperfection. For this reason the fragility and delicacy of the flower recalls Buddhist impermanence as an appreciation of the ephemeral. The appreciation of change and of the unavoidable transience of life, expressed, for example, in the contemplation of cherry blossoms, is also linked to the expression *mono no aware* (物の哀れ). This key term in Japanese culture essentially refers to the “pathos” (*aware*) of “things” (*mono*) resulting from their transience, often associated with a poignant feeling of fleetingness. It is a beautiful sadness in the passing of lives and objects, like the evanescence of cherry blossoms or like the red colour of autumn leaves as they are about to fall.

Unlike flowers, trees, especially evergreen trees such as a pine or a cedar, are considered as symbols of eternity. So, if flowers express impermanence, evergreen trees are a symbol of the eternity of *shinnyo* (真如), the eternal-dynamic nature of all things, referring to Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> As a combination of flowers and tree elements, *ikebana* can be considered as a scenic description and a symbol of the dis/continuity (*kire-tsuzuki*) between moment and eternity, change and immutability.

The process of *kire-tsuzuki* differs both from the sphere of natural spontaneity and from the sphere of simple manufacture of objects (ποίησις, *poiesis*). It is an aesthetic experience that

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*of Japan and the art of floral arrangement* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2004 [Original work published 1891]).

9 The expression *shinnyo* refers in particular to the Buddhist Shinnyo-en school (真如苑, Borderless Garden of Truth). For both Zen and Shinnyo-en Buddhism, eternity does not mean perfect, timeless fixity, that is, it does not mean an absolute state removed from the flow of becoming, but it does mean eternal becoming, change without beginning and without end. See Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, *Dieci lezioni sul Buddhismo* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008), pp. 138-139.

does not manipulate and debase nature, but reveals its deep essence through art.

*Kire-tsuzuki* means therefore that there is a “transition” (移り渉り, *utsuri watari*) between art and nature, a transition that is neither simply continuity (連続, *renzoku*), nor simply discontinuous “cut off” (*kire*). Japanese beauty is closely linked to this dynamic: the mastery of art consists in “cutting” nature not to exclude or surpass it, but to enhance it in its purest form. Through art, the deepest and most intimate beauty of nature comes to light. The expression “cut-continuum” thus indicates the paradoxical coexistence of transition and break permeating the Japanese concept of beauty in the highest sense of the word.<sup>10</sup>

As well known, one of the crucial concepts of Western aesthetic is *mimesis* (μίμησις), which includes “imitation”, “similarity”, “illusion” and “representation” among its various meanings.

The philosophical debate on the notion of *mimesis* in the artistic field is based, starting from Aristophanes and Plato, on the ontological difference between sensitive form and supersensitive model.<sup>11</sup> As imitator (*mimetés*, μιμητής), the artist is, for Plato, a liar, a simulator, an actor in the worst sense of *hypocrites* (ὑποκριτής). Art, according to Plato, is what intoxicates souls and distances them from the truth. Even if this radical separation between what appears (the phenomenon, φαινόμενον) and what is essential (the idea, ιδέα) will be denied by Aristotle,<sup>12</sup> however, the Platonic conception of art as the lowest simulation of a true essence will constitute a leitmotif destined to permeate much of the Christian European aesthetic reflection.

In the Japanese context conventionally enclosed between the

10 In his book *Kire. The Beauty in Japan*, Ōhashi never speaks explicitly of *utsuri watari*. On the comparison of this expression with the notion of *kire-tsuzuki* see A. Giacomelli, *Übergänge und Übersetzungen. Kire-tsuzuki als «Schnitt-Kontinuum» zwischen Kunst und Natur*, in *Übergänge – Transitions – 移り渉り: Crossing the Boundaries in Japanese Philosophy*, ed. by Leon Krings, Francesca Greco, Yukiko Kuwayama (Nagoya: Chisokudō 2021), pp. 51-79.

11 See Cfr. Aristophanes, *Thesm.*, vv. 154-156; Plato, *Resp.*, III, 393d-394d, X, 596b-607b.

12 Aristotle, *Poet.*, 1447a 14-18.

Kamakura era (鎌倉時代, 1185-1333) and the Edo era (江戸時代, 1615-1867) there is either an univocal approach to truth, nor an ideal-essential model which art can imitate and falsify: Art is an exercise of life, and therefore a “way” (道, *dō*) as a way of life.<sup>13</sup>

To understand some important differences between one European conception of art (which has its roots in Greece and in the idea of *mimesis*) and a Japanese one (which has its roots in China in the idea of *dō*), it is important to underline that in the denomination of traditional “artistic practices” (芸道, *geidō*) in Japan, such as *chadō* (茶道, way of tea), *kadō* (華道, way of flowers), *kodō* (香道, way of perfumes) *shodō* (書道, way of calligraphic writing) the suffix *-dō* indicates a relation to Chinese Daoism. The same suffix occurs in “martial arts or practices” (武道, *budō*) such as *jūdō* (柔道, gentle way), *kyūdō* (弓道, way of archery), *kendō* (剣道, sword way).

The Chinese cosmic model, unlike the Western metaphysical-platonic conception, is not based on the opposition between original and copy, true and false, over-sensitive and sensitive. The *dao* (道) is the expression of a polar and a-dual dynamic of the cosmos, in which all hierarchy between the *forma-éidos* and the *simulacrum-éidolon* disappears, while what remains active is the exchangeable and fluid relationship of the elements. Concerning Japanese art, Frisch notes: “The expression *geidō* has not to do with lifelike effects. The aspect of vivification in *geidō* must not be understood as an ‘as if...’; rather, it is considered a real instance of vivification – a new and different kind of life and reality. The contrast between ‘real’ and ‘aesthetic’ or ‘real’ and ‘artificial’ is not crucial. Pygmalion’s Galatea is the opposite of *geidō*”.<sup>14</sup>

13 See H.E. Davey, *The Japanese way of the artist* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2007).

14 See Simon Frisch, ‘The Aesthetics of Flow and Cut in the Way of Film’, cit., p. 3. The reference is obviously to the sculptor Pygmalion, who had modelled a naked ivory female statue with which he had madly fallen in love. On the occasion of the ritual feasts in honour of Aphrodite, Pygmalion went to the temple of the goddess and begged her to fill the gap between art and reality and to give him in marriage the sculpture created with his hands making it a human creature (see Ovid, *Metamorph.*, X, vv. 243-297). Compared

The concept of *kire-tsuzuki* developed by Ōhashi is intrinsically linked to the notion of the way (*dō* or *dao*): the sense of *kire*, writes Ōhashi, “is to ‘cut out’ the daily naturalness, so that it reappears in a deeper form. This ‘cutting out’ is the authentic ‘mastery’. The so-called ‘art way’ (芸道, *geidō*) of traditional Japanese art forms is the way in which naturalness gets a new life through *kire*”.<sup>15</sup> This link between “cut-continuum” or “dis/continuity” (*kire-tsuzuki*), the “art way” (*geidō*) and the Chinese notion of *dao* allows to conceive art and nature not as rigidly separated and opposed, but as symbolically united and complementary. The polarity between art and nature is not static, contrastive and dualistic, but dynamic, dialectical and circular. Traditional Japanese art, and in particular the practise of *kire-tsuzuki*, therefore evokes the well-known structure of the *dao*, where *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) establish a relationship of dis/continuity between them. The black-negative principle (night, darkness, technique) and the white-positive principle (day, light, nature), fit symbiotically into each other. Art and nature maintain their own peculiarities and yet they assert themselves only in their mutual kinetic relationship. In the *dao* we can recognize the “separation” of *kire*, and at the same time the “continuity” of the elements: “the cut is an end and a beginning” at the same time.<sup>16</sup> Each element therefore contains within itself the generating nucleus of its opposite, and the work of art does not betray any “truth”, but rather is involved in a dynamic circulation of energy and “vital force” (*qi* 氣) just like any other event.

After having highlighted the deep affinity between the dis/continuous action of *kire-tsuzuki*, the Japanese “way of art” and the polar dynamics of the Chinese *dao*, we aim to show how the practice of *kire* works in the context of pictorial images of flowers.

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to the passionate attachment to the single and unrepeatable piece of work symbolized by Pygmalion, the *dō* or *dao* as *flow* is the way that teaches to focus on the process of creation, on the internalization of practice.

15 K, p. 35.

16 See Simon Frisch, ‘The Aesthetics of Flow and Cut in the Way of Film’, cit., p. 3.

2. “Cherry blossoms” by Kyūzō and the “genuine flower” of nō by Zeami

As shown by Ōhashi, in the field of pictorial images the notion of *kire* is mostly linked to that of *shōji* (生死).<sup>17</sup> The spiritual disposition of *shōji*, composed of the two characters that stand for “life” (生) and “death” (死), simultaneously expresses the dis/continuity, the polar unity and the incessant circularity of life and death that is peculiar to Daoism and Buddhism. Just as art and nature, so life and death are not understood to be separate from each other. Particularly significant to explain the expression *shōji* as a “cut-continuity” of life and death is the work *Cherry blossoms* (『桜図』) which was initially attributed to Hasegawa Tōhaku (長谷川等伯, 1539-1610, 桃山時代, Momoyama period, 1568-1615) but today is considered a work of his son Hasegawa Kyūzō (長谷川久蔵, 1568-93).<sup>18</sup>

*Cherry blossoms* by Kyūzō is a painting on a golden background on sliding doors belonging to the category of *shōhekiga* (障壁画, drawings on dividers).<sup>19</sup> In the rich Japanese floral language (花言葉 *Hanakotoba*)<sup>20</sup> the ever-popular *sakura* (桜) symbolize the volatility, transience and ephemeral brevity of life. Japanese interest in cherry blossom as a theme for poetry and painting developed during the Heian period (平安時代, 794-1185). At that time, along with the evolution of a native artistic sensibility heavily influenced by the passing seasons, the flowers gained

17 See K, pp. 107; 254.

18 Doi Tsugiyoshi 土井次義, *Hasegawa Tōhaku kenkyū* [Hasegawa Tōhaku Study] 『長谷川等伯研究』 (Tōkyō: Kōdansha 講談社, 1977); Doi Tsugiyoshi, *Decorative Painting, The Heibonsha Survey of Japanese Art*, Volume 14, (New York-Tokyo: Heibonsha 平凡社, 1977), pp. 18, 90-91, 106-107; Takeda Tsuneo 武田恒夫, Kano Hiroyuki 狩野博幸 (ed. by), *Kachōga no sekai* [The World of Bird-and-Flower] 『花鳥画の世界』 (Tokyo: Gakken 学研, 1982), pp. 121-123, 128.

19 In particular the style of the painting is called *kinpekishōhekiga* (金碧障壁画, painting executed on dividing panels or walls on a gold background). See K, p. 111.

20 Gustie Luise Herrigel, *Zen in the art of flower arrangement. An introduction to the spirit of the Japanese art of flower arrangement* (transl. by R.F.C. Hull, London: Souvenir Press, 1999 [Original work published 1958]).

their place as one of the main symbols of spring. Since the Heian period, the cherry blossom has been revered by the Japanese, for its natural beauty and grace, its brief blossoming period and the fragility of its delicate flowers. Precisely the transitory nature of the flower has often been associated with mortality.<sup>21</sup> What Ōhashi emphasizes in the description of Kyūzō's work is the fact that the myriad of flowers that bloom from the cherry tree do not have a uniquely decorative value, linked to the beauty of spring. The beauty of the flowers subtends a gloomy and mournful side: as if in the full bloom of life there was somehow already present the withering of death.



Figure 1 Hasegawa Kyūzō, *Cherry blossoms* (『桜図』)

The huge trunk of the cherry tree rises upwards and overflows beyond the sliding door, meaning that it is “sharply separated and cut out” in an abrupt manner. The thin branches on both sides of the trunk hang down, touching it and separating from it. The painter cuts unnecessary parts and represents only the important ones. Each of the magnificent cherry blossoms appears to hover freely in space, yet their extraordinarily beautiful appearance possesses a “shade” (翳り, *kageri*), revealing the co-presence and the dis/continuity of life-death (*shōji*) in bloom.<sup>22</sup>

The *kire-tsuzuki* and the *shōji* appear when the “withering” (枯れ *kare*) of the flower can already be sensed in full blossoming.

21 Lee Khoo Choy, *Japan. Between Myth and reality* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1995), p. 142.

22 See K, p. 108.

As Ōhashi points out, this dynamic was already present in the reflection on *nō* theatre by Zeami (世阿弥, ?1364-?1443). The titles of Zeami's theoretical works often contain the character indicating "flower" and "bloom" (花, *hana* or *ka*):<sup>23</sup> particularly in *Fūshikaden*, the art and physiognomy of the actor are described according to the metaphor of the flower. The "flower" of 12 and 13-year-old actors, writes Zeami, "is not the genuine flower",<sup>24</sup> since the "genuine flower" – namely the true craftsmanship – can only be achieved through a long refinement of the art-way. The "genuine flower" therefore is not the unripe flower of youth, but the mature flower of old age. The "flower" is not pure nature, but nature stylized in a form (型, *kata*) by means of mastery. The withering flower – which we could compare to *ikebana* – symbolizes the actor's old age. The actor of *nō*, in his relationship with death, or rather in his being essentially mortal, brings to light naturalness in its authentic essence. Again, through the *kire* nature is "cutted" by the "technical" intervention of man to obtain a new and deeper life. The beauty of the flower of old age contains in itself – as in the case of cherry blossoms – the blooming and fading, the dis/continuity of life and death. It is important to underline, in the light of these considerations, that the Chinese character that expresses "flower" (花) contains the sign indicating "transformation" (化). This last sign also means "to go beyond", "to expire", and therefore alludes to the transition and to the perception of the whole as transitory.

In *Cherry blossoms* of Kyūzō it is possible to recognize precisely that quality of withering which also characterizes the flower of Zeami. However, while in Zeami the withered flower (枯れた花, *kareta hana*) appears predominant in the form of

23 Zeami Motokiyo 世阿弥元清, *Kakyō* [A Mirror Held to the Flower] 『花鏡』; *Fūshikaden* [Teachings on Style and the Flower] 『風姿花伝』; *Shikadō* [The True Path to the Flower] 『至花道』; *Shūgyokutokka* [Finding Gems and Gaining the Flower] 『拾玉得花』; *Kashū no uchi mukigaki* [An Extract from Learning the Flower] 『花習内拔書』 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). See. K, pp. 29, 31-32.

24 Zeami Motokiyo, *Fūshikaden*, cit. in K, p. 31 (transl. by ours).

declined old age, in Kyūzō death is only hinted at and the beauty of the flowers remains in the foreground.

The condition of death is also symbolically reiterated by the fact that the trees are painted on the golden background, which is an unusual colour, in fact it is not really a colour, but rather a concentration of brightness that on one side symbolizes the richness, authority and power of the world; on the other side it is a glow that also adorns the world of gods. While gold expresses the glory of this world, it reflects both the power and shining of a world beyond. This double vision, that is the cut/continuity of real world and beyond, is further justified by the fact that the painting was commissioned by Governor Toyotomi Hideyoshi (豊臣秀吉, 1536-98) for the family temple in which his beloved son is buried.

Although the *Cherry blossom* painting does not explicitly represent Hideyoshi's mourning, the specific emotional tonality that permeates the work is for Ōhashi that of life and death.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. *The Tōhaku Maple, the grave of Queen Sōjun and the Red and White Plum Blossoms by Kōrin*

The theme of the dis/continuity between life and death is also clearly represented in the tree of the painting *Maple* (『楓図』) by Hasegawa Tōhaku. The trunk of the maple tree is even sturdier and knottier than that of the cherry tree. The foliage of the maple, which in autumn turns dark red and whose single leaves in Japan are particularly minute and delicate, contrasts with the strongness of the trunk. This trunk, however, as Ōhashi points out, is not only an expression of worldly life force.<sup>26</sup> The lespedeza flowers and white chrysanthemums around the trunk are premonitory signs of the sad winter season. If cherry blossoms are the image par excellence of spring, maple and chrysanthemum are typical autumn plants: Behind the thick

25 See K, p. 109.

26 See K, p. 109.



patch of autumn foliage represented in the painting, two further half-hidden trunks can be recognized. They create the effect of shadows (影, *kage*) behind the huge tree in the foreground. The shadows, the chrysanthemums, and the golden background similar to that of *Cherry blossoms* give the impression that an emotional tone of solemn death envelops this mighty tree. Again, in fact, the radiance of gold reflects the splendour and light of a world beyond. In addition, the autumn atmosphere created by the chrysanthemum flowers and maple leaves alludes to a slumbering nature. The mighty maple also seems to show Hideyoshi's power, but, at the same time, the fragility of life, as witnessed by the death of his favourite son.



Figure 2 Hese-gawa Tōhaku, *Maple* (『楓図』)

The relationship of dis/continuity between life and death in the painting *Maple* emerges in a concrete way at Kyōto's Way of Philosophy (哲学の道, *tetsugaku-no-michi*). In particular, as Ōhashi observes, sometimes there are miraculous places and moments in which past lives return.<sup>27</sup> A special place on Kyōto's Way of Philosophy that has the power to correlate life and death is the grave of Queen Sōjun.<sup>28</sup> A large maple tree stands

27 See Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Der Philosophenweg in Kyōto*, cit., p. 170 (transl. by ours).

28 Queen Sōjun's father was Prince Fushimi no miya Sadayuki 伏見宮貞敬 (1776-1841), while the mother was the daughter of Kanpaku 関白 (the highest ministerial rank) Ichijō Teruyoshi 一条輝良 (1756-1794). The "queen" (*joō* 女王) Sōjun, emphasizes Ōhashi, was not in fact a queen, but a lady of the highest level. See Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Der Philosophenweg in Kyōto*, cit., pp. 79-80. "The Queen Sōjun had played an important role in the movement

there, whose leaves turn a splendid colour in late autumn and whose branches hang down over the white wall. These leaves turn deep red in very late autumn, when the leaves of the other maple trees have almost fallen off. “In Kyōto”, writes Ōhashi, “there are several places known for their maple leaves and also at Kyōto’s Philosopher’s walk there are many maple trees. But the splendour of the maple leaves at the grave of Queen Sōjun, with its contrast to the white wall, is simply incomparable. When I see these maple leaves, I can’t help but connect them to the unknown and isolated Queen Sōjun who died in seclusion. It seems to me that the maple leaves express the posthumous luminescence of the Queen’s life”.<sup>29</sup>

The contrast between the red of the maple leaves and the white of the wall in the background may perhaps refer to that between the maple leaves of Tōhaku and the golden background. In both cases the beauty of natural life activates a peculiar relationship with time. The past is never dead and sharply separated (切れ) from the present, and death is not the opposite of life. *Kire-tsuzuki* expresses thus the interpenetration of the here and now (此岸, *shigan*) and of the beyond (彼岸, *higan*).



Figure 3  
The grave of Queen Sōjun

“Imperial Declaration on the Dissemination of the Great Teaching” (*Daikyō-senpu-undō* 大教宣布運動) started by the Meiji government. This was the political-religious measure authorized by the state to make Shintō the state religion”. Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Der Philosophenweg in Kyōto*, cit., p. 81.

29 Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Der Philosophenweg in Kyōto*, cit., p. 170.

The unity of life and death manifests itself significantly in the painting *Red and White Plum Blossoms* (『紅白梅図』) by Ogata Kōrin (尾形光琳, 1658-1716). Between the two trees is depicted a river that at the same time unites and cuts – in the sense of *kire-tsuzuki* – the two parts of the painting. If we follow the lines of the river waves, we can see that they flow out of one vortex and then vanish into another. It seems as if in a certain way every single wave arises from one abyss and vanishes into another.<sup>30</sup> Every single wave is independent of the others. Each wave seems to “split” from the others. At the same time, however, the waves converge in a vigorous common flow. There is therefore a dis/continuity between the individual waves and the overall river flow. “Rising from the abyss and vanishing again into it”, writes Ōhashi, “to be ‘separated’ from the others and independent, but not being able to exist without the others, is not only about the way of being of the individual waves in the watercourse. This also corresponds to the way of being of life (命, *inochi*), which arises and dies”.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 4 Ogata Kōrin, *Red and White Plum Blossoms* (『紅白梅図』)

30 See K, p. 135.

31 K, p. 135.

The river separates a white plum tree painted on the left side from a red plum tree painted on the right side. According to Ōhashi the two trees are contrasting not only chromatically but also formally. If the river in the middle makes life appear as a fundamental element, the two trees indicate the polarity of sexual gender. The red and white flowers of the plum tree are separated and “cut” from the river as the sexes are differentiated. Yet, like the waves of the river, the flowers belong to a single vital flow. Again, the unity of life and death is shown in the trees that stand out against a golden background. The “life” of the watercourse and the “sexual genders” of the plum blossoms are surrounded by this golden background, which expresses the dis/continuity between what is human (情, *jō*) and what is not (非情, *hijō*), between life and death.

“What emerges here” writes Ōhashi, “is not the oppressive omen of death of Hasegawa Kyūzō’s *Cherry Blossoms*, but rather the gaze that recognizes the non-human indifference of death in the midst of life’s blossoming”.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Kire-tsuzuki and Western art. Van Gogh and Rembrandt according to Heidegger and Simmel

This polar-circulatory in-difference and dis/continuous relationship characteristic of *kire-tsuzuki* and *shōji* can be compared to the relationship of mutual co-ownership (*Zu-einander-Gehören*) between man and the ontological difference, that is between *Dasein* and Being (*Sein*), according to Heidegger. “Man and Being”, claims Heidegger in “Taoist” terms,<sup>33</sup>

32 K, p. 136.

33 On Heidegger and “Eastern thought”, and in particular his relationship with Taoism and Zen Buddhism, see Fabian Heubel, *Gewundene Wege nach China: Heidegger – Daoismus – Adorno* (Klostermann: Frankfurt a. M., 2020); Katrin Froese, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Daoist Thought: Crossing Paths In-Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Steven Heine, ‘The Flower Blossoms “Without Why”’: Beyond the Heidegger-Kuki Dialogue on Contemplative Language’, in *The Eastern Buddhist Society* 3-2 (1990), pp. 60-88; Carlo Saviani, *L’oriente di Heidegger* (il melangolo:

“have already reached each other [...] since both are mutually appropriated, extended as a gift, one to the other”.<sup>34</sup>

What seems to have definitely disappeared in the age of technique is for Heidegger the experience of Being as *Ereignis*. This experience is similar to the one contained in the Chinese expression *dao* and in the Japanese expression *kire/tsuzuki*, as far as a relationship of complementarity, dependence, connection and dis/continuity is expressed with these notions.

In *A dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer* by Heidegger the theme of the difference – namely the dis/continuity – between Being and entity is central and constitutes the point of convergence between the interlocutors. For the “Inquirer”-Heidegger, as well as for the “Japanese” Tezuka Tomio (手塚富雄, 1903-1983), the language itself is nothing but a response to the call of the “difference” (*Zwiefalt*). The “event” of language as “difference” – that is, as dis/continuity and exchangeable belonging of man and Being – is not the expression of an “ethnic” dualism between cultures, rather a place of conjunction between worldviews, a common access to the open (*das Offene*) beyond any grammatical particularism. The Japanese word for this conception of language, as the place of the “difference”, is *koto ba* (言葉).

“And what does that say?”, asks Heidegger to the Japanese. “*Ba* means leaves”, answers Tezuka, “including and especially the leaves of a blossom – petals. Think of cherry blossoms or plum blossoms”.<sup>35</sup> *Koto* literally means “to say”, but in a deeper sense it expresses “the pure delight of the beckoning stillness [...]. But *koto* always also names that which in the event gives delight, itself, that which uniquely in each unrepealable moment comes to radiance in the fullness of its grace”. The meaning of

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Genova, 1998).

34 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row, 1969, [Original work published 1957]), p. 33.

35 Martin Heidegger, *A Dialogue on Language*, in Id., *On the Way to Language* (New York et al.: Harper & Row, 1971, [Original work published 1957]), p. 45.

*koto*, which Heidegger and Tezuka share, is therefore that “of the lightening message of grace”.<sup>36</sup>

Language can thus be seen as “a flower”, since it allows the sprouting of *ba* – leaves and “petals” of words – and expresses the common generating function of Japanese language and German “saying” (*die Sage*). *Koto* and *Sage* therefore represent a common background – or better a dis/continuity – between East and West: From the original language (*die ursprüngliche Sprache*) the particular languages sprout like leaves or blossom like petals.

The in-difference between being and entity evoked in language as event, which expresses the dis/continuity between the original saying and the everyday word, is equally evident in the work of art. For Heidegger the work of art is not a simple representation aimed at the spectator’s pleasure, but an event in which being manifests itself and hides itself at the same time. Like language, art is not the subjective product of a painter or a poet, on the contrary: the work “flourishes” from art and secondarily makes the artist possible. Art is the origin of the work, not the creative subject.

So in van Gogh’s famous painting *A pair of Shoes* (1885) what comes to light is not for Heidegger the ready-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) function of the shoes, but rather the being of the entity itself: the painting depicts “the thing” (the peasant shoes) letting it be as thing.<sup>37</sup> Van Gogh’s work is therefore not the consequence of the action of genius as a sovereign subject, but it is considered a poetic fact in itself. In the apparent insignificance of the peasant shoes the event of the being unfolds itself: “The emergence of createdness from the work does not mean that the work is to give the impression of having been made by a great artist. The point is not that the created being be certified as the performance of a capable person, so that the producer is thereby brought to public notice. It is not the *N. N. fecit* that is to be made

36 Martin Heidegger, *A Dialogue on Language*, cit., p. 45.

37 See Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in Id., *Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993 [Original work published 1950]), pp. 139-212.

known. Rather, the simple *factum est* [...]”.<sup>38</sup> The work of art confronts us with the extraordinary event of being that emerges from the entity, it strikes us with that prodigious shock (*Stoß*) that requires us to transform our usual way of seeing the world.



Figure 5  
Vincent van Gogh,  
*A pair of Shoes*

The change of view resulting from the impact of the artwork also involves our conception of life and death. If Heidegger focuses on the painting *A pair of Shoes* in order to stress the dis/continuity between being and entity, “the clearing of beings” (*die Lichtung des Seienden*) and “the opening up of the open region” (*die Eröffnung des Offenen*),<sup>39</sup> Ōhashi shows the chiaroscuro nature of late van Gogh’s paintings, in which the *kire-tsuzuki* between life and death, and therefore the experience of *shōji*, are palpable. In the bright yellow of van Gogh’s wheat fields we can see an anguished darkness.<sup>40</sup> In line with the Taoist perspective that there is no light that does not generate shadow, in van Gogh brightness always has a dark counterpart, which is polarly connected to it. The abyss of gloom in van Gogh’s paintings is not an element opposed to light but is co-essential to

38 Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 190.

39 Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 196.

40 See K, p. 161.

it. The dis/continuous dynamic of *kire-tsuzuki* seems to cross the boundaries of Japanese culture and manifest itself in the osmosis between light and darkness of the Dutch painter's work, in which the bright yellow of sunny wheat fields is permeated by shadowy pain just as in the expression *shōji* life is permeated by death.

Perhaps this peculiar dynamic can also be recognized in the series of van Gogh's still lives named *Sunflowers*, executed in Paris in 1887. However, in conclusion of this paper, we would like to highlight another possible parallel between *kire-tsuzuki* and western art that Ōhashi does not consider, namely the fundamental relationship between life and death present in Rembrandt's paintings.

According to Simmel, in all portraits of Rembrandt inhabits "one future moment, which after all makes life into a totality precisely by breaking it off".<sup>41</sup> This "braking off" action is the moment of death inherent in all living things. Almost literally anticipating the conception of *kire* developed by Ōhashi, Simmel describes the relationship between life and death in Rembrandt's portraits in the sign of dis/continuity. Referring to the mythological image of the Greek Parcae, Simmel shows how in Rembrandt's portraits life is not simply cut out of death: rather life and death are intimately and polarly linked and are in a relationship of cut and continuity.<sup>42</sup> "A certain sensibility toward the relationship of life and death", writes Simmel in an important passage, "seems to me to exist with him [...] and he seems to possess the deepest insight into the significance of death. I am convinced that this insight depends entirely on one's giving up the conception in terms of the *Parcae*: as if in a certain temporal moment of life's thread, which until then had been continually spun as life and exclusively as life, had been 'cut off', as if life

41 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art* (New York-London: Routledge, 2005 [Original work published 1916]), p. 71.

42 The Parcae or Moirae in Greek mythology had the possibility to control human destiny (in fact μοῖρα in ancient Greek means "destiny"). Their task was to weave the thread of every man's fate and to cut it off at the hour of death. This "cut" of life by Parcae marks a clear contrast between life and death, which for Simmel must be completely abandoned if we want to understand that death has always been within life.



were predetermined to confront death at a certain point in its course, but only then, in that moment, comes into contact with it. Instead of this conception, it seems to me beyond doubt that death *inhabits* life from the onset”.<sup>43</sup>

Anticipating also Heidegger’s reflection about “being-towards-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*),<sup>44</sup> Simmel claims that “Death is related to life not like a possibility that at some point becomes reality, but rather our life only becomes life as we know it, and is only formed as it is, in that we (whether growing or fading, on life’s sunny uplands or in the dark shadows of its decline) are always and already *such beings that will die*”.<sup>45</sup>

The image of life that grows and fades can be referred again to the metaphor of the flower, which expresses the transience and the *kire-tsuzuki* between life and death. According to Simmel, we must disprove the inauthentic idea that “we die” only in an indeterminate future: “the awareness that we shall die is not simply an anticipation, an idealized foreshadowing of our last hour, but is the inner ever-present reality of each moment”.<sup>46</sup> Also in this case the anticipation of the Heideggerian themes of *Being and time* is manifest.

Oposing the traditionally Western idea of death expressed in still life and “dances of death”, which indicates the transience and mortality of life in a cautionary and negative sense,<sup>47</sup> Rembrandt does not conceive death as “an enemy [...] coming from afar toward us, but rather death is from the onset a *character indelebilis* of life”.<sup>48</sup> This is why Simmel urges us not to consider death as a “skeletal ghost” (*der Knochenmann*) that lies outside of life: “If one grasps death not as a violent creature waiting outside — as a fate coming upon us at a certain moment — if

43 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 71.

44 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996 [original work published in 1927]), pp. 219-246.

45 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 71.

46 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 71.

47 Ohashi, for example, refers to the still lifes of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), as an expressive example of baroque *vanitas* and of the *memento mori* theme. See K, pp. 213-214.

48 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 72.

one moreover comprehends its insoluble, deep immanence in life itself, then the death secretly casting its shadow out of so many Rembrandt portraits is only a symptom of how unconditionally, in his art, precisely the principle of life connects itself to that of individuality”.<sup>49</sup> In Rembrandt’s portraits such as *Self Portrait with Saskia* (1636), *Man holding Gloves* (1642), *Titus at his desk* (1655), *Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild* (1662) and *Laughing Self Portrait* (1665-1670 ca.), death is immediately felt with and within life as one of its elements. According to Simmel, “those portraits contain life in its widest sense, which also includes death. Everything that is merely life, such that it had estranged itself from death, is life in its narrower sense; it is in a way an abstraction”.<sup>50</sup> Particularly in the *Laughing Self Portrait* “the laughing is unmistakably something purely momentary”, but “the whole is as if infused by, and oriented toward, death”.<sup>51</sup> Some interpreters claim that Rembrandt, in this self-portrait, likens himself to the fifth-century BC Greek painter Zeuxis, who, according to myth, died laughing while contemplating the portrait of a funny-looking old woman that he had just finished painting.<sup>52</sup> Other interpretations conclude that Rembrandt represents himself by referring to the laughing face of Democritus juxtaposed with the bust of the severe Heraclitus or, more generally, that he laughs in the face of his own impending death.<sup>53</sup> At the end of his life, Rembrandt portrays himself with an expression that is both a fierce grin and a serene acceptance of death. It seems a threshold proxemics between laughing and crying. Between life and death there is the most disquieting affinity: the old man’s smirk carries with it the cheerfulness of youth, which nevertheless appears marked by the burden of a life of suffering. The element of death in life, which in youth remains hidden and invisible, now emerges on the surface. The precious tissue that glides over the

49 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 79.

50 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 74.

51 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 74.

52 See Ernst van de Wetering, *Self Portrait as Zeuxis Laughing*, in *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005, vol. IV), p. 556.

53 See Corrado Ricci, *Rembrandt in Italia* (Milan: Alfieri & Lacroix, 1918), p. 17.

painter's shoulders is a stream of light that, like a shooting star, consumes its glow and returns to the darkness. It is probably a metaphor for the parable of a fading life.

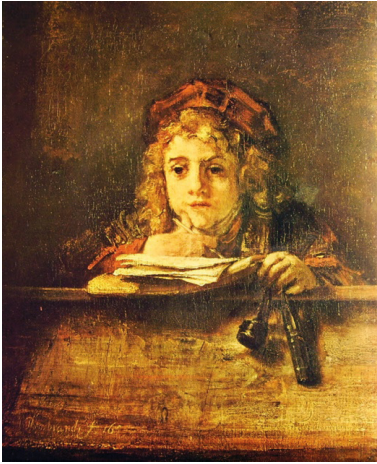


Figure 6  
Rembrandt, *Titus at his desk*

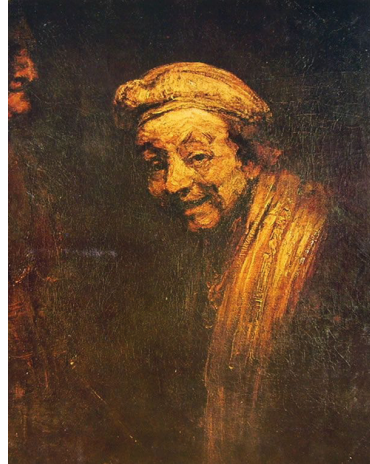


Figure 7  
Rembrandt, *Laughing Self Portrait*

It is not possible, at this point, to relate the laughter of Rembrandt's self-portrait to the smile of the *Tiger in the snow* (『雪中虎図』), which represents the self-portrait of Hokusai Katsushika (葛飾北斎, 1760-1849) before he died.<sup>54</sup> We can perhaps only hint at the possible affinity between the sneer of old Rembrandt and the serenity of Hokusai's tiger: in both cases, old age expresses a serene, youthful and playful attitude towards death as an element of life. The incessant circularity of the earthly world and otherworldly world, of life and death, are thus transformed into play (遊び, *asobi*), into a serene hovering between two worlds.

“One of the deepest typical conditions of our worldview”,

54 See K, pp. 142-145.

claims Simmel almost in unconsciously Taoist terms, “becomes valid here. Many of our essential determinations of being order themselves into dichotomies such that one concept finds its meaning in the correlation with the other: good and evil, masculine and feminine, credit and debt, progress and stagnation, and numerous others. The relativity of the one finds its limit and form in the other [...]. And so perhaps life and death — insofar as they seem to exclude each other logically and physically — are still only relative opposites, embraced by life in its absolute sense that underpins and embraces the mutual limitation and conditioning of life and death”.<sup>55</sup>

The immanence of death in life, which in Rembrandt’s paintings seems so close to the idea of circularity and unceasing dis/continuity of life and death contained in the expression *shōji*, is perhaps an indirect and further developable point of contact between the world of Western and East Asian images.

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55 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, cit., p. 72.