

## Article

# The Aesthetics of Flow and Cut in the Way of Film: Towards Transnational Transfers of East Asian Concepts to Western Film Theory

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**Abstract:** The general concepts in theorising the aesthetics of film are still rooted in occidental traditions. Thus, thinking about film is dominated by Western terms and aesthetic paradigms—such as “pieces of work”, the representation of reality or regarding the arts as an act of communication. From such an angle, it is difficult to describe different characteristics of the cinematic image, for example, its ephemeral character. In contrast to occidental thinking, the cultural traditions of East Asia are based on the concept of *the way* (*dō* or *dao*), which allow for the description of aesthetics of transitions and transformations. Inspired by the concept of *kire-tsuzuki*, as developed by the Japanese–German philosopher Ryōsuke Ōhashi, I shall, in this paper, describe some alternative ways of understanding appearance and occurrence in relation to the cinematic picture.

**Keywords:** cinematic picture; film aesthetics; theory of beauty; *ikebana*; *kire*; *geidō*; film philosophy; Japanese aesthetics; transcultural thinking

## 1. Introduction: Ways of Cutting the Flow of Tea

The cultures of tea in China, Japan and European countries differ, in part, in their methods of steeping. In Chinese tea culture, one teapot is usually steeped up to six times or more, and the duration of the infusion is quite flexible. In Japan, one pot of tea is usually steeped not more than three times, and the infusion times are quite exact: the first infusion is sixty seconds, the second is fifty to twenty seconds, and the third infusion takes three minutes. In traditional Western tea cultures, such as in England or northern Germany, one pot of tea is steeped only one time with an exact point of “cutting off” the process of infusion. Chinese tea practice seems to be interested in participating in the process of the evolution or, rather, in following the *flow* of the tea as a whole. Tea culture in Japan seems to focus on singling out particular, precise moments from the process of infusion, each possessing their own particular taste. In Western tea culture, the tea is steeped in order to get the unique and genuine taste of the tea. Not only are the steeping methods different, each culture includes its own imagination of tea. However, each taste of tea is real, and there is no taste of tea beyond infusion practice.

By contrasting tea cultures in such a way (admittedly simplified and schematic), we are touching on fundamental aesthetic questions. These questions also concern fundamental aspects of thinking about film: in particular, the moving image, the course and transformation of the image, the practice and the effects of *cadrage* and framing, as well as cutting and editing, and the aesthetics of continuity and discontinuity. The examples of Asian tea cultures open up horizons for examining aesthetic problems of film beyond those perspectives that we typically consider universal—for example, the basic difference between reality and imagination but also concepts of representation, reflection, mimesis and illusion that often figure in the theory of the cinematic image.

In this paper, I would like to propose a model for rethinking the main concepts and criteria of film theory and film philosophy, which are still dominated worldwide by occidental traditions of thinking—most basically by Western terms of aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *Kire* (Cut): A Different View on the Cinematic Image

In the history of modernity, there have been numerous transfers of concepts from occidental to oriental culture, which does not seem to be the case when one considers a movement in the opposite direction: theoretical concepts and terms from oriental culture seem to have hardly ever been transferred to the Occident. One could call this a form of Eurocentrism in the Asian world in the 20th century, primarily in Japan in the Meiji period. However, even if 20th-century European *thinking* remains occidental-based, modern European *artistic culture* is shaped and strongly marked by non-European influences, above all from Japan (Japonism)—e.g., Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Brecht, Cage, modern architecture. Looking closer, one can find countless inspirations and influences of Japanese (and also Chinese) culture in modern Western thinking—e.g., Heidegger, Barthes, Derrida. There seems to be a gap between the ‘practice’ of theory and the general self-perception and the discourse about the evolution and the origins of 20th-century European philosophy (May 1996; Parkes 1987).

Although cinema was invented in the Occident (by the Lumière brothers in France, Edison in the United States, Skladanowsky in Germany, etc.) and introduced to most countries by the Lumière brothers, its aesthetic articulation, constitution and form are not necessarily rooted in occidental traditions. The most important characteristics of film—its transitory and ephemeral character and the movement of the cinematic image—are not compatible with the concept of the image in traditional occidental aesthetic theory. Furthermore, the idea of the cinematic image in terms of representation or realism originates from concepts of the image in Renaissance painting and not so much from the photographic technique itself.

Against this background, it is interesting to refer to concepts of the image beyond occidental-based theories. In fact, there already exist quite prominent tendencies to reconceptualise traditions of Western aesthetics. In 1970, Barthes (1970) proposed from the angle of Japanese aesthetics a theory of signs beyond occidental paradigms. The idea that images are creations and concrete beings, and not representations, resonates with Lev Manovich’s and William J. Mitchell’s understanding that digital images are the effects of a *kino-brush* rather than a *kino-eye*. In recent times, Western digital film theory has moved further away from the description of traditional occidental film theory (Manovich 1995, 1996; Mitchell 1992). However, as far as I see, it is not the digital technique that is changing the character of images. The technique has only raised awareness of certain aspects in the aesthetic of images that already existed. Even if they were not important in Western culture, they may have already had importance in non-occidental cultures.

I would like to propose perspectives towards a different aesthetic of film from the angle of a concept presented by the Japanese–German philosopher Ryōsuke Ōhashi in his book *Kire. Das ‘Schöne’ in Japan* [‘Beauty’ in Japan] (Ōhashi 1994, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Ōhashi considers *kire*, a fundamental aesthetic principle in the Japanese concept of beauty. Although he concentrates on Japanese culture, Ōhashi also suggests that the concept of *kire* could be expanded to other contexts. Ōhashi’s book could be taken as an inspiration in order to analyse questions of film aesthetics. Yet, surprisingly, he does not mention film in relation to this concept, which is what I will examine in this paper: I will adopt the concept of *kire* in order to discuss particular aspects of the cinematic image and hence introduce a non-occidental aesthetic concept in thinking about film.

<sup>1</sup> From the 1990s on, however, there have been English translations of Chinese and Japanese film theories and film critics: Semsel et al. (1990) and Semsel et al. (1993). About Japanese film critics, see: Iwamoto (1987); Gerow (2010a, 2010b) and Satō (2010). See also Fan (2015).

<sup>2</sup> The book was published first in 1994; there is a revised edition from 2014 that contains new texts (Ōhashi 1994, 2014).

### 3. The Concept of *Kire* (Cut)

The Japanese word *kire* as a verb means “to cut” or “to separate”, but also “to free”. As a noun *kire* means “cutting” or a “cut”, a “piece cut off”, a “slice”, a “section” or a “segment”. However, *kire* can also mean “dissolving”. As an adjective, *kire* can today be used in the sense of “racy”, “sleek”, “dashing” or “edged” to characterise, for example, a car, a wine or a person.<sup>3</sup>

Ōhashi describes *kire* generally as an artistic practice that tends to liberate dependencies, relations and contexts (Ōhashi 1994, p. 59). This act of liberating things from their natural ambience 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.

*Kire* marks an important difference from traditional Western aesthetics, the key concepts of which are based on imitation and the representation of life. To understand that difference, it is important to be aware of a general trait in Japanese aesthetics: in the names of traditional arts in Japan (*geidō*), such as *chadō*, *kadō*, *jūdō*, etc., the suffix *-dō* indicates a relation to Chinese *Daoism*. In its aesthetic context, the *dō* or *dao*, what we can translate as *flow* or *the way*, is different from the Western concept of the arts, which is concentrated on *pieces* of work (Hammitzsch 1957; Hashimoto 1998; Imai 2004; Ōhashi 1998; Seubold 1993). Japanese art and aesthetics are more focused on movements, processes or certain gestures than on pieces of work. In *geidō*, there are no gestures of communication or expression such as those present in occidental culture. Furthermore, *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>4</sup>

Ōhashi considers the poetics of *geidō* as particular aesthetics of the cut (*kire*). However, it must be considered that *kire* does not only mean “cut” in a literal sense of slicing material things. As an example of the way the aesthetics of *kire* works, Ōhashi examines the ‘flow of walking’ in *Nō* theatre:

On the stage, while walking, the actor slides forward inaudibly and slowly. This slow pacing deprives the usual walking, which corresponds to the flow of time, of its reality. However, at a closer look one can recognise in this way of pacing an extremely stylised way of human’s walk. While lifting the toes of his foot, the actor slides his whole foot forward. Every step—both that of the right foot and the left foot—is completed by the actor by dropping his toes, and hence every step is cut. With this *kire* (cut), however, the next step has already begun and thus the pacing forward continues. What we can note here is a continuity which contains a *kire*, a cut, since one foot cannot continue until the other has made its cut. (Ōhashi 1994, p. 14; my translation)

In pointing out the importance of the combination of the cut and the continuation in the step, Ōhashi establishes actually an aesthetic of continuity as the essence of *kire*. The cut is an end and a beginning. This combination he calls *kire-tsuzuki* (“cut-continuity”). The walking forward on a *Nō* stage seems to be withdrawn into itself so that it is not connected with any context: there is no target to reach by walking, no path to walk on. Instead, the walking is endowed with an inner dimension of time and space. In the practice of *Nō*, by withdrawing the pace into the concrete gesture, the essence of walking is produced—or one can also say: the beauty of walking. One can say that in the ‘way of the arts’ (*geidō*), the execution of gestures simultaneously withdraws them into itself. This means that

<sup>3</sup> I thank the participants of the conference in Frankfurt in 2013 and of a workshop in 2017 at Keio University, Tokyo, especially Kentaro Kawashima, for the explanations of the meanings of *kire* in contemporary life.

<sup>4</sup> When revising this paper, I was referred to Terada Torahiko’s film theory, which was grounded in scientific universalism and, as such, poses a challenge to the occidental aesthetic concept of thinking about film. With Terada, one could explain how the effect of vivification is achieved. It is surprising that Ōhashi does not create a reference to Terada in his concept of *kire*. This is a subject for further research.

each gesture that is executed, at the same, is incorporated into the person who is acting (e.g. walking, painting, writing, moving, etc.).

#### 4. *Ikebana*: The Flower and the Blossom of Beauty

The core of *ikebana* is the cutting of the flower and its arrangement among other flowers. *Ikebana* is often misunderstood as an art that draws on resources from natural life. However, it is not about imitating or representing natural life. The word *ikebana* literally means “to enliven the flower”. The cut flower thus is not dead. Ōhashi describes the result of this process as “the truth of the living flower”, which entails cutting away the natural life of the flower (Ōhashi 1994, p. 69, my translation). *Ikebana* must be understood as a transformation of the natural flower from the meadow to another nature, which is real and natural but different from the life of the flower in the meadow. The cut produces an aesthetic existence for the flower. That aspect can also be applied to the take in a film: a take can be described as a section taken, or cut, from life. This cut results in a transformation from real life into cinematic life. What we can learn here from *ikebana* is to give up the idea that there is only one sphere of liveliness and reality. Similar to the liveliness of the cut flower in *ikebana*, we can develop a concept of the cinematic shot as producing a living image. We will no longer think in terms of lifelikeness or similarity but, rather, regard the picture itself as the origin of its own cinematic liveliness.

It is interesting, in this context, that one of the most important contemporary *ikebana* artists in Japan, Toshirō Kawase, wanted to become a filmmaker in his early years.<sup>5</sup> While studying in Paris, he discovered the films of Tarkovsky and began to understand that there was a relation between film and *ikebana*. Moreover, what he was interested in doing with film bore a strong resemblance to the aesthetics of *ikebana*. He thus went back to Japan to become a grand master of the practice. Considering Kawase’s foundation in film can support our rethinking of the aesthetics of the shot and the cinematic image: the cinematic take is—similar to the flower—cut out from nature. The cinematic liveliness results firstly and directly from the shot. It does not result from ‘lifelikeness’. The cuts and the cut pieces (the takes) are working in a specific sense: the *living*—not *lifelike*—images *act* similar to the flowers in *ikebana*, which establish a new reality within and without the arrangement. The interdependence of all elements and cuts creates a particular reality. In other words, the cut does not destroy the flower’s existence, on the contrary. The flower gains a new temporality and a new spatiality. Thus, *ikebana* can be understood as an arrangement of time and space, and different scales and modes of presence, organised by *kire*.<sup>6</sup>

The new existence of the flower in *ikebana* is often considered its *essence* (Ōhashi also writes in this sense). However, this term is misleading. From the angle of *ikebana* itself, the cut is an introduction or fabrication of something that was not there before. The flower appears in a realm of beauty. The beauty never existed before, and yet, the flower appears to have always had this beauty. It is its own and proper beauty, and a beauty at the same time introduced and revealed by the cut. The cut causes the flower to appear and at the same time disappear. This is a process that never stops: the cut flower causes an eternal flowing presence and absence, emptiness and opulence, of *on* and *off*.<sup>7</sup> There is a fundamental concept and a cosmic dimension of beauty in *kire*. The beauty of the flower in *ikebana* is not defined by external criteria; rather, it is informed by operations such as cutting continuity (*kire-tsuzuki*) and shifting (*zure*) in the dimensions of time and space. *Shifting*—*zure* in Japanese—is a category used by Okakura in his *Book of Tea* to characterise a specific aspect in Japanese aesthetics, which he describes with terms such as *imperfect* or *incomplete*.<sup>8</sup> However, as he wrote his book for

<sup>5</sup> Kawase (2000): [Toshirō Kawase about his biography].

<sup>6</sup> A Japanese colleague of mine, Kayo Adachi-Rabe, said her *ikebana* master told her that she should not so much think of arranging the flowers but of arranging time and space by arranging flowers.

<sup>7</sup> The specific movement of flow in the aesthetics of East Asian cultures is related to the importance of the flow of *chi* (or *ki*).

<sup>8</sup> Kayo Adachi-Rabe refers to different categories of incompleteness presented in Okakura’s *Book of Tea* (Adachi-Rabe 2016, p. 53; Okakura 2008, p. 40).

Western readers, we must consider that this might be a description from an angle of Western aesthetical criteria. In order to understand the proper aesthetics of operations such as shifting (*zure*) and cutting continuity (*kire-tsuzuki*) we must try to understand these aesthetics as perfect and complete.

Similar to the practice of *ikebana*, film as an entity has its living existence in the arising of a characteristic beauty, for which we do not have proper criteria to judge or measure. In traditional Japanese writings about the arts, we do not often read about beauty but, rather, *the blossom*, which is essential in Japanese aesthetics.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Hokusai's Frog, Hiroshige's Cat, Craftsmanship and the Alienation of Violence

Ōhashi provides another example: an illustration from Hokusai of a fairy tale by the author Bakin Kyokutei (1767–1848). The woodcut print shows the witch Kumagimi cutting an embryo out of Niigaki's belly. The scene in Hokusai's picture is characterised by extremely cruel and brutal violent action, but this violence is also combined with the great diligence of the artist's craftsmanship. This is a contrast that could be considered an instance of the aesthetics of *kire*: the contrast is a cut, which at once outlines the cruelty and the delicacy of the artwork. The cut, in the sense of *kire*, lifts the violence of the scene into alienation. The woodblock print is made with visible strokes, which, however, are stylised and abstract in a certain fashion. We can remember here the *incompleteness* in Okakura's *Book of tea*. Thus, the work of creation is not finished with the job of the artist. There is still a process of creation at work in the artwork itself: from the strokes of the cut, the scene is emerging.

Further, Ōhashi points out a little frog sitting in the left lower corner of the image, looking towards what is happening in the picture. Ōhashi writes: "The small frog who is separated from the scene that occurs in front of him changes the sense and the meaning of the scene" (Ōhashi 1994, p. 123). The frog has no value for the story nor for the formal composition of the image. As Ōhashi explains, the frog's meaning arises from its absolute meaninglessness (Ōhashi 1994), because, from the perspective of a frog, what happens in the scene is meaningless. From a frog's point of view, there are no such things as violence or cruelty. He does not see the scene in terms of drama, pain or guilt. From the frog's viewpoint, the scene arises on a new horizon, losing its emotions, its meanings and its moral implications. The frog, almost invisible at the edge, is a key figure of the picture, because it absorbs the scene and reveals the aesthetic mode in which the picture operates. Thus, the picture gains its form, its materials and its details as an artwork.

However, the frog could also be a cat. In a woodcut by Hiroshige from the series *One Hundred Views of Edo* titled "Asakusa Ricefields and Torinomachi Festival" (1861), there is a cat sitting on a windowsill in the foreground of the image. It is watching, while almost sleeping, the parade of the festival in the background of the picture, which is so small that it is almost not visible. From the angle of the cat, the festival is only part of the landscape. There is also a cat in Paul Verhoeven's film *Elle* (2016) watching the rape of the protagonist (Isabelle Huppert), and its view transfers the violence of the rape into a realm of indifference. The frog's and the cat's viewpoints produce a cut in the scene: *kire*. The presence of the frog or the cat (or anything else that introduces a kind of alienation) creates an endless number of scenes, as suddenly there are cuts everywhere, even between us (the spectators), the picture and its moral implications. All things become visible from multiple angles. What before was assembled into a scene in the narration of violence is split into countless portions and pieces, opening various points of view from which arise endless combinations. Thus, there is an endless process working in the picture by which it is permanently creating itself.

It would be misleading, however, to deduce that violence and cruelty are dissolved by *kire*. The more they are liberated from the narration, the more they emerge in a different realm of aesthetics, which might be disturbing because of moral reservations. One might also remember here the first scene of murder of two women in Dario Argento's film *Suspiria* (1977). The colours, the striking set design of

<sup>9</sup> See e.g., the writings of Zeami and the studies on Zeami's aesthetics, in which the blossom is a central term (Zeami 2008).

Art Nouveau architecture, the emptiness and loneliness of the night, the artificial and stereotypical innocence of the two young women and the music all combine with a high level of cruelty and violence in this scene, which ends with a shot of the two dead women. Their bodies are composed alongside elements of broken glass and steel, the ornaments on the wall and floor and the deep red of blood. It is an image of disturbing beauty—we reckon with the cruelty of the murder, but the diligent crafting of the scene cuts the picture from moral judgements just as in Hokusai's woodcut of the witch Kumagimi. It would be misleading to describe this aesthetic in terms of the *delightful horror*—rather, we gain more access to the aesthetic of these images in terms of *kire* by understanding the operations of cuts.

The aesthetics of *kire* consist of dissolving fixed relations between elements, and between elements and sentiments, so that new horizons arise, which recombine elements, sentiments and affects in multiple possibilities. We can move our gaze and our mind from the diligence of the artwork to the story in the presented scene within its moral framework, to our sentiments and emotions and back again to the drawing, to the material of the paper and to the blackness of the ink. Thus, we draw a powerful lesson from Hokusai's frog: the dimensions of things are always changing, always inconsistent. We can see a link here to Zen scepticism, but there is no such thing as agnosticism in the aesthetics of *kire*. Rather, it induces a form of vivid awareness, of becoming conscious of an endless movement of vanishing and arising, and the acceptance of unity of contradictions beyond or above causal logic. For Western logic, this combination of radical relativism with definite truth is a paradox. From the angle of occidental concepts of the image, the cinematic image is thus a paradox: its existence is fundamentally based on a movement, which unites arising and vanishing at the same time, its persistence is related to processuality and permanent change (even if there is not a motif in motion). We gain a new concept of the image as a creative process: it is an image in the state of producing itself in the process of appearing, even as it is produced before in the film production process. *Kire* then could describe the working process in the images themselves.

## 6. Movement, Time and Space in the Cinematic Picture

At the beginning of the film *Rashomon*, when the woodcutter tells his story, the aesthetic structure of the film becomes obvious. The woodcutter can be viewed as Hokusai's frog. Similar to the frog pointed out by Ōhashi in Hokusai's picture, the woodcutter in *Rashomon* is no protagonist, but similar to the frog, he is a central—albeit not the key—figure of the picture. The movie has a void at its centre. Again, similar to Zen, the film draws its cosmos around emptiness (*the nothing*). In a conversation about this movie, film scholar Kayo Adachi-Rabe proposed that the whole film could be seen as a dynamic *ikebana*. Very characteristic in this respect is the openness of the film into a quiet room in front of the screen in the scenes in front of the court, which is never to be heard. The movement, the time and the space in *Rashomon* are transferred to a cinematic process.

The comparison of *ikebana* and film leads us to the concept of cinematic time and cinematic space. However, there is not first the picture and second the movement. The film's movement, time and space must be sought within or better *as* the existence of the picture. Thus, we can say that the cinematic image is an image that contains movement and space in itself, and vice versa, it is the content of these movements and spaces. If we extend this reciprocity a little further, we ultimately renounce the idea that images contain or show something. What we usually refer to as what images contain or show is rather the form in which the images exist. Cinematic movement can move through time or through space. Several films are playing with different dimensions of spatiality and of temporality of cinematic movement. A classic example is the opening sequence of Alain Resnais' film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The camera moves through the rooms of a castle, reaching a room with a group of people who are standing and sitting around without moving. The camera continues moving between them. We get



the impression of moving through the impossible space of a photograph.<sup>10</sup> The picture is frozen and moving at the same time. The story of the murder in *Rashomon* is similar: it is frozen insofar as it could be regarded again and again from different angles, and it is moving because it looks different from each angle.

What we can glean from these observations is that there exist specific cinematic forces, or rather energies, which are able to give life to figures, things and places. The form of their existence depends on particular cinematic articulations. For example, the sequence of different camera angles in the sequence showing the process of walking through the forest at the beginning of *Rashomon* recalls the little frog of Hokusai, such as when we see the woodcutter from a great distance or when he is shown from very high or low positions. It is as if several 'Hokusai frogs' are sitting around and looking at the scene, offering different angles and perspectives to it. As a result, beside the walking forward, one cannot identify a route or any spatial or chronological order. There is only the walking, and we are provided with no clues as to who the woodcutter is, where he comes from or where he is going.

The characteristic operating mode of *Nō* is to conceal the expression of the human body and to dissolve the natural hierarchies between human beings and things (costumes, masks, stage elements, props, etc.) in order to *cut* them all together in the realm of vivification of the art of *Nō*. This could be considered the characteristic of beauty in this performative tradition. In comparison, movement and performance in film are first and foremost based on cinematic operations, such as the position and movement of the camera, framing, light, music, editing, etc. The acting of human beings in film is not any different from other "actions"—they all occur on a cinematic level, as André Bazin points out in his essay on film and theatre (Bazin 1967). In contrast to *Nō*, in Western film tradition living and non-living beings are categorically distinguished. In *Nō*, human (actors) and non-human beings (props, costumes, elements of stage, etc.) are brought by stylisation to a level of a specific artificiality, unifying what is happening and appearing on stage. From that necessity arises a specific reality and aesthetic of film, which might be seen as a particular beauty of film.

## 7. The Appearance in *Ikebana* and in Film Editing

In the 1920s, Lev Kuleshov investigated the effects of the facial expression of the actor and its origins, believing not so much in the work of the actor as in the semantic effects of film editing. In a famous experiment, he juxtaposed the image of an actor with three different motifs: a soup, a coffin and the picture of a sleeping woman (in some sources, it is a child). As a result, Kuleshov claimed that, in each picture, the same face "showed" different expressions: appetite, sorrow or lust. This, according to Kuleshov, demonstrated that expression and meaning in film do not rest within one picture but are generated from the combination of pictures. The *Kuleshov effect*, which can reveal three different emotional expressions on the same face, can also be described in a different way with the principles of *kire*. First of all, there are not three but, rather, four motifs: a soup, a coffin, the picture of a sleeping woman and the face of the man. They are each cut off from their original situations and meanings so that they can combine with other pictures and generate different meanings. They do not relate to their original contexts anymore, similar to the singular flower in *ikebana*, which does not relate to the meadow anymore. This openness creates an ambiguity, in that the images need to be able to be assembled in new relations and to let new entities emerge. However, when describing the Kuleshov effect, we often forget that a picture of soup itself is not primarily a symbol of hunger, just as the other motifs (coffin, sleeping woman) are not symbols unto themselves. There are numerous relations that

<sup>10</sup> In recent *Marvel* movies, there are similar, though, of course, more spectacular, effects with movement in frozen pictures. For example, *Deadpool* (2016), there is a fight scene on a bridge, in which the motion of the action suddenly stops, but the "camera" continues moving through the frozen action. Thus, we feel the spatiality of the cinematic picture by seeing objects such as bullets in the air or halted falling figures from various angles. Quite similar are the effects of the certain scenes from the *X-Men* series. There, we view reality through the angle of Quicksilver, a character who is able to move so quickly that, according to him, the environment looks as if it is frozen. However, those examples are only playing with what is characteristic in the cinematic image itself as form.

occur and operate in a picture and that can give rise to, or manifest as, symbols or motifs, but it is also possible that no motif whatsoever arises from a picture. The question is as follows: how does a picture become a symbol or a motif? Normally, we say that the context of a film's picture is the other pictures surrounding it, the context of a montage sequence is other montage sequences of the film, and the film itself can be seen in the context of other films. It is important to note that in film, the cut is operant in the picture itself and in the picture's constitution as such. *Kire* thus is not so much a question of knife or camera—it continues in the image and is operating in the combination of elements. The flower in *ikebana* is different from the flower in the meadow. It is not only the combination with other flowers or twigs with which it is put together that produces the flower in a new way in *ikebana*. The cut already transforms the flower and continues working on the transformation of the flower in the *ikebana*-arrangement. Similarly, the image of the film, similar to the image of the Kuleshov effect, is created yet by the cut. There is no reference but the cut in creating the symbol or the motif. The concept of *kire* does not know a Platonic heaven. There is not a flower existing if not the flower created by cut. It is conceivable to create also the flower in the meadow by cutting it, but this cut is happening, as it were, "at degree zero": the cut-without-cutting creates the flower in the meadow. What at first glance sounds highly sophisticated is, in fact, similar to the paradoxical theory of *absolute nothing* as the origin of fullness. It is impossible to be explained in terms of distinction as a logic system but, rather, in degrees—one must admit and consider change, flow and difference. The point is that we never get the flower for good. We follow it in its movements, or more precisely, we follow the flower in following the eternal flowing of space and time.

## 8. Flowing Movements, Entities and Fragments

*Kire* allows us to describe aesthetics as occurrences: the occurrence of *Nō*, the occurrence of *ikebana* and the occurrence of film. From here emerges an aesthetics of occurrence and appearance as an endless flow of cuts—this is the meaning of the continuity of the cut in the term *kire-tsuzuki* (the "cut continuity").

A twig could be seen as a twig, but it could also be seen as part of a branch. A branch could be seen as part of a tree. A tree could be seen as an element of the forest. A forest could be seen as part of a landscape. And so on. The twig, the branch, the tree or the landscape themselves are, as entities or as occurrences not composed. They turn themselves into elements: the twig is an element with respect to the tree; the tree is an element with respect to the woods. The principles of *kire* do not know absolute elements or atoms as basic entities. The elements of each arise from appearances, pursuant to the *kire-tsuzuki*. The relations between the elements come from that cutting and continuation. The frame and the cut of the cinematic image define the whole and its elements. However, in every movie, the elements and the whole are always reversible. There is never a fixed centre, even if it is not moving, just as in most mainstream movies. The centre might move every second, causing a Hokusai frog's, or a cat's, point of view to arise; every second a cut (in the sense of *kire*) might occur. The universe opens a different angle never seen or thought of before: *Rashomon* is always possible in every movie. What comes to mind are so-called *mind-game movies* or certain horror movies—movies where changing perspectives and angles are destabilising the centre of narration and are shifting the centre of the cinematic universe.

What might sound like classical semiotics or structuralism is, in fact, something else: structuralism considers meaning that arises from the structural relation between elementary units. However, the aesthetics of *kire-tsuzuki* do not describe combinations; they describe the flow and the operation of appearance or, rather, the arising of aesthetical existence and liveliness in the realm of reality. In terms of *kire*, the take of a film receives existence and liveliness not from its link to what we, in occidental terms, conceive as the representation of reality: the picture receives its aliveness not from the aliveness of the represented object in the picture. The appearance, the image itself, is alive—or not. The picture can fail in the same way as *ikebana* or the walking in *Nō* theatre can fail.



Thus, there is a question of life and death in the aesthetics of *kire*—only from that can we begin to understand beauty that is in contrast to what is nice, picturesque, cute or pretty. Beauty in the horizon of *kire* is not a question of delight or pleasure; it is rather shocking and horrifying, related to that what we call in occidental aesthetics the *sublime*.<sup>11</sup>

## 9. Conclusions: The Beauty and the Blossom of Film

The flower in *ikebana* is connected with the reality of *ikebana*. Likewise, the image within a film is connected with its cinematic reality. Both the flower and the cinematic image arise in a new realm of time and space. They both generate and become a new and singular reality. The aesthetics of *kire-tsuzuki* are rather aesthetics of creation and of existence but not aesthetics of representation. They can open an angle to describe the way in which the cinematic image exists. The idea of essence in the aesthetics of *kire* is crucial, not a concept of expression. However, the essence is different in every case, as it is the form of existence revealed and generated at the same time. This essence, which results from the operations of the cut, must not be regarded as equivalent to Plato's eternal ideas underlying the things. The essence in the aesthetics of *kire* is a paradoxical combination of universal eternity on the one hand and uniqueness and singularity on the other. Thus, the dimensions of time in *kire* are simultaneously everlasting and actually present. Moreover, from the moment of the way the flower, the walking or the image arises—by *kire*—the chronic and spatial dimensions of the universe arise. In Japanese and Chinese traditions, we find more often thinking in terms of energies (*chi* or *ki*) than in terms of time and of space, as we are still used to thinking in the Occident. However, in traditions of East Asian thinking, space and time are also realised by the existence of beings (objects, animals and humans). This is surprisingly similar to cinematic reality.

The concept of *kire* is an aesthetic in contrast to concepts of imitation, representation or reflection. *Kire* opens a horizon beyond the fundamental distinction between reality and imagination that always underlies occidental concepts of aesthetics, such as mimesis, simulation, representation, copy or illusion. Thus, *kire* offers a concept of beauty that is related to the concept of eternity: from the cut, the picture (or in *ikebana*, the flower) arises in the realm of an eternity and offers a reality that never existed before. This is an aesthetic reality that unifies artificiality and naturality. The seeming contradiction results from modes of thinking underlying occidental categories and logic. In terms of an aesthetics of reception, for example, it is a paradoxical constellation of temporal dimensions, because we are used to distinguishing the spheres of creation and reception. However, the aesthetics of *kire* describe a realm of creation, of apparition and of being, which affects us to such an extent that we become aware of the present presence, and we experience the simultaneous presence of different dimensions, which occur in a picture “living” that way. Reception, creation, production and presence are flowing through different agencies. We experience and observe the transformation, instead of understanding meanings or expression.

To come back to the tea: the different practices of tea infusion in Chinese, Japanese and European cultures must not be seen as mutually exclusive, with respect to *kire-tsuzuki*. In fact, they are very much compatible. They are simply different ways of treating the same object; however, when taking into account what we have discussed above, the comparison shows that the same object is always different. The existence of the tea changes depending on the practice of infusion. This comparison of cultural traditions allows us to see the reality of tea as different and diversified.

Applying the logic of *kire-tsuzuki* as introduced above, we gain perspectives for describing the cinematic image beyond representation. Rather, we are able to examine the expression of meanings as occurrence, its appearance and presence, as well as its transformation or “flow”.

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<sup>11</sup> The most important authors of the sublime in modern Western philosophy are Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller.

In building upon the ideas set out in this paper, it would be important to expand the spectrum of terms by introducing other concepts from different cultural horizons (such as Japanese aesthetics). For example, the categories of Okakura's tea theory mentioned above were introduced by Kayo Adachi-Rabe into film theory a few years ago and include emptiness (*kyo*), asymmetry (*suki*), shift (*zure*), lack (*kizu*), deformation (*yugami*), void (*mu*) and virtuality (*kū*) (Adachi-Rabe 2016, p. 53; Okakura 2008, p. 40).<sup>12</sup> As we can see in translating these concepts into English, and thus a Western cultural paradigm, most of the terms are still characterised by their deviation from occidental concepts. Okakura himself talks about categories of incompleteness. His *Book of Tea* (1906), written in the early 20th century, is addressed to a Western audience and was originally written in English, so he wrote considering Western criteria of beauty (Okakura 2008).

In the future, we must change our modes of thinking, instead understanding these terms as categories of completeness and perfection in a sense that is not related to the criteria of occidental aesthetics. Beyond the criteria of traditional occidental aesthetics, we should explore new horizons for describing aesthetics that have been arising since the middle of the 20th century, even in Western culture. We can point to, for example, the films of European cinema since the 1950s and 1960s. Japanese aesthetics have inspired Western directors ever since Japanese cinema was discovered by the Western audience around 1950. The former critics of the *Cahiers du cinema*, above all Godard and Rivette, were strongly influenced by the films from Mizoguchi and Kurosawa. However, recent changes in international film aesthetics are also influenced by non-Western cultural traditions—even in Hollywood productions. In Western philosophy, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, strongly inspired by Daoism, tried to develop a flowering or flowing thinking. In the last few years, the French philosopher François Jullien and others have introduced Chinese thinking in Western philosophy.

Film is not an art form essential to the West. The poetics and aesthetics of film are not rooted in occidental traditions. There might be a relevant wordplay here, even if it only works in English, in the discourse about the flower: the flower itself is an object that flows ("floating flower"—something that James Joyce seems to put forward in *Ulysses*) (Gabler 1984, p. 175).<sup>13</sup> Cinematic images could thus be described as flowers flowing without form through cultures, arising in different forms, just as the tea puts forth various tastes. These cinematic flowers are putting forth endless varieties of blossoms—and the blossom, which, in Western terms, is the beauty in Asian aesthetics, could be seen as the soul in the world of the arts.

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<sup>12</sup> Adachi-Rabe (2016), p. 53. Many studies on Japanese aesthetics have been published in English in the last 20 years, above all the books edited by Marra (1999, 2001, 2002, 2011). But there are not yet many reflections on these aesthetic concepts in relation to film.

<sup>13</sup> *Ulysses*, 5.570–72.

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