

PHILOSOPHY AND AESTHETIC PREFERENCES: SYMMETRY VERSUS ASYMMETRY

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Abstract: *In this paper, it is argued that the difference in aesthetic preferences between the Western culture and Japan is determined by the difference in their philosophical traditions, and not the unique features of the Japanese landscape itself, as is commonly believed.*

In support of this argument, the relationship between the ontological paradigms of the early Greek philosophy with its logical formalism is compared with the intuitionism of the Zen philosophy to show how the implications of these two philosophical orientations affect the aesthetic preferences in the Western and Japanese cultures and, consequently, the form and the content of their art and design works. The fundamental difference between aesthetic preferences in these two traditions narrows down to the opposition between symmetry and asymmetry. Therefore, the key questions asked in this paper are as follows: Why, in the Far East, is asymmetry preferred over symmetry? Why, in the West, is the approach opposite: asymmetry is considered to be a lack of order, and symmetry governs the popular aesthetics?

“Everything exists according to its own nature. Our individual perceptions of worth, correctness, beauty, size, and value exist inside our heads, not outside them.”

2nd Zen Tenet (Holmes, 1992, p. 28)

1. WESTERN RATIONALISM AND EASTERN INTUITIONISM

Western culture has sprung from Greek origins and, as such, has inherited the Greek rational approach; the Greek Logos. Western rationalism is derived from logic, which, in turn, is founded upon a set of principles which are claimed to be the laws of thinking, thereby revealing the intrinsic structure of the cognitive mind. According to Leonard Russell (1914, p. 58), "They express the most elementary and fundamental characteristics of the nature of predication in its formal aspect." Let me recall these laws in their logical order first and then paraphrase them through their implications on the Greek metaphysics. There are three laws: (1) the Principle of the Identity of Terms, (2) the Law of Non-contradiction, and (3) the Law of Excluded Middle. The first law says that "every singular term is predictable of itself ($A=A$)" (ibid., p. 59). That tautology is expressed, for instance, in Yahveh's "I am that I am." The two remaining laws can be thought of simultaneously: "Of the two propositions, 'S is P,' 'S is not P,' one must be true and one false." (ibid., p. 62). In the realm of metaphysics, these laws require that the existing thing cannot fail to exist. In other words, the thing has to be identical with itself and cannot be its own negation, it cannot be self-contradictory. Thus, admitting that something is and is not at the same time is logically incongruous. The logical formalism draws a clear cut separation between affirmation and denial and thus enhances the conceptualization of the world in terms of binary oppositions, as if it were perceived in black or white. Thus, the mainstream of the Western culture, determined by bipolar oriented thinking, gives priority to the (bilaterally) symmetrical organization.

The Parmenidean theory of material monism (c.450 BC) embodies the principles of logic in the extreme form; "What is, is; what is not, is not." That simple tautology implies (1) the existence and the materiality of the world, thus, non-existence of the void, and (2) the static, self-identical, and uniform character of the world. According to that theory, empty space does not exist; it even cannot be thought of, for "one cannot think of nothing" (B. Russell, 1959, p. 28, 29). So, from that perspective, the term "empty space" is an empty name without designation, although its denotation is an empty set. On the contrary, in modern science, it is charged with designation, since the empty space is conceived as having a real existence.

Although the Parmenidean perspective — viewing the world as static and uniform — dominates in the Western tradition, the opposite concept of the world, that is, as perpetually changing, was also developed by the Greeks. Nonetheless, it never entered the mainstream of Western metaphysics. In regard to logical formalism, the Heraclitean "We step and do not step in the same river; we are and are not" (c.500 BC) implies a logical contradiction of "A" becoming its own negation, that is, "not A," during the process of change. Thus, the Heraclitean approach implies not only a conceptualization

of the world beyond the dichotomy of being or not being, but also accepts the existence of void (Russell, 1959, pp. 25-29).

Although Heraclitus (c. 540-c. 470 BC) derives from rationalism, he goes beyond the logical formalism. His perspective, by assuming the existence of the void and the changeability of the world, relates to the Eastern tradition, which, on the other hand, ultimately embodies the intuitive approach of the Zen masters. "Zen has no philosophy of its own. Its teaching is concentrated on an intuitive experience..." (D. Suzuki, 1959, p. 44). "In other words, it is a mode of activity which comes directly out of one's inmost self without being intercepted by the dichotomous intellect." (ibid., p. 140). Paradoxically, ideas which are logically incongruous from the Western perspective are perfectly valid in the Eastern approach. For instance, the concept of the Mind of No-Mind requires denial of self-awareness of the mind. According to Zen teaching "bad is good, ugly is beautiful, false is true, imperfect is perfect, and also conversely." (ibid., p. 33). In the West, these contradictions are rejected as logically incongruous. Zen aims beyond the conceptualizations of the intellect, to reach the feeling of, and identification with reality through the pre-intellectual and direct experience. Thus, the goal in Zen is "to restore the experience of original inseparability [...] to return to the original state of purity and transparency." (ibid., p. 359). "The body and the mind are not separated, as they are in the case of intellectualization. The mind and the body move in perfect unison, with no interference from the intellect or emotion. Even the distinction of subject and object is annihilated" (Suzuki, 1959, p. 146).

2. THE CONCEPT OF VOID AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual denial of the existence of void by the mainstream Western tradition determines the connotations of the concept of space per se. Since empty space does not exist, humans in Western culture do not feel comfortable living in a non-existing void. Thus, empty space has to be filled by existing things to be validated. Hence, in the realm of the Western art and design, space is the element which does not count autonomously. In general, the importance of empty space is underestimated. Although the Gestalt theory of visual perception (1920-25) acknowledged empty space as a design element, it still charged it with pejorative connotations and assigned it a secondary function, naming it a "negative space" or "ground." Thus, the negation of the existence of empty space results in visual abundance, which characterizes Western culture, as if in quantity there was a quality.

Alternatively, the predominating Eastern tradition concept of the perpetually changing world does not imply the denial of the existence of void. On the contrary, it requires the

existence of empty space, as without it, there is no room for change or progression. Consequently, it is given its own voice as a condition of the dynamic world. Since void is recognized as a value in itself, it does not have to be filled with existing things to be validated. Thus, it does not make people feel uncomfortable while realizing that they are living in the void. Moreover, space is utilized as an integral part of any art work and is given the most important role among other elements of visual language (Gunji, 1990, p. 1), leading toward minimalist art, with its principle of simplicity that is ingrained in the Eastern culture. The "thrifty brush" tradition, which demands "the least possible number of lines or strokes which go to represent forms on silk or paper" (Suzuki, 1959, p. 22), expresses the Zen spirit, which longs for primitive simplicity, close to the natural way of living, and "has no taste for complexities that lie on the surface of life." (ibid., p. 23).

3. WESTERN DUALISM AND JAPANESE TRIADIC HIERARCHY

Western logical formalism, with its demand of non-contradiction, determines the conceptualization of experience in terms of binary oppositions. The rule of binary oppositions is claimed to be an intrinsic structure of the cognitive mind. Functional anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and others maintained that an opposition between life and death is fundamental and primary (p.1913), the one from which others have sprung (Brozi, 1983, pp. 68-82, 95-104). On the level of language, an absolute notion which does not have its counter notion has not been developed. Moreover, such an absolute is inconceivable. Every notion in the Western tradition is bipolar and relative. For example, is – is not, good – evil, subject – object, culture – nature. From the standpoint of rational philosophy, the basic binary opposition between being and not being requires only two elements to be satisfied. The two are enough to create the static world, which is in relation to itself, since nothing else exists. Therefore, the binary opposition is complete, as such, and reveals the tension between the two elements of the same importance. The Westerner — enveloped by rationality with its logical formalism and atomistic approach — takes for granted the discreteness and stability of the world and demands it to be safe and predictable in its bilaterally symmetrical order.

On the other hand, the dominating factor in the Eastern tradition, the dynamic concept of the world, implies the third intermediate element. The two elements are not enough to describe the progression since there is something between the beginning and the end. Thus, the third element has to be introduced. The third intermediate element breaks the tension between the two and plays the role of mediator and opens the pair for development. The dichotomy between being and not being loses its contradictory

character, since the changing nature of the world implies the concept of potentialities. That is, the process of change allows the potential qualities to become the actual ones. Consequently, the three nuclear elements need to be organized according to their importance. The order of the three categories of dominant, subdominant, and subordinant was developed in Japan to provide (1) a structure for every Japanese work of art and (2) a hierarchy of the Eastern image of the world. Interestingly, the Oriental hierarchy of dominant, subdominant, and subordinant has been incorporated into Western design for the sake of clarity of visual messages (Carter, 1985, pp. 52-56). In modern design, it is required that the visual message shows the degree of importance of its various parts. If everything is of the same importance and the image is complex, a viewer gets confused while not being given a direction for how to “read” the message encapsulated in the multiplicity of visual elements.

4. WESTERN ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND EASTERN SUBMISSIVENESS TO NATURE

Like anything else, the design elements have to be distributed in accordance to a certain order, so humans have to define their place in nature. Comparing the two traditions, it appears that there is a striking difference between attitudes towards nature. The Westerner’s approach is arrogant when contrasted with the Eastern submissive one. Westerners have placed themselves in the center of the world and have given themselves the superior position over nature. The idea of “conquest of nature” comes from the Greek sources and, as illustrated by Protagoras’ (i.480-421 BC) statement: “Man is the measure of all things.” (Russell, 1959, p. 27), implies the hierarchy of two elements: conquering humans and the conquered rest of the world. The Westerner bends the forces of nature to his or her own will, regardless of the consequences. Westerners place themselves at the top of any hierarchy.

“In the East, however, this idea of subjecting Nature to the commands or service of man according to his selfish desires has never been cherished. [...] To look around for objects to conquer is not the Oriental attitude toward Nature.” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 334). Easterners approach nature with a deep feeling of gratitude and appreciation. They submissively observe nature and learn how to coexist with the natural world harmoniously as its inherent part. The fifth tenet of Zen Buddhism expresses that attitude as follows: (p. 6th cent.) “Man rises from nature and gets along most effectively by collaborating with nature, rather than trying to master it.”(ibid., p. 46). The Eastern intuitive and respectful experiencing of nature comes from the conviction that “...our Nature is one with objective Nature, not in the mathematical sense, but in the sense that

Nature lives in us and we in Nature.” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 351). Consequently, “In Zen landscapes, the man-environment proportion shows a sound ecological relationship, in which no element dominates or damages any other.” (Holmes, 1992, p. 49).

5. DEFINITIONS OF SYMMETRY AND HOLISTIC APPROACH

What is really meant by the term “symmetry”? The modern and commonly used notion of symmetry stands for “the identical disposition on either side of an axis or plane” (Ghyka, 1977), which is a drastically simplified and improperly reduced version, not only of the classical definition of symmetry, but also of formalistic mathematical classification, defining different types of symmetry. Therefore, what is commonly termed “symmetry” should properly be called “bilateral symmetry.” The popular notion of symmetry applies only to the certain type of symmetry within the category of formal symmetry and is bilateral. On the other hand, according to the formalistic classification of symmetry, the notion of asymmetry is derived from the subdivision of symmetry and is named as “informal symmetry.” The informality comes from the lack of any regular pattern of the distribution of elements that might define asymmetric arrangements. From the formalistic point of view, asymmetric composition is unpredictable and, as such, it introduces an element of uncertainty.

Let us look at the Vitruvius’ (c. 1st century BC) definition to see how much it differs from the popular concept of symmetry: “Symmetry resides in the correlation by measurement between the various elements of the plan, and between each of these elements and the whole [...] As in the human body [...] it proceeds from proportion (called by Greeks “*analogia*”), and achieves consonance between every part and the whole. That symmetry is regulated by the modulus (ratio), the standard of the common measure” (Ghyka, 1977). The classical notion of symmetry is called dynamic symmetry because (1) it is related to the correlated proportions and (2) it implies the notion of the ratio, that is, the pattern of growth of the natural world (Korzeniowska, 1976, pp. 144-149). In natural numbers, the ratio is shown in the following proportion (13th cent.) called the Fibonacci series: 1:1, 1:2, 2:3, 3:5, 5:8, 8:13, etc. (Ghyka, 1977, p. xi, 7, 8, 13). The ratio is a number; it is an abstract concept created by the analytical, rational mind of the Western thinker, who imposes the ratio and the rational order onto the phenomena of the natural world.

The classical definition of dynamic symmetry is an expression of a holistic approach, viewing the world as a complex whole consisting of various interrelated elements in flux. That approach clearly has a long tradition in Western culture, although its impact is minor and, therefore, the classical definition was forgotten. Nowadays, there is a return

toward holistic ideas, especially in aesthetics and in the formal training of art and design. For instance, according to the organicistic approach, “art is really a class of organic wholes consisting of distinguishable, albeit inseparable, elements in their causally efficacious relations which are presented in some sensuous medium” (Weitz, 1988, p. 27). By the same token, modern design is considered to be a matter of pure proportion, that is, how various elements can be made to work together to form a superior whole. Thus, the classical approach underlies the Western design, albeit only since the Gestalt theory of perception was conceived as the basis for modern design in the 1920s (Berryman, 1990, p. 9). The Gestalt theory is focused on the concept of the whole in relation to its elements and, as such, relates to the classical definition of symmetry. Nevertheless, it does so only partially, because it remains thoroughly unrelated to the other implication of that definition, that is, to the concept of growth. The ratio, as a Golden Mean of measure, is recognized as a valid principle in modern design, but without its relation to the growth pattern and, thus, without recognition of its derivation from the concept of the world as ever changing. Consequently, Western beauty and perfection is sought in the stability of perfectly balanced bilateral symmetry.

On the contrary, Eastern culture “ignores balance and inclines strongly towards imbalance [...] and embodies beauty in a form of imperfection or even of ugliness” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 24, 27). Consequently, the informality defining asymmetry is in favor, as is the perfection of reality in its imperfection. “All forms of evil must be said somehow to be embodying what is true and good and beautiful, and to be a contribution to the perfection of Reality” (ibid., p. 33). The search for perfect imperfections of the informally structured world comes from the holistic approach, being “inspired by the Zen way of looking at individual things as perfect in themselves and at the same time as embodying the nature of totality which belongs to the One” (ibid., p. 27). The Eastern culture “emanates from one central perception of the truth of Zen, which is ‘the One in the Many and the Many in the One,’ or better, ‘the One remaining as one in the Many individually and collectively.’” (ibid., p. 28).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The search for the roots of the differences in aesthetic preferences between the West and Japan shows the deep influence of philosophical tradition upon our perception of reality itself and, thus, upon aesthetic preferences. To prevent rationality from limiting the spontaneity of the creative processes, I suggest to return not only to the origins of our tradition with its original definition of symmetry, but also to an implementation of the intuitive approach. Opening minds to different philosophical systems will broaden the aesthetic horizon and ensure creativity. The minds that merge rationality with intuition

develop in the totality of their potentials. Finally, it is due to our individual and cultural conceptualizations that the world appears beautiful or ugly, and the world, per se, remains the same in its evolutionary movement and transcends any aesthetic categories.

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