
Aesthetic Categories
Past and Present

Michael F. MARRA
University of California, Los Angeles

It is hard to believe that in the second half of the nineteenth century, at the very same time when the Impressionists were experimenting with shapes and colors in Paris and in Provence, the academic painters schooled in techniques that went back to the Renaissance were actively engaged in reproducing mythological and Biblical themes that for centuries had embellished churches and regal palaces all over Europe. Traditional painters were still winning the major artistic competitions in Paris, thus convincing the authorities of the Meiji state to hire a member of the Barbizon school in order to teach Western painting to a Japanese youth yearning for the “novelties” coming from the West. This was the time when Van Gogh was actually inspired by the *ukiyo-e* of Japan’s past. So, it is no wonder that in 1966, when Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Umberto Eco (b. 1932), and Luciano Berio (1925-2003) were experimenting with avant-garde techniques, a seventy-four-year old professor of aesthetics by the name of Etienne Souriau (1892-1979) was delivering his annual course at the Sorbonne on “Catégorie Esthétiques” (aesthetic categories), as if he were addressing a late nineteenth century audience. The word “category” is ancient, as it goes back to about 330 B.C., the alleged time when Aristotle wrote *Kategoriai* (The Categories), in which he talks about the attribution of a predicate to a subject in the formation of sentences according to quantity, quality, time, relation, and so on. If the attribute of the sentence is related to truth, then we deal with

alethic categories; if the attribute is related to the good, then we are faced with ethical categories. However, the application of the word “category” to beauty explicitly entered the vocabulary of aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century, in 1892 to be more precise, with the publication of Karl Groos’ *Einleitung in die Aesthetik* (Introduction to Aesthetics). Groos introduced the notion of “category” because he felt that the Hegelian definition of aesthetics as the science of beauty was simply too vague. The Aristotelian scheme of subject and predicate allowed Groos to define aesthetic categories as substantive forms (beauty, the sublime, the tragic, etc.) of predicatives (beautiful, sublime, tragic, etc.) used in aesthetic judgment.¹ In other words, beauty became one of several aesthetic categories, not the fundamental one, as a result of the fact that what has aesthetic value is not necessarily beautiful. Next to beauty, one could find the pleasant and graceful from a sensorial point of view, or the sublime and tragic from the emotional point of view. To be fair, we already find similar ideas in the eighteenth century—for example in the studies on the sublime by Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1761), Immanuel Kant (*Observations on Feelings and the Sublime*, 1764), and of Moses Mendelssohn (*On the Sublime and the Naïve*, 1771), not to mention the classical study of the difference between beauty and the sublime, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790). The notion of “grace” had already been examined by Johann Winckelmann (*From Grace in Works of Art*, 1759), Henri Home (second part of *Elements of Criticism*, 1762-65), and Friedrich Schiller (*On Grace and Dignity*, 1793).

The word “*catégorie esthétique*” entered the French vocabulary in 1896 with the publication of *Essais Critique sur l’Esthétique de Kant* (Critical Essay on Kant’s Aesthetics) by Victor Basch (1865-1944), the holder of the first Chair of Aesthetics in Europe that was established in Paris in 1919. It was, then, used by Charles Lalo, the successor of Basch at the Sorbonne, in *Notions d’Esthétique* (Notions of

1. Karl Groos, *Einleitung in die aesthetik* (Giessen: J. Ricker, 1892).

Aesthetics, 1925), in which Lalo provided the following scheme:²

Faculties	Searched Harmony	Possessed Harmony	Lost Harmony
Intelligence	Sublime	Beauty	Spiritual
Will	Tragic	Majestic	Comic
Sensibility	Dramatic	Graceful	Ridiculous

Lalo further revised his table of categories in *Esthétique du Rire* (The Aesthetics of Laughter, 1948) as follows:³

Searched Harmony (Toward high) the Terrible (sublime, tragic, dramatic, pathetic, epic)	Possessed Harmony (Flat) the Pleasurable (beautiful, majestic, graceful, cute, picturesque)	Lost Harmony (Towards low) the Laughable (spiritual, comic, funny, ridiculous, grotesque)
--	--	--

It is no wonder that Etienne Souriau followed his teachers in *Art et Verité* (Art and Truth, 1933), in which he created a rose of aesthetic categories, further revising them in 1960, when he published *Les Catégorie Esthétiques* (Aesthetic Categories), which became the text-book for his courses. Years of thinking went into the ideation of the most exhaustive description of the appreciation of works of art, and into the setting up of antithetical categories such as beautiful-grotesque, sublime-comic, tragic-pleasant, with noble, emphatic, and majestic between beautiful and sublime; pyrrhic, dramatic, and melodramatic between tragic and grotesque; caricatural, ironic, and satiric between grotesque and comic; spiritual, fantastic, and picturesque between comic and pleasant; graceful, poetic, and elegiac between pleasant and beautiful. It must have come as a shock to Souriau to

2. Charles Lalo, *Notions d'Esthétique* (Paris : F. Alcan, 1927).

3. Charles Lalo, *Esthétique du Rire* (Paris, Flammarion, 1949).

realize at the end of his life that, as he sadly admitted, “all efforts to list aesthetic categories in an exhaustive system is a vain enterprise, since a new taste can always rise at any time and be admired by people.”⁴

By the time Souriau was developing his aesthetic theories in the 1930s the very notion of aesthetic category was already suspicious in Europe. In other words, the idea of developing in Japan a scientific aesthetics by importing from Europe the notion of “aesthetic category” (*biteki hanchū*), as Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888-1959), the second chair holder of aesthetics at the University of Tokyo, did in the 1930s, was equivalent to the idea of inviting Antonio Fontanesi to teach western painting in the 1870s, rather than Claude Monet or Auguste Renoir. Following the Hegelian Theodor Fischer and the neo-Kantian Herman Cohen, Ōnishi established the beautiful, the sublime, and the humorous as a-priori structures in aesthetic experience. These three categories work in relation to what Ōnishi called “art-aesthetic moment” and “nature-aesthetic moment.” When the “art-aesthetic moment” takes the lead, the humorous emerges; if the “nature-aesthetic moment” is predominant, the sublime dominates. When the two moments are harmonized, the beautiful comes into being.⁵ Once this scheme was applied to Japanese art forms, Ōnishi was bound to see the “nature-aesthetic moment” predominant in Japanese art, leaving “the art-aesthetic moment” to explain Western art, as one can see from his conclusions:

Because of the advantageous position of the art-aesthetic moment in the West, the three fundamental aesthetic categories, “the beautiful,” “the sublime,” and “the humorous,” are transformed into “the graceful,” “the tragic,” and “the comic” respectively; whereas in the East, because of the advantageous position of the nature-aesthetic moment, they are generated as “*aware*,” “*yūgen*,” and “*sabi*” respectively.⁶

4. Etienne Souriau, *Catégorie Esthétique* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1966).

5. Ōnishi Yoshinori, *Bigaku, Ge: Biteki Hanchū Ron* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1960), p. 55.

Ōnishi dedicated monographic studies to each of these Japanese aesthetic categories—beginning with *Yūgen to Aware* (*Yūgen and Aware*, 1939), and *Fūga Ron: Sabi no Kenkyū* (On Refinement: A study on *Sabi*, 1940), and culminating in his two-volume *Bigaku* (Aesthetics, 1959-1960). Anyone acquainted with Japanese culture is very familiar with the words “*aware*,” “*yūgen*,” and “*sabi*,” and equally acquainted with the claim of their alleged un-translatability. Ōnishi took issue with the idea that one must experience in order to know, and that experience is a trait uniquely related to ethnicity. For him, philosophy represented the means to explain rationally the immediacy of perceptions which defy easy verbal articulations. For example, he explained *yūgen* in terms of the German notion of “*Tiefe*” (depth)—not just a temporal and spatial one, but a depth in the “spiritual” (*seishinteki*) sense of the word. In other words, he saw in *yūgen* the counterpart of Western interiority. However, he hurried to add, *yūgen* was a graceful and quiet depth, not a depth informed by the darkness and fears of the Western Christian world. For Ōnishi, *yūgen* was a metaphysical depth, a “cosmic feeling” produced by what he called, deep “feelings for nature” (*shizen kanjō*). That is to say, the realization that man is part and parcel of nature, and not a simple observer, reduces the amount of anxiety that, otherwise, the violence of nature is bound to inspire. Ōnishi’s aesthetic approach led to an interpretation of *yūgen* as a derivative category from the sublime, a local variation of what he considered to be a universal category equally applicable to East and West.⁷ It goes without saying that the apriorism that had made aesthetic categories already outmoded in the 1930s and 1940s, is also at work in the loss of historicity when it comes to the dichotomy of East and West—a dichotomy which works as an aesthetic category in Ōnishi’s argument.

6. English translation by Otabe Tanchisa, ‘Representations of ‘Japaneseness’ in Modern Japanese Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Critique of Comparative Reason,’ in Michael F. Marra, ed., *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), p. 155.

7. Ōnishi Yoshinori, *Yūgen to Aware* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 1939), pp. 85-102.

If Souriau was the last person on earth to discuss art in terms of aesthetic categories, my professor of Japanese literature at the University of Turin must have been the last person to introduce the particularity of literary works in terms of the alleged universality of aesthetic concepts: the poetry of the *Man'yōshū* was an expression of truth (*makoto*), whereas the *Tale of Genji* was a monument of feminine sensibility (*aware*), and the poetry of the *Shinkokinshū* was so deep (*yūgen*) that there was no point in reading it—it was just too deep for an undergraduate student to understand. In fairness to the late professor, I should hurry to add that the cause of this schematic introduction to Japanese literature had its roots in the application of Ōnishi's aesthetic categories to a classification of literary works on the part of an army of Japanese literary historians, starting with the renowned Hisamatsu Sen'ichi (1894-1976), a colleague of Ōnishi's at the University of Tokyo. Setting aside for the moment the impact that discussions of *makoto* and *aware* had on the main line of Nativist scholars in the eighteenth century, and the continuities between aspects of the *kokugaku* (national studies) movement and its *kokubungaku* (national literature) epiphanies, one cannot deny the presence of Ōnishi's "fundamental aesthetic categories" of "beauty" (*bi*), "sublimity" (*sūkō*), and "humor" (*fumōru*) in Hisamatsu's "humor" (*kokkei*), "sublimity" (*sōbi*), and "elegance" (*yūbi*). Moreover, one cannot ignore the application to Hisamatsu's scheme of Ōnishi's deductive method in deriving "derivative aesthetic categories" from the "fundamental aesthetic categories," as one can see from the following scheme taken from Hisamatsu's *The Vocabulary of Japanese Literary Aesthetics*, an extremely abridged English version of his monumental *Nihon Bungakushi* (History of Japanese Literature, 1955-1960):⁸

8. Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, *The Vocabulary of Japanese Literary Aesthetics* (Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1963), p. 9.

Period	Humor	Sublimity	Elegance
Antiquity	<i>choku</i> (uprightness)	<i>mei</i> (brightness)	<i>sei</i> (purity)
Middle Antiquity	<i>okashi</i> (comic)	<i>taketakashi</i> (sublimity)	<i>aware</i> (sensitivity)
Medieval	<i>mushin</i> (witty)	<i>yūgen</i> (profundity)	<i>ushin</i> (discriminating)
Early Modern	<i>kokkei</i> (comic)	<i>sabi, karumi</i> (tranquility, lightness)	<i>sui, tsū, iki</i> (knowing, connoisseurship, chic)
Modern	—————	<i>shajitsu</i> (realism)	<i>rōman</i> (romanticism)

Literary historians found in aesthetic categories handy shortcuts to explain the Japanese “classics,” inasmuch as general labels such as *makoto*, *yūgen*, *okashi*, *aware*, *wabi*, *sabi*, and so on, allowed scholars to find in them the alleged “essence” of the Japanese classics. Such trends became particularly evident at times when the Japanese intellectuals were urged to contribute to the nation’s formation of a strong subject, as one can see from issues of the literary magazine *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to Kanshō* (National Literature: Interpretation and Appreciation) published during the Pacific War. In June 1940 a special issue appeared on “The Essence of Japanese Literature,” in which Oka Kazuo (1900-1981) traced the genealogy of *yūgen* back to the poetic exchange between Japan’s cultural hero, Prince Shōtoku Taishi (574-622), and a starving traveler whom the Prince helps on the way, and who eventually turns out to be a Buddha.⁹ In 1942, the same journal dedicated the September issue to the “beauty of Japanese literature.” Nose Asaji (1894-1955), who was in charge of the section on the Middle Ages, began his discussion of *yūgen* from the eighth imperial poetic collection, the *Shinkokin Waka Shū* (New Collection of Ancient and Modern Times)¹⁰—a choice undoubtedly inspired by the

9. Oka, Kazuo, “Yūgen Ron,” *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to Kanshō* (*Nihon Bungaku no Tokushitsu*), 6:1940, p. 42. This is a reference to the Tominoogawa poem quoted in the Chinese Preface of the *Kokinshū*.

interest that Japanese scholars developed in the 1920s and 30s for Western symbolic poetry.¹¹

Literary historians seldom problematized the aprioristic nature of aesthetic categories and did not sufficiently underscore the fact that *choku*, *yojō*, *yūgen*, *ushin*, *taketakashi*, and so on, were originally poetic styles: the direct style, the style of overtones, the style of mystery and depth, the style of deep feeling, and the lofty style.¹² In other words, a vocabulary originally devised for rhetorical purposes and for teaching poets how to compose songs became the privileged source of materials to be reconceptualized within the framework of aesthetic categories which transformed simple poetic styles in gigantic discourses on nation, subjectivity, culture, the arts, and so on. This process created a series of cultural amnesias, positing direct continuities between past and present, and seeing in the past the logic of categorical formations which were, actually, a product of modernity. A good example is the lumping together in literary histories of poets far removed from each other in time and cultural milieu, such as Saigyō (1118-1190), Kamo no Chōmei (1155?-1216), Kenkō (ca. 1283-after 1352), and Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), thus creating the false impression that in pre-modern Japan an “aesthetic and a tradition of reclusion” had existed uninterrupted from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. No one seemed concerned with the reality that the category of “*inja bungaku*” (literature of reclusion) with all its array of aesthetic categories was created in 1927 by the folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) in an article titled “Nyōbo Bungaku kara Inja Bungaku e” (From the Literature of Court Ladies to the Literature of Reclusion).¹³ The

10. Nose Asaji, “Chūsei Bungaku Bi,” *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to Kanshō (Nihon Bungaku no Bi)*, 9:1942, p. 25.

11. Iwai Shigeki, “Yūgen to Shōchō: *Shinkokin Waka Shū* no Hyōka o Megutte,” in Suzuki Sadami and Iwai Shigeki, eds., *Wabi, Sabi, Yūgen: Nibontekinaru mono’ e no Dōtei* (Tokyo: Suiseisha, 2006), pp. 337-339.

12. For an example of a description of poetic styles one could refer to the “ten poetic styles” that Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241) presented at the beginning of his poetic treatise, the *Maigetsushō* (Monthly Notes, ca. 1219). See, Robert H. Brower, “Fujiwara Teika’s *Maigetsushō*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 40:4 (Winter 1985), pp. 410-412.

13. The essay is included in Orikuchi’s *Kodai Kenkyū* (A Study of Antiquity). See Orikuchi Shinobu *Zenshū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1975), pp. 265-320.

heading “literature of reclusion” does not appear in any history of Japanese literature prior to the publication of Orikuchi’s article, although since then no history of Japanese literature has failed to include a lengthy chapter on it.

I do not mean to diminish the important role that aesthetic categories played when they came into being at the time of the formation of nation states. I simply want to point out problems related to the use of such categories once one forgets the process that brought them into being in the first place. In the hands of a gifted philosopher such as Kuki Shūzō (1888-1941), the use of the category of “*iki*” was quite brilliant, as he demonstrated in *Iki no Kōzō* (The Structure of *Iki*, 1930).¹⁴ The intricate relationships of grace and clumsiness (*iki* and *yabo*), distinction and vulgarity (*jōhin* and *gehin*), the subdued and the showy (*jimi* and *hade*), the astringent and the sweet (*shibumi* and *amami*), which he worked out with geometric precision in his well-known hexahedron, bring to the fore a varieties of tensions, between opposite sexes, between I and you, between self and nature. Although Kuki could not resolve the problem of apriorism that is inherent in the very nature of an aesthetic category, and inevitably tied *iki* to issues of ethnicity, his intellectual tour-de-force is quite impressive. The intensional moments of *iki* are related to each other in a dialogue in which allure (*bitai*), pride (*ikiji*), and renunciation (*akirame*) keep each other in check and result in the best description of “cool” that has ever been produced. The cultural aspect of the relationships of these three moments with specific philosophies (Shintō, although Kuki never used this word, Confucianism, and Buddhism) run the risk of being too schematic and deterministic, but this is a problem intrinsic to the method Kuki used, the structuralist method of which he was a pioneer.

There are important facets to Kuki’s use of aesthetic categories. His philosophy of sustained tension, transcendental possibility, and contingency is a stern critique of Western philosophies of homogeneity,

14. For an English translation, see Hiroshi Nara, *The Structure of Detachment: The Aesthetic Vision of Kuki Shūzō* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004) pp. 7-92.

and a frontal attack against racism. His critique of racism is well documented in a poem titled “Yellow Face” (*Kiironi Kao*)—a dialogue between a European who presents a racist argument based on the notion of sickness, an Asian positivist thinker who introduces an argument based on the notion of cause and effect, an Asian metaphysician whose argument is based on the notion of God, and a European critical thinker whose argument is based on the notion of value. They all challenge each other in finding the best explanation for the existence of different skin pigmentation. The poem is included in a collection titled “Sleep Talking in Paris” (*Pari no Negoto*), and was originally published in the journal *Myōjō* (Morning Star) in October 1926:

The European:

Your face is so yellow!/Inhabitants of the southern countries of Spain/and Italy,/unable to stand strong sunlight,/have a brown face but/not yellow../It might be rude to say but/the Chinese and the Japanese have contracted/something like a chronic jaundice../This is what we Europeans/actually think.

The Positivist:

This seems a little harsh./The place where we find skin pigments and/the layer where the yellow color of jaundice/is present are different./It seems that our ancestors/somehow overate/pumpkins and tangerines./Maybe they also drank too much/of the Yellow River and Yellow Sea.

The Metaphysician:

The distinction between races is inborn./In a former life we committed mischief,/the gods got terribly upset,/then the demons came upon us,/caught us while we were running away,/forced on our heads the filth of urine and feces./Our yellow face/stands as eternal memorial/to the merciless curse/of just gods.

The Kritik Philosopher:

I am not going to mimic the arguments/of the birdcatcher in the Magic Flute, but/there are yellow persons/as there are yellow birds./The issue of becoming is a different complexity,/reality is given as reality./In short, we should establish appropriate categories/for the concept of yellow race/and look at it from the standpoint of value./Well, how can a yellow face become white?/Let's turn this problem from pure reason/to the realm of the practical.¹⁵

Kuki gave an explanation of different skin pigmentation based on a series of categorizations of contingency—the race is determined by the rolling of the dice, a purely contingent act which breaks the chain of necessity. As you all well know, Kuki envisioned three levels in his structure of contingency:

1. Categorical contingency (*teigenteki gūzensei*), which explains the individuality of race over the generality of being born as a human being rather than as an animal or a tree. However, this contingency is predicated on what Kuki calls “hypothetical necessity,” which is the result of a cause and an effect. I was born Japanese because my parents were Japanese. And yet, this necessity is predicated on a second type of contingency,
2. Hypothetical contingency (*kasetsuteki gūzen*). The encounter (*sōgū*) between the Japanese parents happened by chance; it was a chance encounter (*kaikō*). Again, this is not a pure contingency, since it is based on what Kuki calls “disjunctive necessity.” Although the Japanese parents met by chance, they worked in the same factory. This necessity is, once again, predicated on a third type of contingency,
3. Disjunctive contingency (*risetsuteki gūzen*). Although the parents

15. Michael F. Marra, *Kuki Shūzō: A Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 55-57.

worked in the same factory, they happened to be alive, a fact which includes the possibility of the necessity of death and an opening to the ultimate reality of nothingness.

In other words, human existence is a reality created by a series of contingencies: an individual is characterized by its difference from another for no necessary reason (categorical contingency); it meets by chance with another for no necessary reason (hypothetical contingency); and it eventually fades into nothingness for no necessary reason (disjunctive contingency).

With Kuki, an aesthetic category has the ability to transform itself into an ethical system which stands as an alternative to Western types of morality. No more movement could be given to an aesthetic category that by definition tends to be static and a reflection of the principle of self-identity. In Kuki's ethical world destiny is never seen as a personal event, let alone the event of a nation. Destiny is always considered from the viewpoint of possible destinies, so that other people's destiny can never be alien to us, since their destiny could have been our own. Kuki did not need God in order to reach this conclusion—a *geisha* was all he needed.¹⁶ It goes without saying that Kuki knew too well how difficult it was to reduce human life to an aesthetic category, as he indicated in a short poem from the collection *Sonnets from Paris (Pari Shōkyoku)*:

Hanchū ni/toraegatakaru/onogami o/ware to nagekite/betsuru ikutose

How many years have I spent/lamenting to myself/this body of mine—/as difficult to grasp/as a category?¹⁷

16. See, Graham Mayeda, *Time, Space, and Ethics in the Philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō, Kuki Shūzō, and Martin Heidegger* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 121-201. See also, Michael F. Marra, "A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer: Kuki Shūzō's Version," in Victor Hori, ed., *The Kyoto School: Neglected Themes and Hidden Variations* (Nagoya: Nanzan University, forthcoming).

17. in Victor Sōgen Hori and Melissa Anne-Marie Curley, eds., *Neglected Themes and Hidden Variations, Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 2* (Nagoya: Nanzan University, 2008), pp. 56-77.

It would be difficult to find in Japanese intellectual history another example of an aesthetic category which is made so profoundly relevant to ethical and philosophical discourses. Even Ōnishi Yoshinori's treatment of the category of "*aware*" did not lead much further than to an unspecified worldview, an amorously universalized "kind of world-weariness (*Weltschmerz*)," which is the conclusion he reached in his detailed analysis of this concept.¹⁸ As with Kuki's, Ōnishi's categories are also made of tensions, pairs of meanings that are seemingly contradictory. For example, his idea of *aware* is made of the glory of bravery (*appare*) and feelings of sorrows (*aware*). Even within the same notion of *aware*, one finds feelings of joy and pleasure on the one hand, anger and sorrow on the other. However, unlike Kuki, Ōnishi makes the opposites coincide at the end, following the method of *coincidentia oppositorum* (the sameness of opposites), which erases differences between the two opposite terms, without, however, ingesting one of the two terms, as in the case of the Hegelian digestive system.¹⁹ The conflicting elements of reality are harmonized within aesthetic categories which, in Ōnishi's case, overcome the particularism of language, nation, and ethnicity, by simply displacing this particularism into an amorphous and neutered universalism. It goes without saying that Ōnishi's construction of aesthetic categories was inspired by the need to deal with conflicts between Japan and the Western powers—differences between opposites that Ōnishi tried not only to reconcile, but to actually erase, in order to leave the two adversaries on an absolute equal footing. In other words, Ōnishi was not in favor of Pearl Harbor, but he was not pleased with the unequal treaties either.

In Kuki's case, the tensions within the hexahedron must stay in place and never be made to coincide. The relationship of the *geisha* and her customers is one of possibility (it could be different, it could

18. See Ōnishi Yoshinori's essay on "*aware*" in Michele Marra, *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), p. 137.

19. See Michael F. Marra, "*Coincidentia Oppositorum*: Ōnishi Yoshinori's Greek Genealogies of Japan," in Michael F. Marra, *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation*, pp. 142-152.

be a better customer, it could be a more meaningful relation), rather than fulfillment (I am his object, I love him)—a relationship that is free from the bondage of love, a transcendental possibility (*chōetsuteki kanōsei*) rather than an actual necessity (*genjitsuteki histstuzensei*). Once one element of the pair synthesizes the other, either by overcoming the other and possessing him/her, or by melting into the other and be subjected to him/her, the tension is lost, and a divorce is on the horizon, if not a double suicide.²⁰ Once the tension is relaxed, then a fall into closed aesthetic categories is inevitable, as Kuki himself experience at the end of his life, when the contingencies of Paris gave way to the eternal time of the ancient capital Kyoto.²¹

The limitations inherent to the concept of aesthetic categories are the monumental walls within which they are confined, monadic configurations that separates them especially from life and action—with few exceptions, as in Kuki's case. This must explain why so many important Japanese aesthetic categories were associated with the arts of reclusion in the Middle Ages. *Yūgen*, *yōjō*, *sabi*, *wabi*, *aware*, all call to mind the heroes sung in the anecdotal literature (*setsuwa*) of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the heroes of *inja bungaku* (the literature of reclusion) who were known as "*sukimono*"—madmen who were obsessed with their arts, either poetry, archery, music, painting, or religious enlightenment. The solitary environments from which these recluses draw utmost enjoyment—especially what modern scholars have constructed as aesthetic pleasure—remind me of the virtual spaces inhabited by the lonesome *otaku* generation in dialogue with their computers all day long. By *otaku* (lit. your home) I mean a generation of young people who spend most of their time secluded in their rooms, passionately gathering anime and *manga*, especially pornographic ones, and naively taking the virtual world of computers

20. See my essay, "Worlds in Tension: An Essay on Kuki Shūzō's Poetry and Poetics," in Michael F. Marra, *Kuki Shūzō: A Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 6-41.

21. On the relaxation of tensions in Kuki's philosophy see, Tanaka Kyūbun, "Kuki Shūzō and the Phenomenology of Iki," in Michael F. Marra, ed. and trans., *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), pp. 340-344.

to be the real world. In other words, *otaku* are maniacs whose excesses extend to personal computer geeks, video games, graphic novels, and so on. The reclusive youth of *otaku* is obsessed with gathering objects in the cramped space of their undersize rooms, in the same way that Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216) was obsessed with gathering all the fads of his time (the holy water shelf, pictures of Amida and the bodhisattvas, books and scriptures, zithers and lutes, and so on) in his fictional little hut.

This house is unusual in appearance. It is barely ten feet square, and its height is less than seven feet...On the south side of the building, I have an open bamboo veranda with a holy water shelf at the west end. Toward the north end of the west hall, beyond a freestanding screen, there is a picture of Amida Buddha, with an image of Fugen alongside and a copy of the *Lotus Sutra* in front. At the east end of the room, some dried bracken serves as a bed. South of the screen on the west side, a bamboo shelf suspended from the ceiling holds three leather-covered bamboo baskets, in which I keep excerpts from poetry collections and critical treatises, works on music, and religious tracts like *Collection of Essentials on Ribirth in the Pure Land*. A zither and a lute stand next to the shelf. The zither is of the folding variety; the handle of the lute is detachable. Such is the appearance of my rude temporary shelter.²²

The *otaku* generation has created its own aesthetic categories. *Suki* (obsession with one thing) has been replaced by “*moe*,” which literally means “budding”—a new aesthetic category that describes a person who is attracted to fictional characters. For example, “*meganekko moe*,” or “glasses-girl *moe*,” indicates someone who falls in love with fictional girls wearing glasses. A “*tetsudō-moe*” (train *moe*) is someone who has a passionate interest in trains. While the aesthetic categories of *yūgen*, *sabi*, and *wabi* came to be used to portray the sadness, lone-

22. This is the description of Chōmei’s reclusive space, in his *Hōjōki* (Account of My Hermitage, 1212), in the translation of Helen Craig McCullough, *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 388.

someness, mystery and depth of the recluses who cut their ties from society, new aesthetic categories have come to the rescue of Japan's New Pop generation. For example, "*kawaii*" (cute) best describes the child-like character of the faces depicted by Murakami Takashi (b. 1962), sometimes scary, as in the case of work by Nara Yoshitomo (b. 1959), but constantly cute. *Kawaii* characters appear all over Japanese cartoons and anime from Hello Kitty to Pokemon, from Doraemon to TarePanda (Drooping Panda) and Anpanman (Bean Paste Bread Man). "*Yurukyara*" is another category which combines a sense of looseness and lethargy (*yurui*) with *kyara*, which stands for "characters." Coined by Miura Jun (b. 1958), a multitalented popular illustrator, this term conveys a sense of impotence, of sexual incapacity. The categories are new, but they seem to work in ways reminiscent of pre-war discourses—discourses that would have pleased neither Ōnishi nor Kuki. For example, this is what the artist Murakami Takashi, a leading representative of Japanese Neo Pop, has to say about *yurukyara*:

Like *wabi* and *sabi*, synonyms for Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, *yurui* evades ready translation. The best way to comprehend the term is to place it along the extended lineage of words such as *aware* (sensitivity or subjective emotion) and *okashi* (emotional attraction), which appeal to human emotion.²³

Murakami explains *yurukyara* with the aid of traditional aesthetic categories, mimicking the language of nationalistic aestheticians who stressed the particularism of aesthetic discourses. However, by relying on the abused language of the hermeneutics of the nation one runs the risk of depriving contemporary Neo Pop artworks of the global dimension that the artists wanted to infuse into their works, as art critic Sawaragi Noi has eloquently pointed out:

23. Takashi Murakami, "Earth in my Window," in Takashi Murakami, ed., *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New York and New Haven: Japan Society and Yale University Press, 2005), p. 137.

The true achievement of Japanese Neo Pop is that it gives form to the distortion of history that haunts Japan—by reassembling fragments of history accumulated in *otaku*'s private rooms and liberating them from their confinement in an imaginary reality through a critical reconstitution of subculture. In doing so, these artists have refused to take the delusional path of resorting to warfare like Aum; instead, they have found a way out through the universal means of art, transferring their findings to the battlefield that is art history. In essence, Japanese Neo Pop, as exemplified by the work of Takashi Murakami among others, visualizes the historical distortion of Japan for the eyes of the whole world.²⁴

Personally, I am not too sure how a jet of milk shut from the bulging breast of a cute little girl in Murakami's *Hiropon* (1997), or the spurt of semen of *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998), can liberate the *otaku* generation from the anxieties of confinement, although they are definitely less fatal than the Sarin gas used by the Aum Supreme Truth group in the 1995 attack of the subway in Tokyo. The dreamy eyes of the boy and the girl perfectly fit the newly established aesthetic category of "*kawaii*."

Another interesting example of the use of aesthetic categories today is what the philosopher, aesthetician, and poet Shinohara Motoaki (b. 1950) has called "*mabusabi*." This is the fusion of lonesomeness (*sabishisa*) with glare (*mabushisa*). In other words, *mabusabi* is a post-modern view of medieval *sabi*, a view of ancient Kyoto from the top of its glittering, high-tech station. It goes without saying that *sabi* is an aesthetic category associated with the sub-categories of "*hie*" (*hiesabi*, or cool lonesomeness), "*wabi*" (*wabisabi*, or desolate lonesomeness), and "*kirei*" (*kireisabi*, or beautiful lonesomeness). Leonard Koren has explained *sabi* in terms of rusticity, simplicity, artlessness, fragility, imperfection, impermanence, incompleteness, irregularity, unpretentiousness, anonymity, discoloration, rust, tarnish, stain, warping, shrinking, shriveling, cracking, nicks, chips, bruises, scars, dents, peel-

24. Noi Sawaragi, "On the Battlefield of 'Superflat': Subculture and Art in Postwar Japan," in Takashi Murakami, ed., *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, p. 205.

ing, and other forms of attrition which are a testament to histories of use and misuse—in other words, “a fragile aesthetic ideology.”²⁵ As Shinohara confesses in *Mabusabiki—Kūkai to Ikiru* (Account of Glaring Lonesomeness: Living with Kūkai, 2002), the idea of *mabusabi* came to him during his modern-day experience of reclusion—the experience of *tanshin funin*, the married man who has to leave wife and children behind in order to follow his job. During his lonely days in Tokyo, where he taught at Tokyo University of Fine Arts (Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku), the eighth-century monk Kūkai (774-835) appeared to him in several dreams. The connection between Shinohara and Kūkai comes from the fact that they are both from the island of Shikoku, Shinohara having been born in the Kagawa prefecture, and Kūkai being from the province of Sanuki. In one of these dreams Shinohara perceived Kūkai as a waterfall of light which he felt inside the palm of his hand, and which eventually wrapped around Shinohara’s entire body. The feeling of this dazzling glare made him think of the word “glaring lonesomeness” (*mabusabi*)—a *sabi* befitting a man of post-modernity who is faced every day with transparent and translucent objects. Evidently, Shinohara was influenced by the Shingon practice of meditating on the full moon (*gachirinkan*)—a type of meditation in which the moon becomes so large in the practitioner’s mind that it envelops his entire body. This vision inspired Shinohara to explain the experience of *mabusabi* in poetry—an idea that led him to compose forty-eight poems, which he titled *Mabusabi no Yonjūhachirō* (The Forty-Eight Waterfalls of Glaring Lonesomeness) after the forty-eight holy places in Shikoku. Using the technique of *mitate*, all poems refer analogically to a waterfall.²⁶ The following are a few examples:

2

(The Waterfall in Front of the Gate of the Benevolent King)

25. Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1994).

26. Shinohara Motoaki, *Mabusaki Ki* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 2002) pp. 5-18.

Aun no ma, banshō no, hibikitatsu

In the space of an *a-hum* all things come into sound

11

(The Waterfall of the Falling Stars)

Hoshi shizuku, mizuumi no, takitsubo ni

The stars drop into the basin of the lake's waterfall

15

(The Waterfall Falling Sultry with Heat)

Hoteru mi ni, jinwari to, ase shibuki

A splash of sweat, gradually on me, flushed

18

(The Thunderbolt Waterfall)

Oto ni shita yo, sō ieba, hikatta na

What a sound! To think about it, it actually glittered

23

(The Curtain Wall Waterfall)

Hikari tame, hikari ochi, hikari hae

The light accumulates, the light falls, the light shines

28

(The Waterfall of Falling Sadness)

Kanashimi o, ukekanete, namidatsubo

Unable to hold the sadness—basin of tears

30

(The Waterfall of Eros)

Aiyoku o, tamekanete, hitoshibuki

Unable to amass sexual desire—a splash

36

(The Clanking Bamboo Pipe Waterfall)

Shizukasa o, uchinarasu, take no oto
Clanking quietness—the sound of bamboo

41

(The Waterfall Opening the Door to Transcendental Short Poems)
Arashi yori, shi no ochite, kotoba chiru
Poems falling from a storm—scattered words

These are examples of what Shinohara calls “transcendental short poems” (*chōzetsu tanshi* 超絶短詩), in which a word can be divided into two parts, one part of which acts as an interjection. The word “*arashi* 嵐” (storm) can be divided into “*ara shi* あら詩,” which means “oh, poetry!”

48

(The Waterfall of Glaring Lonesomeness)
Mabushisa no, sabishisa ni, furisosogu
Dazzling glare pours into lonesomeness

This last verse has become the poet’s mantra—a prayer that makes the *mabusabi* experience an example of religious training, or, to use Shinohara’s term, “the training of glaring lonesomeness” (*mabusabigyō*). Again, we are back to the world of reclusion, of cramped spaces, of walled cities, of categories that predetermine and limit the flow of life—an apriorism that, after all, constitutes the very nature of form. It is up to the artists to find ways to free themselves from the straitjacket of patterns (*kata*) which regulate artistic expressions. Shinohara deals with forms in truly creative ways, often making form the content of his poems. After all, he refers to his own poetry as “*hōhōshi*” 方法詩, “method poems.” “*Arashi*” 嵐 is not just a storm, but also an encounter with the stormy nature of language, “*ara shi*” あら詩 (oh, poetry!). “*Oyaji*” 親爺 (father) is not just a reference to a fatherly figure, but also a reminder of his sedentary life, “*oya ji*” おや痔 (oh, the hemorrhoids!).²⁷ On March 20, 2004, Shinohara rented an old train

27. Shinohara Motoaki, *Chōzetsu Tanshi Shū: Monosawagi* (Tokyo: Shichigatsudō, 1996), p. 8 and 31.

car in the city of Otsu, Shiga prefecture, and had a public reading from his collection *Hyakunin Hitodaki* (One Hundred Waterfalls by One Hundred Poets, 2003). The event was titled, “Short Train Verses: one Hundred Waterfalls by One Hundred Poets on the Old Tram.” Each participant was engaged in the reading of Shinohara’s collection—a decomposition and re-composition of the famous thirteenth-century collection *Hyakunin Isshu* (One Poem by One Hundred Poets) by Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241). Shinohara created cards, similar to the *Hyakunin Isshu* cards used each year to celebrate the arrival of the New Year, and spread them on the floor of the train. This was a trip to “knowledge, action, and play” through a rail of words. Each card had the design of a waterfall (the waterfall of words) falling into a receiving basin at the bottom of the fall. A gigantic card was placed in front of the car that had brought people back and forth from Otsu to Kyōto for over thirty years. Now the car was put to a new, creative use, in the same way that Shinohara was putting words to a novel, “transcendental” use. In a sense, Shinohara does with poetry what Kuki did with aesthetics: they both work within precise aesthetic categories, but they struggle to make them alive and relevant to their world. They have thinned down the thick walls of aesthetic categories, forcing the *otaku* generation out from the solitary spaces of their tiny rooms. In other words, they have put glare (*mabu*) into lonesomeness (*sabi*).