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**Krzysztof Loska**  
Jagiellonian University

## IMPERMANENCE AS AN AESTHETIC CATEGORY IN JAPANESE ART

One of the fundamental qualities of Japanese aesthetics, both traditional and modern, is impermanence (*mujō*) – awareness of transitoriness, resulting to a large extent from a sensitivity to natural phenomena associated with the seasons<sup>1</sup>. It is the feeling of impermanence of this world that shapes the classic ideal of ephemeral beauty, so different from Western models. This is not about praising passivity, but, rather, about becoming reconciled to the inevitable and “enjoying the transience of nature”<sup>2</sup>. Delight in ordinary phenomena – everyday objects and nature surrounding us – comes from a strong conviction that everything accompanying human beings is fragile, especially their own life. Impermanence and mortality make people grow particularly attached to what expresses this sense of transience (*mujōkan*), for instance, cherry blossoms, which already in early medieval poetry reflected the allure of the ephemeral:

It's because they fall,  
the cherry blossoms seem to us especially precious.  
What in this sad world of ours  
lasts for any time at all?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi (*Estetyka i sztuka japońska*, Kraków 2009, pp. 32-33) begins her general analysis of traditional aesthetics from the notion of impermanence (*mujō*) and the Japanese's special attitude to nature.

<sup>2</sup> C.-Y. Chang, *Ogólne pojęcie piękna*, transl. B. Romanowicz, [in:] *Estetyka japońska*, vol. 1, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 2008, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> A poem from the eighty-second *Ise monogatari*, transl. J. Mostow and R. Tyler, University of Hawaii Press 2010, p. 176.

Japanese art became an expression of sorrow over the fragility and beauty of human existence, the course of which resembles natural changes in nature<sup>4</sup>. Inevitable loss and death accompany humans from birth, which is why they admire what embodies the ephemeral nature of being, which reminds them of the impermanence of things, regardless of whether this reminder is a broken tea pot or withered flower. The sense of uncertainty has been uniquely captured in the verses beginning the great national epic poem *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*):

The sound of the Gion Shoja temple bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the colour of the *shala* flowers reveals the truth that to flourish is to fall.

The proud do not endure, like a passing dream on a night in spring; the mighty fall at last, to be no more than dust before the wind<sup>5</sup>.

Impermanence is not only an aesthetic but also philosophical and religious category, shaped by the principles of Zen Buddhism, which have influenced a specific attitude to life, expressed in the acceptance of what fate will bring. This attitude stems from the conviction that reality has no fixed foundation, that it is heading for nothingness (*mu*) or emptiness (*kū*), which is why people should “strive to become liberated from the pressure of the external world, from the excitation of the senses, from everything that is intense, i.e. short-lived and exhausting”<sup>6</sup>.

The Buddhist concept of transience (*mujōkan*) is an expression of a deeper discernment of the nature of the world, which – as devoid of substance – is impermanent, suffering and ego- or self-less<sup>7</sup>. It also reflects an understanding of time different from the Western one. Time is not linear but cyclical or, rather, simultaneous, without a beginning and an end<sup>8</sup>. Only by capturing the duality of time can we understand the Japanese’s specific attitude to life and art. “Impermanence is associated with the passage of time (variability aspect), whereas the ‘eternal now’ signifies simultaneous existence of all moments, both past and future (invariability aspect)”<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the passage of time and the change that has taken place in Japanese culture under the influence of its opening up to the world and assimilation of Western models, we can still observe that the classical aesthetic categories have not been completely ousted; on the contrary – often the same authors who in their youth watched in admiration as society was being modernised, noticed after a while that

<sup>4</sup> C.-Y. Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Heike monogatari*, transl. Helen Craig McCullough, Stanford University Press 1990, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> A. Kozyra, *Estetyka zen*, Warsaw 2010, p. 139. The notions of “nothingness” and “emptiness” are understood in a similar manner, but the former has Taoist roots and the latter – Buddhist.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Stambaugh, *Impermanence is Buddha-nature: Dogen’s Understanding of Temporality*, Honolulu 1990, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. K. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, Berkeley 1982, pp. 219-221.

<sup>9</sup> A. Kozyra, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.



Phot. 1 *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949)

the true values were in the old understanding of beauty<sup>10</sup>. It might seem that cinema, as a modern invention, would be totally separated from the past, but many eminent directors include in their films references to traditional notions as well as a desire to preserve the extraordinary sensitivity to transience.

Most critics and historians dealing with Japanese cinematography point to the impact of the classical aesthetic principles on the work of Yasujiro Ozu, looking in it for praise of fleeting beauty and a reflection of the Buddhist worldview<sup>11</sup>. Without resorting to oversimplification, we can note that the Japanese director's post-war films are marked by this unique approach to time expressing an awareness of transitoriness and need to become reconciled to the impermanence of all things. Beginning with *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), Ozu takes a critical view of the present, which he juxtaposes with the past, though not in order to limit himself to praising the past, because his "sensitivity to transience is, in fact, sensitivity to the present; it gives a sense of taste, weigh, gravity"<sup>12</sup> (phot. 1).

The sense of loss by no means stems from a nostalgic perspective adopted by the protagonists of his films, a longing for childhood or youth, a time when every-

<sup>10</sup> A revision of one's attitude to the West can best be seen in the work of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965), one of the greatest Japanese writers of the 20th century, whose late works – especially *Sasameyuki* – praise tradition. A brilliant adaptation of this monumental novel was made by Kon Ichikawa in 1983.

<sup>11</sup> This approach began with Marvin Zeman (The Serene Poet of Japanese Cinema: The Zen Artistry of Yasujiro Ozu, *The Film Journal* 1, 1972, no. 3-4, pp. 62-71), who saw in Ozu's films references to the *haiku* poetry and tea ceremony. Marc Halthof (Ozu's Reactionary Cinema, *Jump Cut* 1978, no. 18, pp. 20-22), who also associated Ozu's films with the Zen aesthetics, saw in them an expression of a conservative longing for a feudal social order.

<sup>12</sup> A. Pierzchała, *Film japoński a kultura europejska. Obcość przezwyciężona?*, Kraków 2005, p. 59.

thing seemed possible, but has its sources in a historical context, the social situation in post-war Japan (American occupation and accelerated democratisation processes). The awareness of impermanence acquires a very literal dimension, because it concerns a break-up of the traditional family model, loosening of intergenerational ties, a problem tackled in Ozu's greatest work, *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953), a tale of an ageing married couple, who decide to visit their children only to find that none of them has time for them. Despite their disappointment and sadness, the parents do not feel bitter, they become reconciled to the new situation and silently accept their fate, which is confirmed by the scene in the bar, during the father's conversation with his childhood friend, who is just as disappointed with life. The mood of melancholic sadness is by no means overwhelming, which is evidenced by the presence of humoristic elements, consistently introduced even into serious fragments; there is no fear of death either, only a belief in the fragility of life<sup>13</sup> (phot. 2).

The *Tokyo Story*, like the earlier *Late Spring*, contains many references to the past and classical aesthetics – both on the level of iconography and visual composition of shots – though we need to bear in mind that these references are selective, because tradition is not something coherent and uniform, but variable and heterogeneous<sup>14</sup>. In the visual layer we see recurring motifs, typical of Ozu, suggesting transience, e.g. smoke, wind or insect trapped in a lamp, though the director avoids stereotypical images like falling maple leaves or blossoming cherry trees.

An important role is played in *Late Spring* by the scenery, especially temples – both Shinto (Tsurugaoka Hachimangū Kamakura), and Buddhist (Kiyomizudera in Kyoto) – emphasising Japan's religious syncretism. One of key scenes in the film – a conversation between the father of the main protagonist (Chishū Ryū) and his friend (Masao Mishima) about the necessity of becoming reconciled to decrees of fate – takes place in the famous Zen garden next to the Ryōanji monastery, which for people living today embodies classical beauty and restraint.

According to Hoover, the empty space dominating the layout of the garden symbolises a lack of attachment to earthly life. The garden is characterised by simplicity and power, it is so perfect that even if just one element is disturbed, the harmony will be destroyed<sup>15</sup>.

Contemplation of the garden enables the protagonists to go beyond the everyday and the materiality of human existence, to see beauty in what is impermanent. The first scenes of *Tokyo Story* take place in the Jōdo temple, belonging to the oldest Japanese schools of Buddhism; we can hear the sounds of prayer drums which

<sup>13</sup> The function of humoristic elements in Ozu's film is analysed by Arthur Nolletti in Ozu's *Tokyo Story* and the 'Recasting' of McCarey 'Make Way for Tomorrow', [in:] *Ozu's Tokyo Story*, ed. D. Desser, Cambridge 1997, pp. 25-52.

<sup>14</sup> Such an understanding of tradition was proposed by authors of articles collected in a landmark book *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Kraków 2008.

<sup>15</sup> A. Kozyra, *op. cit.*, p. 200.



Phot. 2. *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953)

return during the funeral of the mother; there is also a visual motif of a stone lighthouse associated with the symbolism of transition and metempsychosis<sup>16</sup>.

Ozu seems to be fond of traditional marks of Japaneseness, which is evidenced by the presence of various elements of landscape (parks, gardens), architecture (pagodas) and art (Noh theatre) as well as daily rituals, especially the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), which contains an aesthetic idea expressing simplicity (*shitsuboku*) and impermanence, but also certain elegance. *Late Spring*, for example, begins with a scene in a tea pavilion, to which the main protagonist, Noriko (Setsuko Hara) has been invited to take part in a special ceremony. This is not a place to discuss historical treatises devoted to the “way of tea” (*chadō*); we just need to point to two related terms associated with this ritual — *wabi* and *sabi* — owing to their place in the Japanese aesthetics of impermanence.

*Wabi* denotes “noble poverty”, admiration for the imperfect. Despite the fact that the word initially had negative connotations and was used in the context “of unrequited love or life in exile”, with time it acquired a new meaning, suggesting something timeless, something associated with giving up material goods and striving for simplicity<sup>17</sup>. It contained melancholic peace, awareness of deficiency, but at the same time it heralded agreement to this shortage, a liberation from attachment to material goods and earthly life. Such an attitude to life is the attitude of the protagonists of Ozu’s many post-war films; they understand happiness as reconciliation to one’s weaknesses, death or loss of one’s loved ones. In his last works — *Early Spring* (*Soshun*, 1956) and *Equinox Flower* (*Higanbana*, 1958) — the Japanese director likes to introduce

<sup>16</sup> The role and significance of Buddhist symbolism in Ozu’s film are examined in greater detail by Kathe Geist, Buddhism in ‘Tokyo Story’, [in:] *Ozu’s Tokyo Story*, pp. 104-117.

<sup>17</sup> A. Kozyra, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-361.

scenes of encounters after a long separation, mostly of war veterans, who share not only wartime memories, but also a similar attitude to life, expressed in cheerful resignation and lack of grudges against the world. In any case, the awareness of transience is emphasised by the very titles of his films: *Tokyo Twilight* (*Tōkyō boshoku*, 1957), *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959), *Late Autumn* (*Akibiyori*, 1960), *The End of Summer* (*Kohayagawa-ke no aki*, 1961), *An Autumn Afternoon* (*Sanma no aji*, 1962).

*Wabi* means finding peace in unfavourable conditions, quiet consent, without despair, regret, anxiety or envy at what fate brings. Such a state is possible only when a human being is not attached to anything<sup>18</sup>.

The beauty of deficiency, disavowal of all luxuries, calm and striving for simplicity – these are all characteristic features of Ozu's style: minimalistic, with reduced means of artistic expression, but at the same time extremely strict formally.

There is a similar meaning in the second of the terms mentioned here — *sabi* — suggesting spiritual isolation and abandonment<sup>19</sup>. The word is associated with old age and quiet acceptance of transience; at the same time, however, it contains an awareness of loneliness and imperfection. The key difference between *wabi* and *sabi* is that while *sabi* “concerns mainly the external manifestations of beauty and its experience, *wabi* is more concerned with human beings and their lifestyle”<sup>20</sup>. According to the Zen aesthetics, simple and ordinary objects become sometimes objects of aesthetic contemplation, like the vase in the hotel room in which the protagonists of the *Late Spring* spend the night. The scene, which is a symbolic farewell of the father and the daughter, is regarded as one of the most beautiful in Ozu's entire oeuvre. Paul Schrader sees in it an embodiment of the transcendental style, while Donald Richie – an example of becoming reconciled to the inevitable, i.e. an illustration of the Buddhist principle of accepting fate<sup>21</sup>. A shot of the old vase recurs several times and we may suspect that it is first of all to express the protagonists' emotional state, which would correspond to the *sabi* principles, according to which various objects, usually imperfect or damaged, may create a mood of sadness or melancholy.

It is not always easy to reconcile oneself to a loss, for usually the death of a loved one leaves an indelible mark and in such a situation the sense of transience or awareness of impermanence acquire a slightly different tinge, less connected with nostalgia and more with a traumatic attachment to the past. While the attitude of the protagonists of *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story* was an expression of their giving up of

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 365.

<sup>19</sup> The etymology of the word can be derived from the verb *sabu*, i.e. weaken, and the adjective *sabishii* — lonely.

<sup>20</sup> B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Berkeley 1972, pp. 49-51; D. Richie, *Ozu: His Life and Films*, Berkeley 1974, p. 174. A slightly different interpretation of this scene is proposed by Kirstin Thompson, *Late Spring and Ozu's Unreasonable Style*, [in:] *eadem*, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton 1988, pp. 339-340.



desires and acceptance of the decrees of fate, in films directed by Hirokazu Koreeda, regarded by many critics as an heir to Ozu's minimalist style, this acceptance is associated with anxiety and suffering. In his films the main theme is memory, which is associated with a recollection of death or abandonment, a difficult return to normalcy, working through mourning and overcoming melancholy, i.e. becoming reconciled to the transitory nature of everything. The artist focuses on individual experience, but he does it in a unique way, successfully avoiding sentimentalism and pathos; his camera maintains some distance, as it were, from the characters and the world presented, it maintains an objective stance and neutrality, as if it intended to capture images of daily life, focusing on banal situations.

The author's strategy stems to a large extent from his adoption of the poetics of a documentary; the Japanese director seeks "authenticity", though it is understood differently from the traditional definition of the realism of cinematic representation. He uses wide and long shots not to record experiences of ordinary people, but to record moments of epiphany, revelation, fragments of dreams and recollections. It seems that film images are for him the most faithful artistic reflection of memory, that they are capable of transmitting the mystery which escapes rational experience and of showing what is the most intimate, a slow death, departure from this world. This can be seen in a documentary entitled *August Without Him* (*Kare no inai hachigatsu ga*, 1994), which is an account of the last few months of a man dying of AIDS. The director clearly stresses that he is not interested in death on its own, but in people who have lost their loved ones and have to live with recollections; for them, memory is a source of subjectivity<sup>22</sup>.

Koreeda often understands impermanence in a very concrete, even tangible manner, for instance in *Without Memory* (*Kioku ga ushinawareta toki*, 1997). Its protagonist is a man who, as a result of a medical error, has been permanently brain damaged and is suffering from Wernicke's encephalopathy, a disease which disrupts short-term memory. He is unable to recall people who visited him at the hospital a day before; he becomes suspicious of those around him, so everyday after waking up he has to face an awareness of emptiness in his life. Looking for a way to enable him to function in the world, he decides to keep a diary and record all events, as a result of which he will be able to overcome his loss of memory<sup>23</sup>.

In *Maboroshi* (*Maboroshi no hikari*, 1995), Koreeda's debut as a feature film director, we see a return of the theme of death and impossibility of becoming reconciled to the past. The main metaphor is contained in the film's original title, in the reference to optical illusion, illusory light or mirage, which deceives and strangely

<sup>22</sup> See G. Paletz, *The Halfway House of Memory: An Interview with Hirokazu Kore-eda*, *CineAction* 2003, no. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Lars-Martin Sorensen (Reality's Poetry: Koreeda Hirokazu between Fact and Fiction, *Film Criticism* 35, 2011, no. 2-3, p. 29) sees in *Without Memory* an example of a participative documentary, because of the way it is filmed and the presence of the film crew in the protagonist's life.

attracts the individual gazing at its light. The plot, which comes from a novel by Teru Miyamoto (b. 1947), is focused on the story of one character, a young woman, who has to face what is seemingly incomprehensible – a suicide of the man she loved. Yumiko (Makiko Esumi) cannot reconcile herself to the loss of her husband or to understand the reasons behind his decision; she feels abandoned, nearly paralysed, totally indifferent to the world around her (although she has an infant son to take care of). The director has stressed many times in his interviews that he wanted to express the loss with which the young woman lived, because all his generation had experienced a similar, although indeterminate sense of loss<sup>24</sup>.

The events in the plot are preceded by a prologue, which turns out to be the protagonist's nightmare, a memory of a situation from her childhood. The girl took care of her grandmother suffering from memory loss. The grandmother wanted to visit the land she came from, an idyllic reality in order to see for the last time the sun rising over the sea. A death wish, symbolised by light attracting human being, is combined with a nostalgic longing for times past, but also with the necessity of abandoning one's loved ones. The grandmother's disappearance, her sudden departure, is the first traumatic experience from which the protagonist will not be able to free herself in her adult life, especially after her husband Ikuo (Tadanabu Asano) died just as unexpectedly, throwing himself under a passing train.

Yumiko finds out that happiness is fragile and uncertain, for death appears unexpectedly, at the least opportune moment, destroying one's sense of safety and identity. The woman plunges into sadness and melancholy, she sits indifferent, motionless, looking through the window and waiting for her beloved to come back. After six years she decides to start a life anew and agrees to an arranged marriage to a widower living in a small seaside town on the northern edge of the island. Tamio (Takashi Naitō) is a delicate and sensitive middle-aged man, who brings up his daughter Tomoko (Nami Watanabe) and takes care of his old father.

Yumiko is unable to forget her past, she still feels anxiety, even fear, is plagued by questions which she cannot answer. Tamio tells her a story of a mysterious light luring hapless humans into the land of forgetfulness and drawing them into the abyss of the sea. People who have given in to the "magic light" pass away forever. The last scenes take place somewhere between wakefulness and dream, because the funeral procession seen from afar seems to be unreal. This image may be a reflection of the protagonist's mental state or a harbinger of death that has accompanied her for years. No tragedy ensues, however, because in the last scene we see the husband and wife together again, with their children playing nearby<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> D. Richie, Koreeda's *Maborosi*: Showing Only What is Necessary, *Film Criticism* 35, 2011, no. 2-3, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> The special meaning of the last scenes is pointed out by Keiko I. McDonald, who devotes to them a large part of her analysis of the film. The author compares them to Mizoguchi's long shots, but emphasises their different thematic function. See K.I. McDonald, *The Danger and Allure of Phantom*



Becoming reconciled to the transitoriness of everything is not easy, but acceptance of this truth opens up the way to spiritual freedom, so Koreeda's protagonist gradually gives up her attachment to anything, she decides to live without any luxury, in peace and quiet, unconsciously following the ideal of Buddhist peace, coldness and loneliness. She realises that emptiness (*kū*) is not something negative, pure absence, because it brings liberation from all extreme experiences and, consequently, from suffering. "*Wabi* denotes finding peace in unfavourable conditions"<sup>26</sup>, overcoming despair and accepting what fate brings.

Unlike Ozu, Koreeda is more sensitive to what seems crucial in the Japanese aesthetics of impermanence, namely, the relation between art and nature, which is why he points to the specific function of landscape and stresses the contemplative beauty of nature. He shoots using natural light, outdoors, deliberately reducing the colour palette, but in this way he presents the world in a way that makes it difficult for the spectators to become emotionally involved and identify themselves with the characters on screen. The camera assumes the point of view of someone who looks at the events from afar and remains objective. Thanks to this device the melodramatic plot does not fall into the trap of sentimentalism, and the director does not succumb to the temptation of conveying emotions through close-ups<sup>27</sup>. Beauty can be admired only from a distance – argues Koreeda – we cannot come close to it. The way various objects and people are illuminated often makes recognising them difficult, as the light comes from behind, as a result of which we cannot clearly see facial features, and can only discern outlines. The semi-darkness emphasises the impossibility of communication between the characters, who should be close, but, in fact, do not understand each other. Light or its absence are used to convey the meaning of the film story, and so are the placement of the camera, its movement or lack thereof. The protagonists go outside the frame, but the director never follows them, leaving an empty space, like Japanese painters.

Some critics have noted a similarity between *Maboroshi* and Yasujiro Ozu's films, not only owing to the presence of transition shots, which are characteristic of the Japanese classic, but, first of all, owing to the use of a transcendental style, which makes it possible to capture the mystery of existence. This can be achieved

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Light: Hirokazu Koreeda's *Maboroshi*, [in:] eadem, *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context*, Honolulu 2006, pp. 211-217.

<sup>26</sup> A. Kozyra, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

<sup>27</sup> Detachment and assumption of the perspective of an external observer as the key stylistic features of Koreeda's film are mentioned by Timothy Iles, who describes this method of presentation as *detached style* (a term often used by critics analysing films of the second New Wave artists). Close-ups are rare, but when they do appear they are all the more significant; they are mostly close-ups of objects and not faces, applied to emphasise the absence of a loved one (e.g. a key belonging to the dead husband, his bicycle). See T. Iles, The light of life and death — the function of cinematography and lighting in two films by Koreeda Hirokazu, *Asian Cinema* 16, 2005, no. 1, pp. 205-219.

without resorting to conventional artistic devices (e.g. psychological realism), by focusing on daily life and ordinary events determining human existence at breakthrough moments, in which discontinuity between humans and the world around them is revealed. In such moments life stands still, the picture is frozen, and it becomes clear that the objective of a transcendental artist is not to resolve contradictions but to transcend them<sup>28</sup>. Showing an ordinary life and trivial situations makes it possible to create a context for later episodes presenting inexpressible pain, anger and despair after the death of a loved one, which in turn blocks life's opportunities and makes the protagonist detached from reality, though the final scenes make us realise that these limitations can be overcome.

The problem of reconciling oneself to the transience of things returns in Koreeda's next film, *Wonderful Life* (*Wandafuru raifu*, 1998), the title of which draws on Frank Capra's classic film (*It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946). Its action takes place in an abandoned and squalid school building, a kind of purgatory or, rather, waiting room where the dead come before embarking on the rest of their journey. Surprised and confused people are met by guides who are to help them choose the memory with which they will live for eternity. The counsellors do not resemble angels; rather, they seem to be like low-level officials supporting their clients in making the right decision. The afterlife seems to be a continuation of the earthly reality, there are no religious references in it, it is governed by secular laws, a bureaucratic system reigns, though it is only an intermediary stage. It turns out that the carers are not permanent "staff" but are recruited from the deceased who have been unable to find a precious memory for themselves. Their task is to restore memories, help people recover their past and reconstruct past events. This is not about being historically faithful, but about reconstructing the mood, i.e. about adopting a nostalgic perspective facilitating a return to childhood or one's first love.

Often, the memories are stereotypical and schematic, because people are very similar; sometimes wrong ones are chosen and the consultants then try to convince the deceased making the choice to take another look at his or her life. People remember various episodes which they transform in their mind and give them a desired shape. The whole operation resembles an instance of wishful thinking, as the protagonists get rid of unpleasant memories and forget about misfortunes. Such a possibility is given to the dead by their counsellors, because when the right image is chosen, the whole memory is erased.

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<sup>28</sup> The notion of transcendental style was introduced by Paul Schrader, *op. cit.* A detailed explanation of the comparison between Koreeda and Ozu is to be found in an article by David Desser, *The Imagination of the Transcendent: Koreeda Hirokazu's Maborosi* (1995), [in:] *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, ed. A. Phillips, J. Stringer, London 2007, pp. 273-283. Keiko I. McDonald (*op. cit.*) notes, on the other hand, that similarities between the two directors are purely superficial, and are used only to make a foreign text familiar and put it inside a well-known framework.

When telling the stories of his protagonists, Koreeda uses images stemming from the aesthetics of impermanence, creating the mood of melancholic sadness, fleeting moments and reconciliation to the inevitable, hence the recurring images of cherry blossoms, snowfall or moonlight. Such a strategy has enabled him to convey the special ability to feel sympathy contained in the notion of *mono no aware* (“the pathos of things”) in which sadness is combined with beauty and a conviction that life will pass, but also with a degree of satisfaction stemming from sensing harmony and noticing fleeting perfection. Mikołaj Melanowicz writes that *aware* “with regard to the world presented denotes a type of sensibility, that is a way of experiencing the world of nature and people, which can be most profoundly experienced in its transience, in its dying”<sup>29</sup>. According to Makoto Ueda, pathos is a combination of feelings of melancholy, elegance and resignation; it is characterised by an inclination towards the tragic, because it is born when life is treated as constant striving for death<sup>30</sup>.

Koreeda returns to the necessity of facing the ultimate challenges and reconciling oneself to a loss in *Still Walking* (*Arutemo arutemo*, 2008), which was written shortly after the death of the director’s mother and which is a kind of tribute to her. Like in his *Wonderful Life*, Koreeda tackles the problem of authenticity of memories and way of presenting them on screen as well as the relation between what has been remembered and the capacity of cinema to mechanically reproduce images. The personal dimension is more deeply hidden here, because Koreeda does not bring the film crew to the set, but only draws on the convention of family stories (*kazoku no monogatari*), dramas modelled on Yasujiro Ozu’s works, examining the difficult parents-children relationships<sup>31</sup>. The process of bringing back memories is associated with the presence of signals triggering specific images, not only visual but also aural, an example of which is a 1960s hit played from an old gramophone record, making it possible to create a nostalgic mood and also an impression of authenticity.

Apart from the epilogue, the plot is characterised by unity of time, place and action; the director does not introduce retrospection, giving information about the past by means of photographs watched by the protagonists and numerous stories told by the mother. All events take place over twenty-four hours in a suburban house of Mr and Mrs Yokoyama, who are visited by their children — daughter Chinami (You) and son Ryōta (Hiroshi Abe) with his wife (Yui Natsukawa) and her child

<sup>29</sup> M. Melanowicz, *Literatura japońska. Od VI do połowy XIX wieku*, Warsaw 1994, p. 183.

<sup>30</sup> M. Ueda, *Prawda i fałsz w literaturze pięknej*, transl. Joanna Wolska, [in:] *Estetyka japońska*, vol. 2, *Słowa i obrazy*, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 2005, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup> The similarity of *Still Walking* to Ozu’s family dramas, not only on the level of the plot but also on that of the visuals, is pointed out by Mitsuya Wada-Marciano in *A Dialogue Through Memories*; ‘Still Walking’, *Film Criticism* 35, 2011, no. 2-3, pp. 114-117. The author analyses the compositions of some shots – for instance the meeting between the father and the son at the seaside – which bring to mind images from Ozu’s films, especially his *Tokyo Story* and *Late Spring*.

from her first marriage. The family meets on the anniversary of the death of the eldest son, who died trying to save a drowning boy. The visit is a return to the past, as it were, it reveals hidden resentments, old conflicts between the father and the siblings, conflicts stemming from the trauma which has not been worked through. Their life has been marked by a loss; they are unable to show affection to each other and mend the broken ties. Like in his earlier films Koreeda focuses on ordinary, everyday activities, housework, preparation of meals and conversation at the table, which he films with a fixed camera positioned at a distance.

Despite the absence of direct references to Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics, the director has managed to convey a specific understanding of time, to show its cyclical nature, and in the epilogue – taking place five years after the events presented – to capture the most important component of Japanese sensibility: acceptance of transience and impermanence. The last scene at the parents' grave is preceded by a voice-over monologue in which the son expresses his regret about promises that have not been kept. However, sadness is not combined with depression here, mourning does not mean turning away from life, while acceptance of its fragility alleviates melancholy. The beauty of simplicity and joy derived from the ordinary accompany human beings, who see manifestations of the ultimate truth in flowing streams or growing grass.

Koreeda's oeuvre has been compared to *haiku*, given its economy of formal means and sensitivity to the changing seasons<sup>32</sup>. Undoubtedly we can discern in his films a unique ability to show what is authentic and genuine, and what also makes it possible to express a "dynamic momentum of existential phenomenality (*ryūkō*): ceaselessness, change, inconstancy, transiency and transformation"<sup>33</sup>, components that can be found in the famous poem by Bashō (1644-1694), the greatest *haiku* poet:

This road –  
with no one on it,  
autumn dusk<sup>34</sup>.

Despite the differences between Ozu's and Koreeda's cinema, stemming from differences in historical contexts, films by both directors reveal a similar truth about

<sup>32</sup> Cf. A. Pitrus, Hirokazu Koreeda: wszystko, co utracone, [in:] *Autorzy kina azjatyckiego*, ed. A. Helman, A. Kamrowska, Kraków 2010, p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> T. Izutsu, *Haiku: an existential event*, [in:] *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1981, p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> Translated by David Landis Barnhill (*Bashō's Haiku*, State University of New York Press 2004), below the original version and its Latin transcription:

この道や	kono michi ya
行く人なしに	yuku hito nashi ni
秋のくれ	aki no kure

human beings, who find happiness only when they realise that they are part of nature, i.e. accept the fragility of life. The sad or melancholic tinge comes from a particular fondness for the fleeting and the impermanent, though sometimes a nostalgic longing signifies too strong an attachment to the past, a situation in which it is not easy to become free from suffering.

## IMPERMANENCE AS AN AESTHETIC CATEGORY IN JAPANESE ART

### Summary

The main subject of the paper is impermanence (*mujō*) defined as the awareness of transience and sensitivity to what is fleeting. I assume that the term, taken from Buddhist philosophy, shapes the classic ideal of beauty in Japanese art. On the basis of films by Yasujiro Ozu and Hirokazu Koreeda, I would like to show how this aesthetic category is still present in Japanese cinema. Short analyses of *Late Spring* (1949) and *Tokyo Story* (1953) emphasise the references to tradition by invoking the notions of *wabi* and *sabi*; while Koreeda's works provide an example of particular minimalist aesthetics the aim of which is to present what is authentic in art. Despite the differences between the two film directors, resulting from different historical contexts, their films reveal a similar truth about people who may find happiness only when they realize that they are part of nature; in other words, when they are reconciled with the fragility of life.

*Summary translated by Krzysztof Loska*