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THE AESTHETICS OF TRANSIENCE IN JAPANESE CULTURE: *WABI-SABI*, IMPERMANENCE AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF *DÉCOÏNCIDENCE*

Abstract: The article examines the concept of wabi-sabi as the foundation of Japanese aesthetics, emphasizing its role in art and everyday life. Wabi-sabi celebrates the beauty of imperfection, impermanence and natural decay, which is expressed in practices such as the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*). In the context of art, this aesthetic allows for reflection on the transience of existence, contrasting with the Western tradition of vanitas. The wabi-sabi aesthetic evokes an emotional response akin to Julien's notion of *dé-coďncidence* – the experience of contradiction between what is enduring and what is ephemeral, a key element of the Japanese approach to impermanence. The article juxtaposes these manifestations of transience, showcasing both universal and culturally specific ways of coping with the passage of time.

Keywords: *Wabi-sabi*, Japanese aesthetics, Impermanence, Tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), Transience, *Décoďncidence*

The Philosophical Foundations: Buddhism and *Shintō*

Buddhism and *Shintō*, the two primary spiritual traditions of Japan, deeply influence the nation's cultural and philosophical outlook, particularly its aesthetics. Both embrace the concept of impermanence, which is central to Japanese art, literature and daily life. In Buddhism, the idea of *mujō* reflects the transient nature of existence, fostering a sense of mindfulness and detachment.

Shintō complements this with its reverence for the fleeting beauty of nature, such as cherry blossoms that bloom briefly before falling. Together, these traditions shape an appreciation for ephemerality, manifesting in practices and aesthetics that honor the beauty of the present moment and the inevitability of change[1].

Introduced to Japan from China and Korea in the 6th century, Buddhism evolved into a multifaceted and influential spiritual tradition. It intertwined with native *Shintō* practices, profoundly shaping Japanese culture, philosophy and aesthetics[2]. Over the centuries, numerous Buddhist sects emerged in Japan, but two branches had the most significant impact on its culture and mindset: Zen (*zenshū*) and the two Amidist sects, the Pure Land Sect (*jōdo-shū*) and its continuation, the True Pure Land Sect (*jōdo-shinshū*)[3]. As Dajczer implies, Zen has no doctrinal dogmatic books, nor are there any formulas that could fully unveil its meaning – "This school teaches nothing. Whatever its fruits may be, they ripen internally, within the mind of the individual practitioner. Each person is their own master, and Zen merely points the way"[4]. Japanese Zen Buddhism is characterized by its rejection of traditional dogmas and scriptural authority, emphasizing instead direct experience and intuitive insight. As expressed by Blocker and Starling, "Although we tend to think of Zen as intellectual and refined, it is in many ways a more grounded, direct, and pragmatic form of Buddhism than many of the works of Chinese culture. Above all, it is a form of practice, not theory. It does not rely on literature, innovation, foreign-language manuscripts that require deciphering, or secret metaphysical doctrines that need to be interpreted, nor on scholastic dialectical subtleties that demand resolution"[5]. Zen teaches that enlightenment cannot be achieved through intellectual study or adherence to doctrinal texts but must arise from personal meditative practice and transformation of consciousness[6]. While it is a school of Buddhism, all Buddhist teachings laid out in sacred texts (sutras and

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1 H. GeneBlocker, Ch. L. Starling, *Filozofia japońska*, transl. N. Szuster, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008, p. 75.

2 D. Keene, *Landscapes and Portraits: Appreciations of Japanese Culture*, Kodansha International, Tokyo 1978; Y. Tamura, *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*, Kosei Publishing, Tokyo 2000; D. Richie, *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*, Stone Bridge, Berkley CA 2007; J. Pilarska, *Japoński synkretyzm wyznaniowy*, "Edukacja Międzykulturowa" 2024, no. 2 (25), pp. 43–54.

3 P. Pieścik, *Współczesna rola religii w życiu japońskiego społeczeństwa*, "Tekst i Kontekst" 2020, no. 6, p. 68.

4 T. Dajczer, *Medytacja w buddyzmie zen*,"Studia Theologica Varsaviensia" 1994, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 136.

5 H. Gene Blocker, Ch. L. Starling, *Filozofia japońska*, p. 75.

6 D.T. Suzuki, *Zen i kultura japońska*, trans. B. Szymańska, P. Mróz, A. Zalewska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2009, pp. 13–14.

shastras), as D. T. Suzuki states, are "considered by Zen to be mere wastepaper – useful only for clearing away a certain portion of mental debris, and nothing more"[7]. Notwithstanding, this philosophical and artistic approach has shaped Japan's cultural identity, fostering a unique blend of spirituality, discipline and artistic expression: "Zen contributed a sense of aesthetics to Japanese culture, as noted by Kawabata Yasunari in his Nobel Prize speech, and it significantly shaped the Japanese mindset"[8].

Japan never became an entirely Buddhist country, as Buddhism coexisted alongside *Shintō* and Confucian traditions[9]. The renowned scholar Donald Keene identified two tenets of Japanese aesthetics, i.e. the principles of *wabi-sabi* (embracing imperfection and impermanence) and the poetic sensibility of *aware* (a gentle, melancholic appreciation of the ephemeral), both deeply rooted in the Buddhist concept of *mujō*. Building on the philosophy of the 14th-century Buddhist monk Kenkō, as articulated in his work Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness), Keene[10] furtherly recognized suggestiveness, irregularity and simplicity, as well as the Buddhist notion of impermanence, as foundational principles of Japanese aesthetics. In this context, the concept of *mujō* (impermanence) highlights the transient nature of all things[11]. Rooted in a Sanskrit Buddhist term, mujō encapsulates the notion that ceaseless change is the only constant in the phenomenal world[12].

To present a thorough explanation, it is essential to highlight that Japanese aesthetics reflect values such as harmony (*wa*), simplicity (*kanso*), asymmetry (*fukinsei*), subtlety (*shibui*), naturalness (*shizen*), hidden depth (*yūgen*), and timelessness (*seijaku*), creating a distinctive approach to beauty and art[13]. This integration of aesthetic principles not only acknowledges life's fragility but also celebrates it. Thus, it can be argued that central to Buddhist teachings is the understanding that all things are impermanent, interconnected, and ultimately subject to decay[14].

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7 D. T. Suzuki, *Die grosse Befreiung*, Weilheim/Obb. 1972, p. 50, in: T. Dajczer, *Medytacja*..., p. 136.

8 P. Pieścik, *Współczesna rola religii*..., p. 71.

9 A. Kość, *Prawo, Państwo i religia w Japonii*, "Teka Komisji Prawniczej" 2011, vol. IV, p. 63.

10 D. Keene, *Landscapes and Portraits*....

11 A. Rezaee, *Reconceptualizing Mujō: A Japanese Worldview Not in the Pursuit of Eternity*, "Journal of Iranian Cultural Research" 2017, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 27-50.

12 P. Varley, *Kultura japońska*, transl. M. Komorowska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006, p. 96.

13 D. Keene, *Estetyka japońska*, transl. K. Guczalski, in: *Estetyka japońska. 3. Antologia*, vol. 1, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Universitas, Kraków 2006, pp. 51-61; Cf. D. Richie, *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*, Stone Bridge, Berkeley, CA 2007; A. Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, VT 2003; D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, English edition, Kindle ed., Princeton University Press, New York 2009.

14 J. C. Dobbins, *Buddhism in Japan*, in: *A Thousand Cranes: Treasures of Japanese Art*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 1987, pp. 24-41.

As we read in Dobbins:

> "There is, for example, no emotion that moves the Japanese more profoundly than the Buddhist sense of impermanence. It issues forth in moments of sadness such as funerals, and in times of delight such as the enjoyment of nature, impermanence in fact underlies the traditional notion of beauty. When the Japanese speak of beauty in terms of *wabi*, melancholy, and *sabi*, they link it directly to the transience of all things. An object that lasts forever has far less aesthetic appeal than something fragile and short-lived. Impermanence, in that sense, makes it possible for beauty to exist"[15].

In the light of the above, aesthetics of transience in Japanese culture are deeply rooted in the Buddhist awareness of impermanence, which shapes both emotional experiences and artistic ideals. As Dobbins observes, this sense of impermanence, reflected in concepts like *wabi-sabi*, directly informs the Japanese understanding of beauty by emphasizing the fragile and ephemeral nature of existence as a source of profound aesthetic value[16]. This worldview encourages an acceptance of change and a focus on the present moment. The *Nirvana Sutra* declares that "All compounded things are impermanent"[17] – an idea that resonated deeply with Japanese society and infused its artistic expressions.

On the other hand, *Shintō*, with its reverence for nature, instills a sense of wonder toward fleeting natural phenomena. As Japan's indigenous spirituality, it is a polytheistic belief system that reveres nature and its cycles as sacred, centering around the worship of *kami* – divine spirits or deities believed to inhabit natural elements like mountains, rivers, trees, and the wind – while emphasizing the interconnectedness of life, the importance of ritual purity and the celebration of ephemeral beauty through traditions, festivals and practices that honor the impermanence and renewal inherent in the natural world[18]. At the heart of *Shintō* lies an intimate relationship with nature, seen as sacred and imbued with *kami*. This reverence for the natural world fosters an appreciation for its ever-changing and ephemeral qualities, such as the blooming of cherry blossoms or the shifting seasons. These cycles of renewal and decay

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15 Ibid., p. 41.
16 Ibid.
17 Transl. by Mark L. Blum.
18 H. Hardacre, *Shinto: A History*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017; J. Hendry, *Japończycy: Kultura i społeczeństwo*, transl. T. Tesznar, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2013, pp. 174-177.

are celebrated in *Shintō* rituals and festivals, reflecting an understanding of impermanence as a fundamental aspect of existence. The concept of *musubi*, or the creative power of nature, emphasizes the continual cycle of life, death and rebirth, reinforcing the idea that beauty arises from transience. This aligns with the Japanese aesthetic sensibility found in practices like *wabi-sabi*, where imperfection and temporality are honored.

Shintō shrines themselves, often built from natural materials like wood, embody this philosophy; they are periodically reconstructed in a process known as *shikinen sengū*[19], symbolizing the impermanence and renewal of life. Its influence on Japanese culture also extends to art and literature, where fleeting moments of natural beauty are cherished and immortalized. Poems in classical forms such as *waka* and the *haiku* often evoke *Shintō*-inspired themes, capturing transient images of nature that resonate with the notion of *mono no aware*, the poignant awareness of impermanence[20]. From the perspective of *Shintō*, transience is revered as sacred, with the fleeting moments of life celebrated as expressions of the divine. This perspective deeply influences Japanese aesthetics, intertwining spirituality with an intimate appreciation for the ephemeral beauty of the natural world. It offers a framework where change is not feared but embraced, allowing impermanence to inspire wonder, reflection and a deeper connection to life's fleeting moments[21].

Taking both Buddhism and *Shintō* into consideration, as we read in Pieścik, "It seems reasonable to state that religions in Japan, lacking a rigid, dogmatic structure from the beginning and marked by a tendency toward syncretism, did not take the form of separate, formalized institutions but rather became a significant yet seamlessly integrated element of the cultural fabric of society"[22]. Thus, contemporary Japanese religious thought and spirituality can be characterized as "multilayered, eclectic, and syncretic (disparate and often contradictory elements are frequently combined or harmonized), where dimensions of the sacred permeate various aspects of everyday secular life"[23]. The integration of *Shintō* and Buddhist ideologies fosters an acceptance of life's impermanence, influencing behaviors and attitudes – from samurai codes emphasizing honor in death to modern interpretations in cultural and artistic

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19 Cf. D. McIver Lopes, *Shikinen Sengu and the Ontology of Architecture in Japan*, "Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 2007, vol. 65, no. 1, pp. 77-84. Cf. also: K. Kurokawa, *Metabolism in Architecture*, Studio Vista, London 1977, p. 9.

20 K. Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, History, and Possibilities in English*, Charles E. Tuttle Co., Rutland, VT 1957.

21 K. Loska, *Impermanence as an Aesthetic Category in Japanese Art*, "Studia Filmoznawcze" 2013, vol. 34, pp. 1-13.

22 P. Pieścik, *Współczesna rola religii* ..., p. 71.

23 J. Pilarska, *Japoński synkretyzm wyznaniowy*, p. 52.

24 J. Hendry, *Japończycy*..., pp. 174-181.

practices[24]. Ultimately, the Japanese approach to transience is not merely abo ut acknowledging impermanence but finding profound beauty and meaning within it, offering a lens through which life's inevitable changes can be cherished rather than resisted. Together, these philosophies shape a worldview that finds beauty in the ephemeral and values the fleeting moments of existence.

Given the foregoing, the aesthetic philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, deeply rooted in Japan's cultural fabric, serves as a conceptual bridge between the Buddhist embrace of impermanence and the cyclical naturalism of *Shintō*, harmonizing the transient and imperfect aspects of existence with the reverence for nature and spiritual continuity.

Wabi-Sabi: The Aesthetic of Imperfection

The concept of *wabi-sabi*, central to Japanese aesthetics, embraces the transient and imperfect nature of life, emphasizing simplicity, humility and the beauty found in natural flaws and impermanence.

According to Daisetz T. Suzuki "We can now grasp the transcendental solitude in the very heart of many things, which in the dictionary of Japanese terms related to culture is called wabi. Wabi means "poverty" or, in a paradoxical form, "not belonging to the fashionable social circles of one's era." To be poor means not being dependent on the things of this world, to detach oneself from wealth and human opinions, while simultaneously sensing within oneself the presence of something most precious, something that transcends time and social status. This is what creates wabi"[25]. He describes *wabi* as a transcendental solitude and a detachment from material wealth and societal expectations, embracing simplicity and uncovering a deeper, timeless value within oneself. This notion aligns with Mi's description: "Wabi roughly means «the elegant beauty of simplicity», while *sabi* means «the evanescence of time and the impermanence of all things», which is regarded as a simple and restrained way of appreciation"[26]. The term *wabi* was applied to many fields of art but achieved particularly high artistic status in the tea ceremony, which reached its perfect form in the style known as *wabicha* – a subdued approach to tea[27]. As we read in Kumakura: "You can remove one component of wabi-cha and that component will certainly not lack meaning on its own, but wabi-cha is complete in its totality. Architecture, gardens, utensils, cuisine, tea-making procedures

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25 D. T. Suzuki, *Zen i kultura japońska*, p. 13.

26 L. Mi, *The National Concept Behind Japanese Aesthetic 'Wabi-sabi' – Taking the Gold Ornaments in Nagoya City as an Example*, "International Journal of Social Sciences and Public Administration" 2024, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 299.

27 P. Varley, *Kultura japońska*, p. 158-159.

(*temae*) and style (*shukō*): it was Sen no Rikyū who in a single masterstroke perfected and gave striking new emphasis to all these elements"[28]. It focused on seeking spiritual satisfaction in material austerity and required a sensitivity to subtle, hidden beauty[29]. Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi points that "the main difference between *sabi* and *wabi* lies in the domains to which these values pertain. While sabi primarily relates to an emotional state and embodies a more literary type of beauty, *wabi* is primarily associated with daily life and its conditions. This explains why *wabi*, in its broadest sense as the beauty of poverty, though present in the works of Bashō's school, played a more significant role in the tea ceremony"[30].

In his work "Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers", Leonard Koren suggests understanding *wabi* as relating to the spiritual path, the internal and subjective, philosophical ideas and spatial aspects. In contrast, *sabi* is more associated with material objects, art and literature, with what is external and objective, certain aesthetic ideals, as well as the category of time[31]. *Sabi* lies in rustic simplicity, imperfections, and the richness of historical associations, which always accompany it. Ultimately, it is the essence of these features that gives the object its artistic value, even if it is not a work of great technical skill. All these features are part of what is considered *sabi*. It is precisely these elements that are conveyed through the master of the tea ceremony's artistry[32].

Wabi-sabi channels the meditative understanding of life and death into physical forms – cracked ceramics, weathered wood, and other humble materials – each bearing the marks of time. Such artifacts embody the transient beauty of existence, resonating with a larger cultural tradition that celebrates the fleeting (like seasonal poetry). It transcends art to become a spiritual practice, reflecting mindful detachment from idealized perfection.

Wabi-sabi finds expression in various Japanese art forms, such as tea ceremonies, flower arrangements, *haiku* and garden design, all of which celebrate the fleeting beauty of the natural world and human creation. The word "comes from the idea of simple tea ceremony props, and (...) embodies the beauty of

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28 I. Kumakura, *Japanese Tea Culture: The Heart and Form of Chanoyu*, Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, Tokyo 2023, p. 23.

29 K. Haga, *The Wabi Aesthetics through the Ages*, in: *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, ed. N. G. Hume, transl. B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, State University of New York Press, Albany 1995, p. 246.

30 B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, *Estetyka i sztuka japońska. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Universitas, Kraków 2009, p. 86.

31 L. Koren, *Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, CA 1994, p. 23.

32 D. T. Suzuki, *Zen i kultura japońska*, p. 13-15.

33 B. Cichy, *Wabi sabi. Estetyczny ascetyzm w sztuce zen*, "Estetyka i Krytyka" 2011, vol. 22, no. 3, p. 51.

tranquility and deepness. It is not only an aesthetic attitude, but also an aesthetic realm and aesthetic mind"[33]. It invites a rejection of materialism, encourag-ing appreciation for the subtle, understated, and ephemeral. As Cichy poetically enshrines in her reflection: "Whether in a cracked tea bowl, in the short verses of haiku poetry that sensitively celebrate the small and unassuming, or in a few seemingly random and imperfect brushstrokes in *sumi-e* painting, *wabi-sabi* consistently evokes imperfection, irregularity and simplicity – regardless of the interpretations, which are likely as numerous as the commentators themselves"[34].

Originating from the Japanese tea ceremony and influenced by Chinese Taoist and Buddhist traditions, *wabi-sabi* encapsulates simplicity, humility and a profound connection to nature. It challenges conventional Western ideals of symmetry and perfection, instead embracing asymmetry, imperfection and the passage of time. Its principles have shaped Japanese culture profoundly, influencing even global aesthetics, from Western art movements inspired by Japanese woodcuts to contemporary design philosophies[35].

The aesthetic principle of *wabi-sabi* encapsulates the beauty of imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness. Celebrating the flawed, weathered and understated, it welcomes to find charm in the marks of time and wear. As we read in Juniper:

> "Zen monks lead a simple and austere life, always aware of their mortality. The art of wabisabi seeks to capture the essence of their humble efforts, aiming to express, in physical form, their love for life balanced with a sense of sorrow stemming from the inevitability of its end. As an artistic aspect of the entire Zen ideology, the art of wabi-sabi embodies the lives of monks and is based on principles of simplicity, humility, restraint, naturalness, joy, and melancholy, as well as the overarching element of impermanence.[36]"

Analyzing the above, the deep relationship between Zen philosophy and the art of *wabi-sabi* illustrates how both encapsulate the aesthetics of transience that define Japanese culture. In this exploration, the lives of Zen monks become a testament to impermanence and simplicity, while *wabi-sabi* transforms these philosophical ideals into tangible artistic expressions. At the heart of this relationship is the monks' deep awareness of mortality, a cornerstone of Zen thought, which shapes their austere and mindful existence. This awareness

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34 Ibid., p. 52.
35 A. Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, Tuttle Publishing, North Clarendon, VT 2003, p. 52.
36 Ibid.

mirrors the broader Japanese cultural focus on the fleeting nature of life, encapsulated in the concept of *mujō* (impermanence). *Wabi-sabi*, with its emphasis on imperfection, incompletion, and the passage of time, becomes a natural extension of this worldview.

The emotional depth of this aesthetic lies in its duality – balancing a love for life with the sorrow of its inevitable end. This interplay resonates with the Japanese notion of *mono no aware*, the poignant sensitivity to the ephemeral.

Photo 1. Figurines of kitsune, adorned with the patina of time, at the *Shintō* shrine Nezu Jinja. Kitsune are mystical foxes serving as messengers of the deity Inari, symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and protection from evil. Source: Author's private archive

In *wabi-sabi*, this duality takes form through the celebration of weathered materials, asymmetrical compositions, and muted tones.

These elements invite quiet introspection, encouraging a harmony between the joy of the present and the acceptance of eventual decay. Simplicity, humility and naturalness emerge as core values in both Zen practices and *wabi-sabi* art, reflecting a shared ethos of reducing life to its essentials: "Zen and its distinctive worldview significantly shaped the artistic sensibilities of medieval Japan – an era guided by aesthetic values such as simplicity, austerity, and a preference

37 B. Cichy, *Wabi sabi*..., p. 49.

for what is old, worn, and imperfect"[37]. The emphasis on restraint and authenticity harmonizes with the unassuming designs of *wabi-sabi*, which celebrate nature's organic imperfections. This aesthetic represents more than just an artistic approach; it embodies a way of life. The concept reflects an appreciation for the transient, imperfect and natural aspects of life and art. It is evident in Japanese architecture, dry landscapes and tea ceremonies, where understated beauty and natural materials highlight the ephemeral essence of existence. The philosophy emphasizes the coexistence of "being" and "nothingness," fostering a tranquil and introspective environment. In environmental art and design, *wabi-sabi* inspires a focus on the relationship between humans, the environment, and materials, advocating for designs that resonate with natural harmony and spiritual depth. It bridges the functional and spiritual realms, creating spaces that reflect a delicate balance between impermanence and beauty[38]. *Wabi-sabi* permeates various cultural artifacts such as tea ceremonies, bonsai, haiku and stone gardens, emphasizing transience as an integral part of beauty. In the context of broader human experience, it offers profound implications for medicine[39], ethics and personal attitudes. It challenges modern ideals of perfection, proposing an alternative framework that embraces the natural variations of physical form, age and even disability. This perspective, relating to the art of *kintsugi*, encourages valuing scars and imperfections as markers of uniqueness and resilience, rather than flaws to be eradicated. It also reorients attitudes towards mortality, suggesting that the transient nature of life is not a tragedy but a defining element of its beauty, offering solace in practices like palliative care[40]. According to Wilkinson, *wabi-sabi* reflects a virtue-based mindset, promoting acceptance and appreciation of life's inherent imperfections, fostering human flourishing, and guiding attitudes towards health, aging and death[41].

The aesthetics of transience in Japanese culture, encapsulated by the concept of *mujō* (impermanence), reveals a profound cultural philosophy deeply intertwined with Buddhist principles. Central to this aesthetic is the acceptance of change and the ephemeral nature of existence, a perspective that manifests in art, literature and social customs. *Mujō* is illustrated in the cherry blossom (*sakura*), whose fleeting bloom symbolizes the beauty and fragility of life, a recurring theme in Japanese poetry, particularly in waka and haiku[42].

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38 J. Yang, *The Meaning and Expression of Wabi-Sabi in Environmental Art Design*, "Pacific International Journal" 2021, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 45-48.

39 Cf. D. Wilkinson, *Wabi-Sabi: A Virtue of Imperfection*, "Journal of Medical Ethics" 2022, pp. 938-939.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 A. Rezaee, *Reconceptualizing Mujō*..., pp. 28-29.

This notion extends into architecture and craftsmanship, where impermanence is embraced through materials like wood that age and decay, embodying the natural cycles of life. From this perspective, even contemporary philosophical ideas like Jullien's concept of *dé-coïncidence* resonate with *wabi-sabi*, which celebrates divergence and imperfection, uncovering beauty in the natural rhythm of life and its inevitable decay. Ultimately, it reveals how the aesthetics of transience are woven into the fabric of Japanese culture, not only as an artistic pursuit but as a way of understanding and living. With its quiet acceptance of impermanence, *wabi-sabi* offers a profound reflection on life's fragile beauty. It transforms the inevitability of loss into a source of meaning, encouraging a life lived with humility, balance and a deep appreciation for the fleeting present. In this regard, *wabi* "is not only an aesthetic principle popularized through *chadō* (the Way of Tea) or poetic forms such as *waka, renga*, and *haiku*, but also a way of life or an attitude associated with embracing certain values, such as simplicity, renunciation, and tranquility"[43].

Another illustrative example is the *kintsugi*. As a traditional Japanese craft, it aligns with Zen aesthetics[44], where broken or fragmented pieces of accidentally (or intentionally) shattered ceramics are carefully collected, assembled, and bonded using *urushi* (the sap of the East Asian lacquer tree), then adorned with gold or other precious metals. The cracks are not hidden but highlighted. An intricate network of golden veins envelops the vessel, making it more unique and refined than in its original state. By aligning with the aesthetic concepts of Zen, *kintsugi* celebrates simplicity, unpretentiousness and the beauty of aging. This practice reflects an acceptance of flaws as part of an object's history, a metaphor for resilience and the human capacity to embrace imperfection. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1977) further explores this aesthetic, offering a profound meditation on the aesthetics of transience, which is central to Japanese culture[45]. Tanizaki extols the understated beauty of impermanence, shadow and subtlety, contrasting it with the Western preference for brightness and clarity. Tanizaki's reflections on the subdued glow of lacquerware illuminated by candlelight or the quiet elegance of traditional Japanese architecture underscore a reverence for the transient and the incomplete. His work situates shadow as a metaphor for the fleeting and intangible qualities of beauty that resist commodification or permanence. By framing these aesthetic principles as intrinsic to Japanese identity, "In Praise of Shadows" not only

43 B. Cichy, *Wabi sabi*..., p. 53.
44 T. Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art: A Way of Spiritual Experience*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1962.
45 J. Tanizaki, *Pochwała cienia*, transl. H. Lipszyc, Karakter, Kraków 2016.
46 Ibid., p. 58.

critiques the homogenizing effects of modernity but also serves as a defense of cultural specificity. "There is no beauty without shadow"[46], writes Tanizaki, and this is perhaps the essence of his aesthetic views. According to Tanizaki, what is Japanese should be shielded from overly bright light, bathed at most in a pale glow, and "permeated with the dust of darkness"[47].

Kintsugi transforms damage into beauty by integrating the cracks into the object's design[48]. This practice reflects a broader philosophical acceptance of imperfection, resilience and the passage of time. It emphasizes the value of flaws, not as defects to hide but as elements that enrich and enhance the narrative of the object's existence. Similarly, Tanizaki's work explores the aesthetic and sensory qualities of traditional Japanese spaces, highlighting their understated elegance and shadowy qualities in contrast to the stark, bright modernity of Western influences: "Objects placed in semi-darkness not only become beautiful but also invite us to immerse ourselves in a world of illusion,

Photo 2. A serene Japanese tea house nestled in a lush garden, embodying the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic with its harmonious simplicity, natural materials, and tranquility. Source: Author's private archive

47 Ibid., p. 66.

48 A. Avdulov, *A Different Kind of Beauty: Wabi and Kintsugi*, in: *The Kyoto Conference on Art, Media & Culture 2020 Official Conference Proceedings*, Saint Mary's University, Canada 2020, p. 2.

49 J. Tanizaki, *Pochwała cienia*..., p. 45.

dreams, and reverie"[49]. When Tanizaki mentions the glow seeping through the paper-thin, translucent *shōji* screens, he is describing precisely this process: "Astonished by this dreamlike light, I rub my eyes and feel as though a mist veils my vision and clouds my sight. The light emanating from the milky-white paper is so faint that, instead of dispelling the dense darkness reigning within the alcove, it is reflected by that very darkness, revealing a world of illusion where it is impossible to distinguish brightness from shadow"[50]. As he meditates on the interplay of light and shadow, it invites a deeper appreciation of understated beauty and the fleeting, fragile nature of life.

These ideas are deeply connected to the concept of *Ma* (間), a fundamental element in Japanese aesthetics and philosophy[51]. Often translated as "space," "interval," or "pause," *Ma* represents more than just physical or temporal gaps; it embodies the harmony of presence and absence, the meaningful void that enhances perception and experience[52]. In the context of *kintsugi*, the repaired cracks symbolize literal and metaphorical *Ma* – spaces created by breakage, which are highlighted, not concealed, using gold lacquer. This transformation underscores the aesthetic importance of the "empty" or "damaged" spaces as meaningful contributors to the whole. Similarly, Tanizaki's exploration

Photo 3. A traditional Japanese tatami room with a circular window (marumado) that frames a lush garden view, emphasizing harmony between architecture and nature. The design reflects the Japanese concept of Ma – the intentional use of space and intervals to create a sense of balance and flow, where emptiness becomes as significant as the objects within it. Source: Author's private archive

50 Ibid.
51 M. Lucken, M. Rosen, *The Limits of Ma: Retracing the Emergence of a 'Japanese' Concept*, "Journal of World Philosophies" 2021, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 38-57.
52 Ibid., pp. 39-40.

of shadowy beauty reflects *Ma* in its emphasis on what is implied, subtle, or incomplete. The interplay of light and shadow creates a sense of depth and invites the observer to engage with the unspoken or unseen, aligning with the idea of *Ma* as the value of the interval or pause. The connection to *Ma* enhances the interpretation of these practices, situating them within a broader philosophical framework that appreciates the dynamic balance of presence and absence.

Chanouy as the art of celebrating impermanence

The Japanese tea ceremony represents a profound integration of Zen Buddhist philosophy and Japanese cultural aesthetics. It is far more than the act of drinking tea; it is a spiritual practice that fosters mindfulness, tranquility and harmony. The ceremony evolved during the time of Shukō, who lived in the Muromachi period, and was shaped "in accordance with the aesthetics of wabi-cha, that is, the tea aesthetic (cha). According to Hagi Koshirō, wabi contains three types of beauty: the beauty of simplicity and irregularity, the beauty of austerity, and the beauty of solemnity"[53].

As we read in Cichy: "Natural simplicity is also a characteristic of chanoyu (literally meaning "hot water for tea"), the tea ceremony (commonly referred to in Japan as *sadō* or *chadō*, "the way of tea"), which represents an extension of Zen rituals. Everything related to the way of Zen also applies to *chadō*, as the way of tea is essentially an attempt to understand Zen in practice. However, if Zen discipline is not observed in daily life, the act of preparing and serving tea becomes merely an empty form, a meaningless gesture devoid of the ethical essence so central to *chadō*"[54]. Thus, the ceremony embodies the principles of simplicity and enlightenment, transforming a daily ritual into a profound journey of self-discovery and reflection[55]. This spiritual connection is the foundation of the tea ceremony's unique identity. Central to its aesthetic is the concept of triple realm beauty, which manifests in tangible, conceptual and abstract forms. The tangible beauty of the tea ceremony lies in its physical expressions – the understated architecture of tea rooms, the imperfections in tea sets, and the meticulously prescribed rituals[56]. Every element, from the asymmetry of the tearoom to the rugged simplicity of tea bowls, evokes a sense of humility and appreciation for imperfection. Beyond its physical form, the ceremony's artistic conception beauty reveals themes of tranquility and nothingness. Silence and simplicity dominate the tearoom, creating a contemplative

53 P. Varley, *Kultura japońska*, p. 158.
54 B. Cichy, *Zen a sztuka*, "Hybris" 2009, no. 8, p. 64.
55 A. L. Sadler, *Cha-No-Yu: The Japanese Tea Ceremony*, Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo 2011.
56 K. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo 1977.

Photo 4. A traditional Japanese interior with a rustic wooden table featuring an integrated hearth (irori), surrounded by natural materials and minimalistic décor. Source: Author's private archive

space where both host and guest can shed distractions and focus on the present moment. This immersion fosters an intimate connection, allowing participants to reflect on their lives and the transience of human existence.

At an abstract level, the tea ceremony encapsulates philosophical principles like *wabi-sabi* and *Ichigo Ichie*[57]. These principles celebrate impermanence and the unique value of fleeting moments. *Wabi-sabi* finds beauty in the imperfect and transient, while Ichigo Ichie reminds participants to cherish each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event. Together, these ideas encourage an appreciation of life's simple, ephemeral joys.

Historically, the tea ceremony evolved from Chinese tea culture, introduced to Japan through Zen monks. Figures like Murata *Jukō*, Takeno *Jōō*, and particularly Sen no Rikyū played pivotal roles in shaping its development[58].

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57 H. García, F. Miralles, *The Book of Ichigo Ichie: The Art of Making the Most of Every Moment, the Japanese Way*, Penguin Life, New York 2019.

58 Sen Shōshitsu XV, *Smak herbaty, smak zen*, transl. M. Godyń, Wydawnictwo Ravi, Łódź 1997, p. 23; I. Kumakura, *Japanese Tea Culture: The Heart and Form of Chanoyu*, Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, Tokyo 2023, pp. 11-13.

Sen no Rikyū revolutionized the tea ceremony by emphasizing minimalism, spiritual reflection and the intimate connection between the host and guest. His innovations, such as the "wabi tea style" and the reduction of tearoom sizes, distilled the ceremony to its essence, transforming it into an artistic and spiritual practice[59]. Today, while the tea ceremony has become more professionalized and commercialized, its core philosophy remains a source of inspiration. It serves as a reminder to find beauty in life's imperfections and simplicity, to cherish fleeting moments, and to cultivate inner peace. In a world often dominated by complexity and haste, the tea ceremony offers a timeless refuge, guiding individuals toward mindfulness and harmony in daily life. Through its enduring principles, the tea ceremony continues to reflect the spiritual and cultural depth of Japanese tradition, offering a path to connect with oneself and

Photo 5. A minimalist ikebana arrangement in a woven vase, set against a traditional Japanese alcove (tokonoma) with a hanging scroll, beautifully positioned within the serene setting of a teahouse, embodying simplicity and seasonal beauty. Source: Author's private archive

59 P. Varley, *Kultura japońska*, p. 159.

the surrounding world. The use of weathered, handcrafted utensils, the seasonal design of tea rooms, and the careful attention to ephemeral elements such as flower arrangements or the sound of boiling water all underscore this philosophy. Furthermore, chanoyu draws on Zen Buddhist influences, emphasizing mindfulness and the acceptance of change. It exemplifies the art of celebrating impermanence through its meticulous attention to ephemeral beauty and the transient nature of existence. Each aspect of the ceremony – from the seasonal selection of tea implements and the floral arrangements to the fleeting atmosphere created by the interplay of light and shadow – celebrates the transient and the impermanent.

Photo 6. A serene moment of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*). Source: Author's private archive

The practice reflects the embrace of *mujō* (impermanence), inviting participants to find meaning and beauty in the present moment, knowing it will never recur in the same way. The aesthetic appreciation of a worn tea bowl, with its cracks and patina, highlights the passage of time as an integral part of its value and narrative. By framing impermanence not as a limitation but as a source of aesthetic and spiritual depth, *chanoyu* transcends its role as a cultural practice to become a profound meditation on life itself. It offers a space where participants can momentarily suspend the permanence sought by modernity, reconnecting instead with the fleeting, fragile beauty of existence. The ceremony fosters an awareness of the fleeting nature of beauty, as seen in the appreciation of a cracked tea bowl or the interplay of light and shadow in the tearoom. In this way, *chanoyu* serves not only as an artistic and cultural practice but also as a spiritual exercise that reinforces the Japanese worldview of finding harmony in the transient and the incomplete. By intertwining aesthetic, philosophical and cultural values, *chanoyu* embodies the essence of Japan's reverence for the impermanent. Within the tearoom's tranquil setting, detached from the outside world, participants are encouraged to contemplate the ephemeral nature of life and find solace in the present moment, fostering an appreciation for the subtle beauty of impermanence.

Reflection

The aesthetics of transience in Japanese culture is profoundly expressed through the principle of *mujō* (impermanence), which is deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy and finds artistic expression in the intertwined aesthetics of *wabi-sabi* and *mono no aware. Mujō*, derived from Buddhist teachings on the impermanence of all things, emphasizes the fleeting nature of existence, a perspective that shapes Japanese poetry, visual arts and social practices. *Wabi-sabi*, celebrating simplicity and imperfection, and *mono no aware*, the melancholic awareness of life's ephemerality, are central to this cultural ethos. Through these lenses, Japanese culture embraces a worldview that finds depth and beauty in the inevitable cycles of growth and decay, offering a poignant counterpoint to modern ideals of permanence and perfection. This aesthetic philosophy not only reflects a spiritual acceptance of impermanence but also fosters an intimate connection with the transient beauty of the natural world and the human condition.

The aesthetics of transience in Japanese culture, epitomized by *mujō, wabi-sabi*, and *mono no aware*, aligns intriguingly with François Jullien's concept of *décoïncidence*. François Jullien, from his sinological perspective, explores philosophy through the lens of Chinese thought, emphasizing its contrast with Western traditions and highlighting themes such as immanence, relationality

and the fluid dynamics of change. Jullien's *décoïncidence* refers to the gap or disjunction that opens between a thing's immediate presence and its potential to unfold into something new, emphasizing the dynamic process of becoming rather than fixed being[60]. For Jullien, coincidence often represents a condition where ideas, actions, or states become too fixed and self-satisfied, inhibiting growth and creativity[61]. He proposes the idea of *de-coincidence*, which he views as an essential process for transformation and renewal. Through *de-coincidence*, individuals and systems are encouraged to break free from rigid conformity, enabling continuous evolution and opening new possibilities for existence and understanding. This dynamic interplay between coincidence and *de-coincidence* reflects Jullien's broader exploration of change and the potential inherent in life's transitions.

This resonates with the Japanese embrace of impermanence, where the transient nature of things is not only accepted but celebrated as the source of beauty and meaning. For instance, the wabi-sabi aesthetic highlights the beauty found in imperfection and the incomplete, which parallels Jullien's notion of potentiality within *décoïncidence*. Similarly, *mono no aware*, with its melancholic sensitivity to the ephemeral, mirrors the philosophical stance that true appreciation arises from the recognition of impermanence as a site of creative potential and existential depth. The Japanese view of nature and art, as ever-changing and fleeting, echoes Jullien's framing of *décoïncidence* as the space where transformation occurs, allowing the viewer or participant to experience not just what is but what might emerge. Both philosophies reject static absolutes and instead valorize the unfolding process, situating impermanence as a dynamic and creative force central to aesthetic and existential reflection. Thus, Jullien's *décoïncidence* provides a Western philosophical parallel that enriches the understanding of Japanese transience as a profound and generative engagement with life's inherent flux.

Expanding on the relationship between the Japanese aesthetics of transience and François Jullien's concept of *décoïncidence*, we find that both perspectives invite a rethinking of how humans relate to time, change and beauty. In Japanese culture, impermanence is embraced not merely as a philosophical abstraction but as a lived experience. This is evident in the fleeting bloom of cherry blossoms, which captures the poignancy of transient beauty, and in the tea ceremony, where the irregularities of handcrafted ceramics symbolize the value of the imperfect. *Décoïncidence* parallels this by positing that the essence

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60 F. Jullien, *Ponownie otworzyć możliwości: De-koincydencja i kolejne życie. Wybór tekstów*, transl. and ed. E. Marynowicz-Hetka, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2024, p. 153.

61 Ibid., p. 154.

of things lies in the disjunction between what they are now and the possibilities they open for future transformations[62]. For Jullien, *décoïncidence* reflects the creative tension that arises from divergence, which can deepen one's engagement with the world – a concept that resonates deeply with *mujō*. In this interplay, both Jullien's philosophy and Japanese aesthetics recognize that the value of an object or moment lies not in its permanence or perfection but in its ability to evoke an awareness of life's transitory and evolving nature. Similarly, mono no aware – the empathetic awareness of the impermanence of things – underscores the emotional resonance of this aesthetic engagement, transforming impermanence into a source of profound emotional and artistic expression.

Furthermore, Jullien's *décoïncidence* sheds light on how the Japanese view of time and history differs fundamentally from linear, progress-focused paradigms. Japanese aesthetics, through its emphasis on cyclical and natural rhythms, mirrors Jullien's view of *décoïncidence* as a productive dissonance that avoids reductive resolutions[63]. This philosophy encourages a mode of appreciation that transcends immediate utility or fixed identity, much like the Japanese reverence for objects that bear the marks of age and use, such as in *kintsugi,* the art of mending broken pottery with gold to highlight rather than hide the cracks. Finally, both the aesthetics of transience and *décoïncidence* call for a participatory attitude toward life and art. Japanese culture, through its aesthetics, invites individuals to find beauty and meaning in the process of change and decay, challenging the modern obsession with permanence and material perfection. Jullien's *décoïncidence* echoes this by proposing that the space of disjunction is where true creativity and depth are born. Together, these perspectives encourage a view of existence that celebrates fluidity, openness and the transformative possibilities inherent in impermanence. This synthesis not only bridges Eastern and Western philosophies but also offers a profound way to navigate the complexities of human experience in an ever-changing world: "The processual nature of transformation is defined not so much by its "beginning" as by the subtle change that unfolds over the course of its maturation"[64]. The philosophy of *dé-coïncidence*, as proposed by François Jullien, provides a complementary lens to explore how the tension between stability and transience can evoke deep emotional and aesthetic resonance. In "In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics", Jullien discusses the Chinese aesthetic ideal of blandness (*dan*), which emphasizes subtlety, balance and the potential for continuous transformation over striking or

62 Ibid., pp. 155, 168.
63 Cf. Ibid., p. 159.
64 Ibid., p. 11.

fixed beauty. He contrasts this with the Western fixation on defined and dramatic aesthetic ideals[65]. His works on *dé-coïncidence* also indirectly relate to aesthetics, as they discuss the openness to new perspectives and the refusal to fixate on a single "perfect" form or concept, which aligns with dynamic beauty: "the "I" and the "world" are grasped in a shared flickering, "perception" is simultaneously "feeling," and nothing is fully "objectified" meaning transitions, but cannot be codified – it remains indefinitely blurred and dispersed"[66]. Together, these elements illuminate a uniquely Japanese understanding of beauty that finds meaning and serenity in the impermanent and incomplete.

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65 F. Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, transl. P. M. Varsano, Zone Books, New York 2004.

66 F. Jullien, *Drogą okrężną i wprost do celu: Strategie sensu w Chinach i Grecji*, transl. M. Falski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006, p. 99.

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ESTETYKA PRZEMIJANIA W KULTURZE JAPOŃSKIEJ: WABI-SABI, NIETRWAŁOŚĆ I FILOZOFIA *DÉCOÏNCIDENCE* (streszczenie)

Artykuł analizuje pojęcie *wabi-sabi* jako podstawę japońskiej estetyki, podkreślając jego rolę w sztuce i codziennym życiu. *Wabi-sabi* celebruje piękno niedoskonałości, nietrwałości i naturalnego rozpadu, co znajduje wyraz w praktykach takich jak ceremonia herbaciana (*chanoyu*),

poezja haiku (np. Matsuo Bashō) oraz minimalistyczne ogrody zen. W kontekście sztuki ta estetyka umożliwia refleksję nad przemijaniem istnienia, kontrastując z zachodnią tradycją *vanitas*. Estetyka *wabi-sabi* wywołuje emocjonalną reakcję podobną do pojęcia dé-coďncidence Juliena — doświadczenia sprzeczności między tym, co trwałe, a tym, co efemeryczne, co stanowi kluczowy element japońskiego podejścia do nietrwałości. Artykuł zestawia te przejawy przemijania, ukazując zarówno uniwersalne, jak i kulturowo specyficzne sposoby radzenia sobie z upływem czasu.

Słowa kluczowe: *Wabi-sabi*, japońska estetyka, nietrwałość, ceremonia herbaciana (*chanoyu*), przemijanie, ogrody zen

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