

Shedding light on shadows

Autor(en): **Girot, Christophe**

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SHEDDING LIGHT ON SHADOWS

Christophe Girot

“I wonder if my readers know the color of that ‘darkness seen by candlelight.’ It was different in quality from darkness on the road at night. It was a repletion, a pregnancy of tiny particles like fine ashes, each particle luminous as a rainbow. I blinked in spite of myself, as though to keep it out of my eyes.”¹

—Jun’ichirō Tanizaki

The immanence of a Japanese garden is hard to decipher, particularly when its meaning remains enigmatic and at times unfathomable to the Western mind. Three factors help to explain this fascination as well as the misunderstandings that this particular intercultural dynamic sets up. The first stems from the definition and use of the term “landscape,” which varies from one culture to the next. In the West, landscape is typically understood as the result of cultivation. The very word stems from the Dutch *landskip*, which defines a stretch of cultivated farmland. Western landscapes have thus traditionally belonged to the peasant and whether through the pastoral, picturesque, or Renaissance villa styles, always been associated with the idyllic. In each case, nature must first and foremost be shaped and tamed in order to then be read or appreciated. In Japan, however, although the rustic and rural came to play a significant role in the *soan*-style tea ceremony (tea served in a “thatched hut”) developed during the early Edo period, landscape was primarily expressed through traditional landscape painting known as *sansui* (literally the painting of “mountains and waters”). In *sansui*, the landscape is steeped in ancient eremitic practices and mysteries linked to the cult of the ancestors.² A set of complex references to Confucianism and Taoism can also be found in any Japanese garden. The garden acts as a microcosm; it becomes the crucible of universal, natural phenomena. In Shintoism, an unwieldy faith in spirits attaches meaning to a thousand manifestations of natural occurrences. These animistic beliefs embedded in nature are sacred to Japanese culture. And central to any Japanese landscape practice is the idea of catching the evanescent beauty of a single, fleeting moment as it comes into resonance with the divine. Such spiritual connotations can hardly be reconciled with the Western landscape, which has fundamentally worked against nature.

1 Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker ([Tokyo: Tuttle, 1977] Leete’s Island Books, 1933), 18–19.

2 Augustin Berque, *Histoire de l’habitat idéal: De l’Orient vers l’Occident* (Paris: Édition du Félin, 2010), 196–197.

The second factor relates to visual culture, and to what has been coined *Japonisme* in the West. The woodblock prints of the *ukiyo-e* style (the term literally means “image of a floating and ephemeral world”) produced at the end of the Edo period and popularized by artists such as Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige, had an immense impact on artistic circles in Europe throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in France and England. These prints were developed throughout the Edo period and gradually broke away from traditional canons of Japanese painting by placing common landscapes before the subject. The lasting impression of Japan that these prints left in the West can be seen in the works of the great Impressionists: Manet, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh. Monet’s interpretation of a Japanese bridge within his celebrated garden at Giverny is a token of his admiration for classic *ukiyo-e* imagery. Perhaps less well known, however, is that influence ran both ways: Hokusai himself was deeply influenced by the works of his predecessor Ryūryūkyō Shinsai who had integrated methods of Western perspective into his compositions by the turn of the century.³ This knowledge, acquired through *Rangaku* (teachings brought to Japan by the Dutch from 1641 to 1854), made Hokusai and Hiroshige’s work more accessible to a European public at a time when their common subjects were at best considered comic or pop in Japan. Even the printing process involved a special ink called Berlin Blue, which was imported from Germany by the Dutch. But the prints’s extraordinary success in the West inevitably led to a deep misunderstanding of Japanese landscape aesthetics. To this day, more value seems to be placed on what is visible in a Japanese landscape than what is not from a Western point of view.

This dilemma introduces the third factor which challenges the notion that an aesthetic experience is necessarily tied to visibility. Indeed, the perception of a Japanese garden not only requires Westerners to dissect the differences between distinct visual cultures but also to search beyond the visuals. In fact, in Japan the appreciation of a

3 The woodblock print perspective (*uki-e*) entitled “Ohashi” (1801–1804) by *ukiyo-e* painter Ryūryūkyō Shinsai, now housed within the permanent collection of the

Musée Guimet in Paris (gift of Isaac de Camondo), clearly sets the framework for later works of the same bridge by both Hokusai and Hiroshige.

garden reaches far beyond the visible spectrum to the deepest recesses of some hidden language of nature; Japanese gardens emanate a spirit of their own, carefully weighed and wrought through literature. Relating to nature, especially through the multiple meanings made possible by a haiku poem, allows a garden to be perceived intuitively, experienced and felt before anything visible even manifests itself. The late translation of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's 1933 essay *In Praise of Shadows* into English in the late 1970s, marks a significant shift in the perception of Japanese aesthetics in the West. In his acerbic critique of modernity, Tanizaki praises subtle nuances in all things—the intense softness of shadows on wood, the sound of rain dripping from a roof into the garden—with an intricate mindfulness. Even the outhouse becomes a site for contemplation, a microcosm for perceiving a world filled with sounds, sights, and seasons:

I love to listen from such a toilet to the sound of softly falling rain, especially if it is a toilet of the Kantō region, with its long, narrow windows at floor level, there one can listen with such a sense of intimacy to the raindrops falling from the eaves and the trees, seeping into the earth as they wash over the base of a stone lantern and freshen the moss about the stepping stones. And the toilet is the perfect place to listen to the chirping of insects or the song of birds, to view the moon, or to enjoy any of those poignant moments that mark the change of seasons. Here, I suspect, is where haiku poets over the ages have come by a great many of their ideas.⁴

An essay that begins by paying tribute to a toilet embraces the most common aspects of both diurnal and nocturnal life in Japan; every space holds the potential for cosmic contemplation. In the same text, he thoughtfully describes the delicate quality and mysterious effect of a home's recessed spaces shrouded in subtle shadow: "Were the shadows to be banished from its corners, the alcove would in that instant revert to mere void."⁵ What becomes clear after reading Tanizaki is that a deep chasm prevails between an eagerness for literal "enlightenment" in the West and an aesthetics of suggestion which embraces ambiguity in Japan. This is certainly still true of Japanese gardens

4 Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, 4.

5 Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, 16–17.

where a distinct taste for mystery and cosmic resonance remains unmatched in Western culture.

Compared with Japan, Switzerland does not have a defining garden tradition of its own but it has a strong agrarian culture which has managed to harness the harshness of the alpine climate, transforming extreme topography into some of the most beautiful and productive mountain landscapes in Europe. So it is without really knowing the subject at hand, and despite the many misunderstandings between Western and Japanese landscape sensitivities, that a small team of ETH researchers from my Chair joined me in documenting the Shisen-dō Zen garden in Kyoto for the first time in the autumn of 2014.

It was clear to us from the beginning that any mode of representation based on orthographic projection or perspective inherited from the Renaissance would not have been appropriate for this place, its particular context and aesthetics. With the hopes of developing a technique which would more accurately capture the qualities of a Japanese garden, we finally decided to record the spatial dimension of the garden using a terrestrial laser scanner and its acoustic dimension with the aid of surround microphones. But while we were satisfied with the precision of these methods which enabled us to retrieve sounds and light impressions from even the garden's deepest recesses, it dawned on us that we might, in fact, be repeating the same kind of affront to Japanese aesthetics with this new technology that Tani-zaki had decried a century earlier. By shedding light on shadows we were undoubtedly meddling with the spiritual integrity of this Zen garden; we stood in risk of producing mere voids. And so when we presented our initial research findings to a delegation from the Kyoto Institute of Technology, we were relieved and amazed to have our work met with enthusiasm. I will always remember Professor Yoshiro Ono reciting haikus and singing traditional songs in our Landscape Visualization and Modeling Lab at the ETH as he entered the virtual Shisen-dō garden through an interactive 3D headset. It was clear to us then that our recordings were more than descriptions. Instead of definitively filtering the landscape through a Western gaze, our chosen technique was indeed capable of transporting one into a realm so reminiscent of reality that imagery from Japanese poetry embedded in the physical garden became recognizable in its virtual analog.

The multisensory models we produced revealed to us how an appreciation of landscape can at times entirely escape the realm of the visible. The deep black background of the model on which the point cloud was suspended contributed to an aura of mystery and cosmic resonance which Tanizaki himself could have claimed to be part of a Japanese tradition. I think it may be precisely the counterintuitive phenomenon of points of light disappearing into this darkness as one approaches them that makes this impalpable landscape method so appealing and adaptable to the Japanese context. As one nears the points for more detail, they disappear into the darkness of the screen like countless swarming fireflies.

Since our initial meeting with the Kyoto Design Lab in 2015, we have returned to Kyoto already four times to teach a series of workshops together with professors Yoshiro Ono, Erwin Viray, and Masahiro Kinoshita and to record traditional gardens within the city. We have now successfully recorded three temple gardens (Shisen-dō, Shōsei-en, Mii-dera), two private gardens (Ninigi and Daineiken) and a contemporary tea garden (Toraya). Through audiovisual video sequences, D-Lab workshop students created their own landscape narratives, capturing or curating a unique walk through the garden.

In designing this multisensory booklet—intended to be read, looked at, and listened to—we employed a similar multimedia approach in order to relate a more intuitive, experiential understanding of landscape. Using our field recordings from the six Kyoto gardens, we mixed nine audiovisual samples in the AudioVisual Lab at the ETH. We asked each contributor to react to one of these samples using a subjective, personal approach. Each written reflection is thus paired with an image from a point cloud model which presents a glimpse of the audiovisual animation immediately accessible via the accompanying QR code. As in a garden, this collection of audiovisual samples and written reflections may be explored freely. Notice each element as an exemplary feature of Japanese culture; linger. A non-linear reading is welcome: Readers, viewers, and listeners are encouraged to compose their own way.