

Making Progress in a Culture of Evanescence

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1. Introduction: Technological Thinking



This is the final scene from Kurosawa Akira's 1952 film *Ikiru, To Live*. It is the story of a city planner's struggle to build a children's park in a city slum. Diagnosed with stage-four cancer, he works against time, and the complacency of the technocratic bureaucracy, both among his own subordinates and at higher levels of power in the city government.

In the 1951-52 lecture course *What Is Called Thinking?*, Martin Heidegger denounces what he calls "technological thinking." The essence of technological thinking is "enframing" (*das Gestell*), a drive to submit everything to an absolute order, to regard all of nature as a "standing reserve," to measure every artifact in terms of reliability and to despise anything "poetic" or "artistic" as capricious triviality. This critique is clearly behind his paramour Hannah Arendt's description of the "technocratic banality of evil" in her New Yorker articles on the Eichmann trial.

Technological thinking or technocratic thinking is dangerous because it is a way of thinking that prevents people from "really" thinking about things. Failing to think is an intrinsic part of thinking. This happens for two reasons. First, the truth is mysterious. The meaning of Being, knowing how to live, is difficult to understand and nearly impossible to explain. Second, Western thinking is distorted by a particular series of metaphysical errors. Both Husserl before him and Derrida after him, make the same argument: Western culture entered into metaphysical error with the "Platonic turn," which holds that we cannot know something unless we can explain it. In short, logocentrism. For Heidegger, technological thinking is an especially pernicious form of logocentrism that developed in the modern period.

In the period of the “thinking lectures,” Heidegger warns that technological thinking will destroy our relation to nature, and he opens the lectures by noting that despite the worldwide calamities of the First and Second World Wars, humanity at that time was rushing headlong into the Cold War. Man-made climate change and nuclear war are still today the most immediate threats to human life on this planet, and as Heidegger would say, “We are still not thinking.”

In the first semester of the “thinking lectures,” Heidegger cites several problems in the modern education system as proximate causes of our inability to think. He seems particularly angry about the new formation of the Humboldt University in 1810, when the sciences were cut off from the humanities, and these two were further subdivided into departments that rarely communicate with one another. Today, this is the education model of nearly every university in the world. He dislikes the examination system which tests only whether facts have been acquired, not the ability to interpret the facts. In a side note, he sums up the state of education by imagining a scene where a group of philosophers, gazing at a tree in full bloom, wonder whether or not it is beautiful; alongside them, a team of scientists measure the brain waves of the philosophers to see if they are thinking.

When I first came to Japan, book consumption was 20 per capita. In the US, 0.5. Just north of here, in Jimbocho, there was the best collection of used book stores I had ever seen—even better than the Sorbonne district in Paris. In the industrial city of Nagoya, in a train station bookshop, I noticed there was a meter long section with titles by Habermas and Foucault. In 1983, Asada Akira published *Structure and Power: Beyond Semiotics*, a survey of French thought from Lacan and Althusser through Deleuze and Guattari. It sold 80,000 copies. Japan was the perfect place for an existential phenomenologist to begin an academic career.

But things have changed over the past 35 years. I want to underline two important changes that have plunged Japanese education into a severe crisis. First, when I arrived in 1985, Japan was entering the “Bubble Economy.” There were plenty of students and lots of money. My first classrooms had broken windows, cracked blackboards and no AV equipment. My colleagues were using typewriters or Japanese “wordpros.” By 1995, the old buildings had been replaced by new ones with AV systems and every teacher had a computer on their office desk. But the supply of 18-year-olds was decreasing. No one seemed to have noticed that the student population would drop by 50% over the next decade. Also, the “Bubble Economy” had burst.

Second, the Ministry of Education instituted radical curriculum reforms in 1995, and doubled down on that bet in 2000. Though there were many exacerbating social changes in the period, a decade later the Ministry of Education had to admit that the reforms were a disaster. The students had stopped reading. In the face of this, the administrative staff at my university seized control of the curriculum from the teaching staff in 2007, and things went from bad to worse. By 2015, when all of the students would have known only the so-called “relaxed education system,” at my university, literature majors, on average, borrowed two books per year from the library; other majors, less than one.

By the end of the first semester of the “thinking lectures,” Heidegger turns to the greatest anti-Platonist of all to find the deep causes of why we are failing to give sufficient thought to a most perilous situation: Friedrich Nietzsche. In Chapter 88 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche calls the modern age a “growing wasteland” (*Die Wüste wächst*). In German, “*Wüste*” means a vast desert, but it also means “disorder” and “chaos.” Nietzsche explains that the “wasteland grows” because the “spirit of revenge” rules society. Not revenge against another faction, but rather revenge resides within the modern will itself.

In Western metaphysics, the “really real” is defined as continuous presence. Classical education trains the will to preserve the established order. But, in the modern age, people are

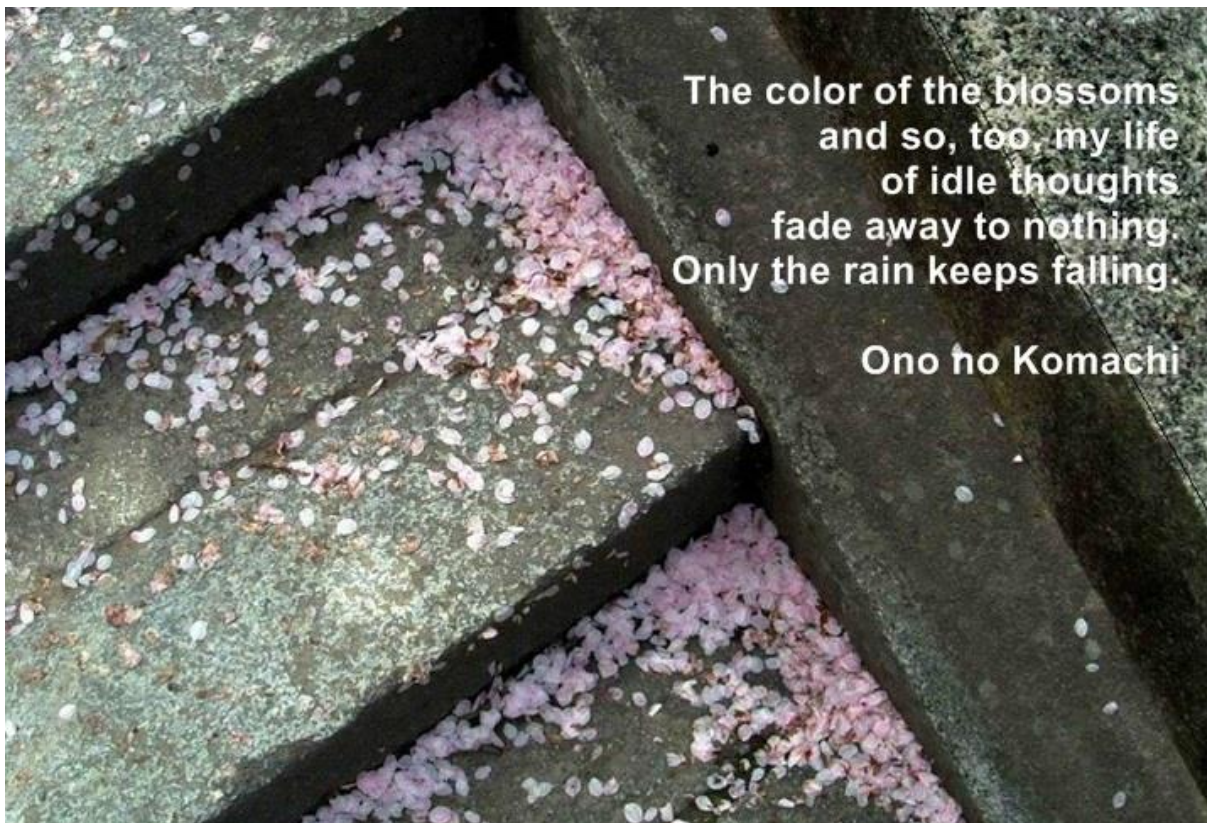
encouraged to not only embrace change but also take “democratic” responsibility for it. This contradiction of “willing against the passing of time” and “willing to embrace the future” results in nihilism. According to Nietzsche, revenge disguises itself as regulation, so that “anger,” exercised through discipline and punishment, can claim to be part of justice.

Nietzsche continues,

For that man be delivered from revenge: that is the bridge to the highest hope for me, and a rainbow after long storms. (tr. J. Glenn Gray)

To pass over this bridge, Nietzsche says that one must embrace the Eternal Recurrence of the Same: every act one takes will be repeated *ad infinitum* into the future, so one must be decisive, literally cut the continuity of time. In every instant of your life make your life a better life. Heidegger interprets this to mean that memory, our abiding sense of who we are, must be transfigured into a sense of who we might be. Memory must become the promise of imagination. And to unleash the power of imagination, we must let go of our attachment to consistency and continuity and embrace ambiguity, uncertainty, transiency.

2. Evanescence (*Uturoi*, 移ろい)



At the beginning of the second semester of the “thinking lectures,” Heidegger formulates four ways to pose the question: *Was heisst denken?*: (1) what is the essence of the matter? (2) what is the history of the matter, (3) what methodology is appropriate for advancing the matter and (4) what in the matter calls on us to think. The first three questions call for explanations (*logos*). Only the fourth question is a noetic question, an existential shift of mind. Heeding what calls on us to think is the only way to overcome the nihilism of logocentrism.

But, how do we make progress with a way of thinking that has replaced openness and imagination with correctness and agreement as the measures of truth? For Heidegger, there is

only one way that will result in truth becoming a path to freedom and freedom becoming a path to peace: A Dialogue Between Thinking and Poetry.

I wrote my dissertation about Heidegger's essays on Hölderlin's poetry. Heidegger calls these works "elucidations," by which he wants to say that he is neither doing philology, nor literary criticism, nor even aesthetics in the usual sense. For Heidegger, a good poem is the most primordial and purest expression of the meaning of Being. Nevertheless, it is the philosopher's task to expose something that remains unsaid in the poem. Academic critics regard Heidegger's interpretations of Hölderlin's poems to be violations. But Heidegger thinks of his work differently. He says finding a good poem is like finding an old bell that has begun to tarnish and lose its tune. Philosophy should be like snow falling on the bell. At first it muffles the sound, but as the snow slowly melts away, the bell again shines and rings true.

This slide is an example of the first poem I will discuss. I have circled the "hinge word" of the poem, which I am going to interpret in a radical way. First, I'm going to impart a Zen Buddhist reading to the text, but it is impossible that the author could have been influenced by Zen, though the wabi-cha masters who commend the poem certainly were.

Second, the Zen thinking that is behind my thought comes from neither Eisai's Rinzai nor Dogen's Soto Zen. Instead, I am influenced by the Zen of Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), who is simultaneously the Sophocles and Aristotle of classical Japanese drama: the Noh theater. In other words, I will regard a lyric poem as a drama.

The first volume on "autumn" in the early 13th century imperial anthology, the *Shinkokinshu* has 152 *waka* poems. About 70 of the first poems in the sequence concern windy days and the final 70 moonlit nights. In the middle of the sequence, about a dozen poems deal with evening. They all close with the line "autumn evening," or something nearly identical to this phrasing. Three consecutive poems have been memorialized as "The Three Evening Poems."

As you will likely have already heard in this conference, the 16th century wabi-cha master Takeno Jōō (1502-55) points to the "Evening Poem" poem by Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) as being the original expression of the wabi-sabi way. It was originally composed when Teika was only 24 years old in 1186.

Autumn evening looms,	miwataseba	When I look from afar
At a beach shack by the bay,	hana mo momiji mo	There are neither flowers
Gazing far and wide:	nakarikeri	Nor bright leaves;
No blossoms. No crimson leaves.	ura no tomaya no	Evening in autumn
Only Nothingness abides.	aki no yuugure.	At a thatched hut by the bay.

The translation on the right is by the Columbia University Japanologist Shirano Haruo, and it is correct. I've rearranged the poem. I've put the setting and protagonist, in Western fashion, in the opening 5-7-5-syllable triplet. The result is that I've moved the hinge word "*nakarikeri*" to the final position and stretched out the verse in order to emphasize the "nothingness" expressed by the poem.

The great majority of classical poems that begin with "*miwataseba*," "gazing far and wide," follow with the presence of either blossoms or crimson leaves. Teika has veered off into a new direction and established a new vision of what causes fascination. Nothing that shines, nothing present, only the fading light is important.

Another one of the "Evening Poems" by the travelling monk Jakuren (1139-1202) points to the supra-phenomenal quality of evening light, and it also uses the hinge-word *nakaikeri* to convey this. "*Nakari*" is a present preterite tense, which denotes something that has passed away in the remote past, and the suffix "*-keri*" makes the verb emphatic, a slashing, startling break: "there has not been" blossoms or crimson leaves for the longest time and into

the foreseeable future. There are no discernible phenomena. There is only this dusk blurring horizon, where sky and earth slowly become one.

The shiny colors of spring flowers and autumn leaves are distractions from what really matters. By focusing on the fading light of a steel gray autumn evening, Teika hints that he is able to see another source of light. As Minamoto no Shunrai (1055?-1129?), a mentor to Teika's father, puts it in a more blunt way,

侘び人の	wabibito no	The man of wabi
心の中を	kokoro no uchi wo	In his own most secret heart
よそながら	yoso nagara	From quite a distance
知るやさとの	shiru ya satori no	Perceives the shining ray of
光なるらむ	hikari naruran	Enlightenment, perchance?

In Japan, thinking occurs in the heart rather than the head. Heidegger agrees that noetic intelligence takes place in the heart; he translates “*nous*” as “taking-to-heart,” *zu Herzen nehmen* and notes that in the Homeric period, *nous* was located in the heart.

In this slide, the upper character is “*fu*” (不) and it means “not” in the sense of privation or negation. The lower character is “*mu*” (無) which is usually translated by “nothingness,” or “no,” e.g. *mushin*: no-mind. Though “*nakarikeri*,” the hinge word of both Teika's and Jakuren's poems, is nearly always written in hiragana, the Chinese character that says this word is “*mu*.” It is not a simple “not,” it is not the privation of or negation of any particular color. Rather it is the same formless color of the sky that Teika saw: abiding nothingness.

The radical of the character “*mu*” is “flickering fire” and the morphological root is “the flapping sleeves of a dancer.” It comes to Japan from Taoism, where it means: (1) something infinite behind all finite beings, (2) something that evades all explanation (*logos*), and (3) something that is neither relative to, nor the opposite of being. Thus, nothingness, in the Western sense of the word, is not a very good translation. We need something that conveys the presence of absence. I usually translate “*mu*” with “transiency.”

But transiency is not quite the same as the wabi-sabi mood expressed in the poems of Teika and Jakuren. There's no mention of the colors of sunset. There's no twitter of birds noting the passing of the day. We are beyond the twilight hour of pure transiency. The emphasis is on passing-away. Wabi-sabi is more about having passed through the hinge-word of the poems, *mu*, into “evanescence.” And this is what distinguishes the Japanese way of life from all the others that I've experienced in East Asia.

The contemporary architect Isozaki Arata says that Western architecture is all about construction, but architecture is really a process of construction and destruction. He says Japanese architects and city planners emphasize the “transiency” of buildings. “Rubble” needs to be incorporated into buildings so that one is not merely waiting for decay but actually moving towards it. He says that “ruination” and “rubble” are merely modern ways of expressing the traditional wabi-sabi aesthetic. Other architects like Ando Tadao and Kurokawa Kisho have expressed similar beliefs.

This is not quite the same as Mies van der Rohe's “less is more.” It is more about “letting go.” As dusk creeps in, what is lost to ordinary sight is regained by transcendental seeing. The Japanese word for “evanescence” is “*utsuroi*,” The primary sense of the word is “fading away,” but there is a secondary Shintō sense of a god entering into the hidden recesses of something, usually a tree or a stone, and animating it. If the presence of a god is phrased in more modern terminology, then “*utsuroi*” means what is expressed by the German word *Aufheben*, a philosophical curiosity because it means both “cancel” and “preserve.” What is canceled at the level of ordinary perception is preserved in a transcendental

consciousness of things: an openness to the living essence of things beyond their material manifestation. Wabi-sabi is not simply austerity and quietude. A bowl of *matcha* is the equivalent of a triple-espreso

3. Japanese Creativity: The Sony Walkman



Heidegger says an important measure of the work of art is that it disrupts our familiar way of seeing things and sets forth a new world of experience. In 1965, I got my first transistor radio. It opened up the world of listening to baseball games while walking my dog, but AM radio was terrible, so it wasn't much of a world. In the late 1960s, portable tape recorders came on the scene. Press conferences changed from Press Notetaking to Press Recording. In the lower right corner, you can see someone using a Sony TC-D5M.

Sony was founded by Ibuka Masaru (1908-1997) and Morita Akio (1921-1999). Ibuka liked to listen to classical music on long flights, but Ibuka thought the TC-D5M was too heavy at 5 pounds, so in early 1979, he asked the Sony audio labs to make something smaller and lighter. The lab produced a "playback-only" tape recorder which was much smaller.

This was a world changing device for me when I went to China in 1982. At the time, Chinese trains travelled at 25 kilometers/hour. For most of my first year a campaign against cultural pollution meant it was illegal to play any Western music that could be heard by Chinese. If one didn't appreciate listening to *The East is Red* crackling over the tinny train loudspeakers for the 72 hours it took to get to Shanghai, having a Walkman was great,

Ibuka was impressed by the sound quality and portability of the Walkman, so he proposed that Morita market it. There was some pushback: "Who would buy a tape recorder that didn't record?" Supposedly Ibuka replied, "Don't you think a stereo cassette player that you can listen to while walking around is a good idea?" This is when Morita comes into the story. Once he found out that some design flaws in the prototype could be ironed out by the beginning of the summer holidays, he pushed the teams working on the project to proceed at breakneck speed. The design teams worked through the night two or three times every week. The usual review and evaluation committees were cut out of the picture. Team managers encouraged the engineers to not think about potential problems and just get it done. The \$150 Walkman was released on July 1st 1979.

At the time, the most popular tape recorder was selling 15,000 units per month, but Morita ordered that 30,000 units be produced. The press was critical, believing no one would

buy a recorder that did not record. By the end of July, only 3,000 units had sold, so Morita hired stylish young people, the target market for the device, to walk around the trendy areas of Tokyo. It turned out that the “Me Generation” actually did want to isolate itself from the world by donning a pair of headphones and listening to whatever they wanted rather than being dependent on radio stations. By the end of August all 30,000 units were sold. Millions of Walkmans and other knockoffs were sold over the decades, and “walkman” became the generic name for any portable music player.

Until the iPod. Although Sony had brought out a digital version of the Walkman three years before the Apple device, editing songs was troublesome due the finicky Sony ATRAC media format. Steve Jobs recognized the advantages of the MP3 format, which had become open-source. And his iTunes media system was simpler than the glitchy Sony Sonic Soundstage. Within three years, Apple had captured 80% of the market share. Now, in the age of the smartphone, no one uses these devices, Apple cancelled most of their line in 2017,

But Sony continues to make the Walkman. This is the latest \$1,000 specimen. With headphones and cables suitable for such an audiophile device, we’re talking about riding the train or bus to work with nearly \$2,000 of gear. Sony makes cheaper models but they are no better than a phone for listening to music.

I have three important takeaways from this situation. The first is that the Sony engineers were able to abandon the recording aspect of the tape recorder. It’s not a case of “minimalism,” but rather an “*Aufheben*,” of the device. They were able to let go of something that all the world thought was an essential feature of tape recorders. The second is the speed of the decision making. I will interpret this in the next section in terms of *jo-ha-kyū* (序破急, prologo, capriccio, presto), a fundamental Japanese poetic principle. The third is Sony still makes the Walkman. They cannot let go of a device. In the case of the Walkman, it is probably a sentimental attachment, but it serves as a metaphor for so many experiences I’ve had working in Japanese organizations—an inability to reform or abandon mistaken policies. The Japanese even have a word for this tendency to remain stuck in a bad situation.

About 40 kilometers from here is the castle town of Odawara, which was ruled by the Hōjō clan for 160 years. The Hōjō were a model of consensus building management. Meetings were held twice a month so that the various factions of the clan could hash things out. These meetings effectively eliminated betrayal or rebellion among its numerous vassals; something that plagued other clans during the Warring States Period (1467-1603). When Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-1598) laid siege to the castle in 1590, deliberations about how to meet the enemy got underway. Six months later, they were still trying to come to a consensus when the food ran out and they were forced to surrender. The last *Daimyo* of the Hōjō clan was spared, but Hideyoshi brutally executed his tea master. From that time, whenever a meeting runs on and on with no conclusion in sight, it is called an *Odawara Hyōjō* (小田原評定), an Odawara-style Assessment.

In my 35-years of experience, the vast majority of meetings were Odawara-style Assessments rather than the breakneck pace of designing, producing and marketing the Sony Walkman. In 1971, Peter Drucker published “What We Can Learn from Japanese Management” in the Harvard Business Review. He argued that Japanese organizations achieve greater focus through “consensus decision making.” In my experience, this is complete nonsense. All important decisions are made by a few managers at the top. Everyone else is ordered to get in the boat and start rowing in the same direction. If a discussion topic is put on a meeting agenda, it is likely to be an unimportant matter or a ploy to find out who are the Bolsheviks. Most of the time is spent reading reports from various sub-committees. Into the third hour of a faculty meeting, many are dozing and some chairs are groaning.

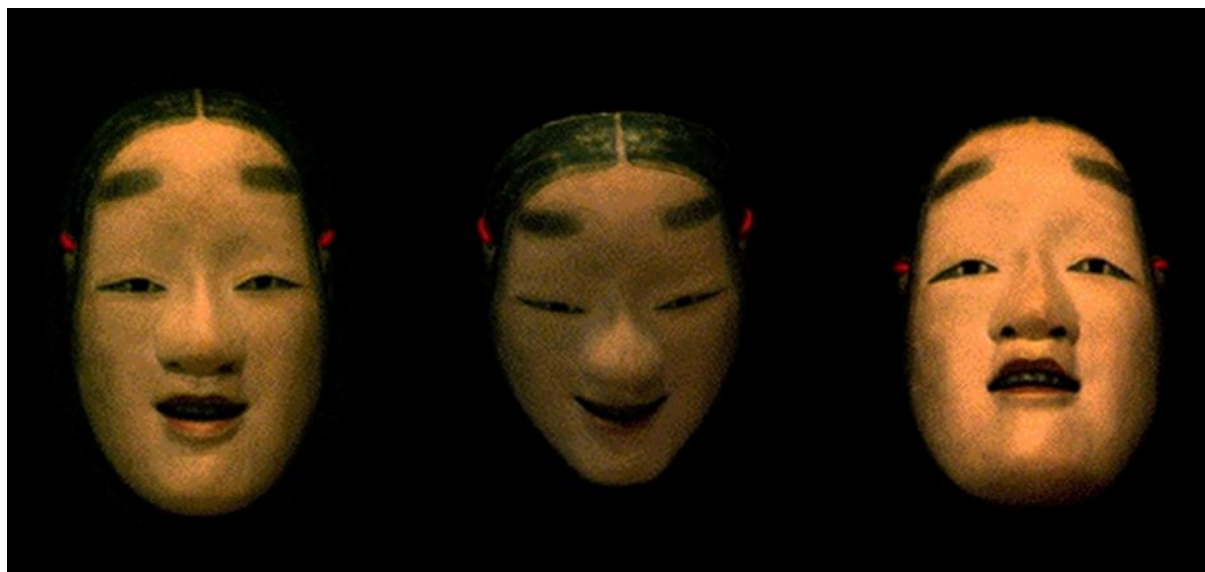
There is something like consensus building called *nemawashi* (根回し), literally “digging around the roots” of a tree to prepare it for transplanting. In practice, it means

someone with greater seniority will phone you and let you know how to vote on an agenda items of the next day's meeting. After the rebellion of 2007, there was serious factional infighting at my university, and votes became more unpredictable, so lining up support was more meaningful. But by that time, I stopped getting calls. I knew what my chair wanted, and I generally agreed. In sub-committees, I followed the lead of the "internationalist" faction.

Two words that you hear in many Japanese meetings are *shikata ga nai* (仕方がない) and *shō ga nai* (しょうがない), both meaning "nothing can be done," where nothing happens to be the nothingness of *mu*. These phrases are usually uttered when the failure of a project seems inevitable, but one can find no corrective plan of action. Everyone falls into a fatalistic acceptance of the situation and hunkers down into an Odawara-style Assessment, postponing decisions for as long as possible. Sometimes complacency and trust in the leadership abolishes circumspective concern about the future. How could universities fail to anticipate the decline in the student population? Why does Sony continue to make the Walkman?

4. *Jo Ha Kyū* (序破急)

A basic principle of Japanese aesthetics is *jo-ha-kyū* (prologo, capriccio, presto). It describes how things should develop in the arts of time: music, drama, etc. and the arts of space: architecture, flower arrangement, etc. I think it also applies to Japanese organizational decision making.



Photograph by Michael Lyons

"*Jo*" establishes the theme and groundwork of a process whereby something emerges from nothing. A Noh drama begins with a secondary character already on the stage delivering the prologue. The main actor emerges from the shadows along a bridge-to-the-stage (*hashigakari*, 橋掛かり). The process of gaining stage presence is stretched out as much as possible.

"*Ha*" means "ruin" or "break." It introduces imperfection and uncertainty into the process. The "break" can lead to ruination, but it also introduces the possibility to proceed in a completely unexpected direction. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explains that the "dramatic *Aufheben*" is like the light of a candle being nullified by daylight. The actor remains a man, but at some point, he also becomes Hamlet; the temple is a building, but somewhere after passing through the gate, it becomes a sacred atmosphere.

"*Kyū*" means "acceleration." It is a charismatic/graceful moment (*yūgen*) when the energy of the orchestra is transferred to the audience. It is when the tea ceremony becomes a

pure devotional moment of “just making a cup of tea.” Unlike Western dramatic structure, where action is intensified through the complication, resolved in the climax and relaxed in the denouement, Japanese classical drama breaks the forward movement of the action in a disorienting “*ha*” moment and accelerates thereafter, an expiation, not a conclusion. In the gentle evanescence of light on an autumn evening, suddenly another light shines through. The Zen expression for this is “In Silla, at midnight, the sun shines bright.”

The *jo-ha-kyū* progression can be illustrated by the simple act of walking. A foot is firmly planted on the ground (*jo*), then we lean forward into vacant space (*ha*), finally the other foot accelerates in front of our body to catch us from a fall (*kyū*). But with every step, there is also the possibility of stumbling. This sense that the perfection of the circle is only achieved when the circle is momentarily broken is expressed in the well-known haiku of Matsuo Basho (1644-1694):

古池や	furu ike ya	The old pond	<i>jo</i> : stillness
蛙飛こむ	kawazu tobikomu	A frog jumps in	<i>ha</i> : otherness
水の音	mizu no oto	Chapon!	<i>kyū</i> : enlightenment

The first line establishes the setting and season. The second is the capricious *ha* element. The third line is the *kyū* moment. Startled, Basho, as man, is “annulled” by the frog, and simultaneously achieves the transcendent level of poetic utterance. The poem was composed at a haiku competition on the theme of “frogs” in 1688, at a pond east of the Sumida River, not far from here. It was the winner, the first of the day, just as the group was settling down. One cannot intentionally sit by ponds waiting to be startled by leaping frogs, but, can one dwell in a poetic mood, ready to seize such opportunities?

5. Conclusion; *Ha* Moments

Is it possible to build useful contingency—*Ha* moments—into the system? And how do we avoid getting stuck in the “break” and never achieving enough acceleration for liftoff. A few suggestions:

(1) Cultivate Heideggerian-style “heartfelt thinking.” In my experience of Japanese organizational meetings, for the most part there has been a semblance of democracy. As long as one respects the hierarchy and does not speak before those with seniority have a go, one is generally free to say anything. Through the *nemawashi* process, votes are suggested but not coerced. People who speak against some aspect of the system, sexism for example, tend to get more onerous schedules than those who keep silent. There are cases of people being worked to death (*karōshi*), or being ostracized. But putting these extreme cases aside, there is still something missing. The “secret ballot” and “freedom of speech” are not enough,

I finally realized that the missing democratic element was the requirement to listen—Montesquieu’s communal virtue. Rarely did we listen to outsiders, newcomers, other disciplines, and most especially the suggestions of students. By contrast, Sony’s excellence in audio equipment originally came about when the fledgling company received a letter from a music student complaining of the poor quality of their audio. Instead of throwing the letter in the bin, Sony hired him as a part-time consultant and Ohga Norio (1930-2011) went on to eventually become the company chairman. He was head of the tape recorder division when the Walkman was developed and negotiated the CD format with Philips, with the imperative that the format be large enough to contain Beethoven’s 9th symphony on one disc.

For Heidegger, thinking begins with listening. Only when the noetic question: “What in this matter calls on us to think?” is established can we proceed with the logocentric questions of essence, history and method.

“Heartfelt thinking,” “listening,” is not a matter of rational calculation. It is not a matter of ideas, representations or opinions. Instead, it is a “fortunate mood” that provides an instantaneous snapshot of how one is faring and what is most important in a situation. We can recognize this mood in two ways. First, “heartfelt thinking” is:

that innermost essence of man which reaches outward most fully and to the outermost limits, and so decisively that, rightly considered, the idea of an inner and an outer world does not arise. (tr. J. Glenn Gray)

Second, he distinguishes two kinds of memory. The historical memory of “it was” must be replaced with the poetic imagination of “it might be.” This imaginative memory is more about paying attention than recalling. It is an unrelenting devotion to what is at hand.

(2) The lesson to be drawn from Nietzsche is that factional fighting in an organization is usually a case “anger,” the basic human emotion in Aristotle and Aquinas, masquerading as a juridical dispute. Such disputes can be resolved only when we adopt a new sense of time.

In August of 1928, having attended Husserl’s and Heidegger’s seminars for some years, and lately having been coached by a young Jean-Paul Sartre on the current trends in French philosophy, Kuki Shūzō (1888-1941) delivered a lecture “The Notion of Time and Repetition in Oriental Time” to a gathering of intellectual elites at the abbey town of Pontigny in the Bourgogne region of France. This is likely the first time the French heard about Heidegger’s ideas of “thrown-projection” and so on. In brief, he said that all Western time is a matter of anticipation—he calls it horizontal time: even Nietzsche’s thought of the Eternal Return was grounded in a drive to move forward: Western time is continuous and irreversible. Asian time, by which he means the Great Circle of Indian Buddhist time, is vertical time: it is always moving backwards in an attempt to escape time, to reverse it, to get out of it altogether.

By contrast, Japanese time lives only in the moment. The will seeks neither to escape into the future nor into eternity, but only wills to live in the moment. He says,

We commenced construction of the Tokyo subway just after the great earthquake which five years ago destroyed almost half of Tokyo. At that time I was in Europe. People asked me: “Why do you build a subway destined to be destroyed by one of these earthquakes you perpetually have every hundred years?” I answered: “It is the enterprise itself which interests us, not the goal. We are going to construct it anew. A new earthquake will destroy it once again. Ah well, we will always recommence. It is the will itself we esteem, will to its own perfection.

(3) Finally, look at the familiar image of Hokusai’s “Great Wave.” Westerners read a painting from left to right. Do the sailors seem to be in danger? Are they hunched down in their boats because they fear the wave is about to overtake them? Japanese read a painting from right to left. The sailors are not fleeing the wave, but rather challenging it.

Zeami says that in order to achieve the highest level of performance, a charismatic level that will impart the essence of the drama to the audience, one must develop what he calls the “seeing of detached perception” (*riken no ken*, 離見の見).

...an actor must come to have the ability to see himself as the spectators do, ... and find the skill to grasp the whole—left and right, ahead and behind. If an actor can achieve this, his ... appearance will be as elegant as that of a flower ... and will serve as living proof of his understanding. (tr. J. Thomas Rimer)



“Great Wave” by Hokusai (reversed for Western eyes)

Notice that a hundred years after the Teika poem banished flowers as an object of fascination, Zeami has brought them back. In his early writings, Zeami uses the metaphor of “flower” (*hana*, 花) as the watermark of excellence; later he uses “charisma” (*yūgen*, 幽玄), a term more closely associated with the waka poets. But, even when he uses “flower,” he does not mean the flowers of field and grove. *Riken no ken* is the reversal of figure and ground that begins to gather in the “*ha*” moment of a performance and comes to full expression in the *kyū* finale. It is nothingness gazing back into the mind of the artist so that he may achieve true detachment.

Detached perception is necessary because the Noh actor is denied the use of most of his ordinary senses. Hearing is muffled by a heavy wig, and the mask is a great impediment to normal seeing. It is not worn on the face, but rather in front of it so that the eye holes provide only pinhole views of the stage. The separation of the eye holes is not wide enough for parallax vision, so it is difficult to know one’s exact relation to a stage property even if one sees it. Furthermore, a Noh mask changes expression according to its inclination. Most of the time, the actor must look straight ahead. If the actor loses his position on the stage, he cannot look around to find the edge.

Every aspect of the Noh performance is structured so as to deny normal perception and the normal lived experience of the body. Thus, when Zeami speaks of “detached perception,” he does not mean some mystical, superhuman power; instead, he means that the actor must enable other powers of perception that have atrophied through over-reliance on seeing and hearing in the usual sense. Detached perception is really about recovering our original intellectual powers—powers which wild animals still use to “sniff out” the situation, the original meaning of the Greek word *nous*, intelligence, but which we have lost living in the overly regulated and overly structured spaces of a familiar environment.

How does one achieve this level of noetic perception, imaginative intelligence? Zeami advises: “To know the flowering [of excellence] is first of all to know that nothing abides,” (tr. William R. LaFleur) meaning never get caught in the frameworks of the *Gestell*, never let your thought stagnate, always come at things with a fresh pair of eyes.