

Cinema's Vital Histories: Wabi-Cinema, Forces and the Aesthetics of Resistance

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Abstract:

Many films, both narrative and documentary, explore the relationship between history and politics or ethics. This may be accomplished when fictional narrative films enact ethical arguments regarding history in cinematic form, when documentary films explicitly seek to uncover lost histories of political oppression, or films may experientially and aesthetically stage ethical experience with respect to historical meanings and contexts. There are some cases where such ethical-historical experience is explored through the specific aesthetic form of the film in relation to its narrative. *Ask This of Rikyū* (*Rikyū ni tazuneyo*, Tanaka Mitsutoshi, 2013) is one such example. In this paper, I will suggest that film can explore the relation of aesthetic experience to the ethico-political character of history, opening up ways of responding aesthetically to concrete political conditions. *Ask This of Rikyū* accomplishes this by interrogating the possibility of a wabi-cinema, established with respect to its title character, his individual aesthetic practices, and his personal political circumstances. I will draw upon the work of Gilles Deleuze alongside Kyōto School philosopher Nishida Kitarō in order to articulate the way in which *Ask This of Rikyū* explores the relation of artistic activity and aesthetic experience to the general ethical and political forces that feed into history.

Keywords: *Ask This of Rikyū*; Deleuze; Nishida; Japanese aesthetics; ethics and politics; history; vitalism.

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Based on a historical novel by Yamamoto Ken'ichi¹, *Ask This of Rikyū* (*Rikyū ni tazuneyo*, Tanaka Mitsutoshi, 2013) is one of several fictionalised accounts of the life of Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591 CE). Rikyū was the tea master who served the military and political leaders Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi and has since become the most influential figure in the development of the wabi-cha tradition of tea ceremony. The film is a fictionalised story of his life, and the narrative does not adhere with fidelity to historical record, but instead focuses on a gestural aesthetic in order to investigate the relationship between life, history, and art. Specifically, two fictionalised elements take centre stage: Rikyū's relationship with Hideyoshi, and Rikyū's tea ceremonies, aesthetic performances, and works of art. The film explores and reconceptualises many aspects of classical Japanese aesthetics, but focuses especially on Rikyū's philosophy of the way of tea (*chadō*) and the general "wabi" aesthetic sensibility. This sensibility values and seeks to express a sense of profound austerity. In this paper I use a comparative theoretical approach to explore two related questions raised in the film: firstly, is a specifically wabi cinema possible, and secondly, what is the aesthetic thinking with regard to history and ethics (or politics) that the film develops? *Ask This of Rikyū* is well-placed to explore such questions. Unlike other works that draw upon wabi minimalism in a general and abstract manner, this film is concretely wabi in both content (aesthetically-thematically) and form (aesthetically-cinematically). I will use Gilles Deleuze's aesthetics to examine the implicit sensuous logic and ontology of the wabi sensibility and, conversely, I will use wabi to understand the connection between disparate elements of Deleuze's aesthetics and expand their theoretical limits. Using this theoretical foundation, I argue that the wabi structure of *Ask This of Rikyū* dissects the complex relation between artistic creation as a technical practice and historical transformation as a power of nature. As a result, the film weaves a certain kind of pacifist ethics of aesthetic praxis that nonetheless draws a deeply violent and disruptive power from nature and history.

The primary narrative of the film follows Rikyū throughout his service to Hideyoshi. In particular the story focuses on their relationship as it becomes increasingly strained after Hideyoshi's rise to power. After his first patron, Nobunaga dies, Rikyū is transferred into Hideyoshi's service.

1. In this paper Japanese names will be presented in Japanese order: family name followed by personal name. When presented in short hand, I will follow convention by using the personal/familiar name of historical figures (Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Rikyū) and the family name of philosophers (Nishida and Hisamatsu).

With Rikyū serving under him as his retainer and tea master, Hideyoshi consolidates military and administrative power over the disparate states of Japan. He minimises the power of local daimyō lords, and takes the title of kampaku (Imperial Regent). As the regent, he brings an end to Japan's Warring States period (sengoku jidai) and becomes the de facto administrative and military ruler of the nation. Concerned about the tea master's aesthetic taste, controversial amongst many nobles but admired by the public, and his potential political influence, Hideyoshi's advisers conspire against Rikyū, and the regent's favour turns into disdain. Hideyoshi's interference in Rikyū's life becomes more and more severe. He initially mocks his taste, and then executes Rikyū's disciple after an outburst. Later Hideyoshi demands to take Rikyū's daughter as a concubine, and finally orders him to commit seppuku. This conflict is sensuously intensified through the difference between Rikyū's and Hideyoshi's aesthetic tastes. Hideyoshi's extravagance and opulence are emphasised – from his golden portable tea room to his attempts to make a caged bird sing by sprinkling gold over it – in contrast to the overwhelming stillness of Rikyū's tea ceremonies and restrained work with objects of nature. Hideyoshi's obsession with gold and indulgence, an exaggerated depiction of the “suki” sensibility that admires wealth and completeness, is suggested to be an embodiment of his style of political rule (Izutsu, 1981/2011, p. 1225). He is depicted as self-gratifying and drunk with power². In response, Rikyū continues to develop his minimalist wabi aesthetic which despite its sense of poverty and austere simplicity inspires the popular imagination, but draws the ire of Hideyoshi and his advisers. Through his persistent pursuit of artistic life against the commands of his patron, the film suggests that Rikyū's stubbornness in his aesthetic practice is an open act of rebellion against Hideyoshi's rule³. To render this, *Ask This of Rikyū* focuses primarily on the tea master's curious artistic work.

At the beginning of the film, Nobunaga, the leader of the dominant Oda clan during the Warring States period visits a small village. In search of artefacts that could enrich the material and symbolic wealth of his campaign, he assembles a number of prominent local experts in a mansion

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2. Earlier in its development, suki referred to the broader attitude of valuing aesthetic experience for non-pragmatic reasons (and hence would include wabi), but later came to signify a stricter set of specific aesthetic values (Izutsu, 1981/2011, p. 1225).
 3. It is worth noting that the historical relationship between Hideyoshi and Rikyū is generally depicted in a more positive way. Hideyoshi is often looked upon favourably in Japanese history, though he is known for his extensive suppression of peasant rebellion and later attempts to invade continental East Asia.

compound to offer their most prized artistic possessions. Nobunaga marches into the room and individually addresses each collector, demanding to know the history and value of the objects they have come to offer. With a servant at his side holding a large bag of gold pieces, Nobunaga presents a hand-weighed amount of gold pieces for each work he wishes to take. Some collectors receive a small but generous amount, while others are shunned entirely. Rikyū arrives, carrying something covered in a white shroud. The guard at the gates of the mansion is annoyed by his tardiness. Rikyū glances at the sky and suggests that he may have arrived too early. Nobunaga sits at the head of the room, visibly agitated and frustrated by the collectors' lacklustre show. He impatiently asks if there is nothing else someone can offer. With slow and precise movements, Rikyū enters through a sliding door at the opposite end of the room. Nobunaga asks what he has brought to offer. Rikyū kneels on the floor and slowly and deliberately unfolds the shroud to present a small, simple black box. The other collectors in the room audibly mock him for bringing something so clearly without value. Rikyū, maintaining his composure and with restrained but refined movements, takes the box and walks to the edge of the room, next to a sliding door which opens onto the garden outside. He sits down, removes the deep lid from the box and places it upside down on top of the base of the box. The camera, facing from outside in the garden towards the interior of the house, holds a low angle. This allows us to see Rikyū and the occupants of the room, but not the details of the box's interior. With a smooth gesture he folds back the long sleeves of his robe and retrieves a previously unseen bamboo water canister from his hip. He slowly pours the water into the lid of the box, adjusts its position and sits aside. Nobunaga approaches the box. He briefly stares at it, then he quickly looks to the sky and back at the box again. He calls over his servant, weighs the bag of gold in his hand, and then proceeds to empty its entire contents in front of Rikyū, before leaving the room. The collectors audibly gasp. A younger Hideyoshi runs over to the box. The camera shows a close shot of his reaction: he looks down, gasps, looks up at the sky and then back to the box. The next cut, a close up of the box from above, anticipated by a gentle but sudden piano chord, reveals a delicate golden inlay of flowers juxtaposed against the plain black background of the box and the shining reflection of the full moon in the water.

This scene features the first of Rikyū's many artistic performances. It introduces the audience to a filmic conception of the wabi aesthetic sensibility and it serves as a cinematic refrain repeated throughout the film. Many of Rikyū's artistic acts follow this structure. The bare and devalued components of an art work are unveiled piece by piece, through

an elongated sense of time and emptied space. This is followed by the final revelation of the whole work as an overwhelming but minimalistic and transient event. The effect is that Rikyū's art works reframe the presence of nature in a stunning and captivating form of austere beauty. An artistic event is stripped of ornamentation and rendered in slow, delicate movements shot and edited in static cinematography with few cuts. Suddenly the music changes, the colour composition is drastically altered, and the editing and cinematography become more dynamic with sharp changes in angle and perspective. An astounding or overwhelming aesthetic event emerges out of stillness, restraint, and austerity through this process. Through the repetition of this structure, Rikyū's wabi works of art and chadō are framed and reframed by formal cinematic techniques. In this way the narrative is given new phenomenological and ethical significance.

From Wabi in Cinema to Wabi-Cinema: Images and Immanence

Examining the relationship between *Ask This of Rikyū's* political narrative and the cinematic quality of the ethical experience it traces requires a conceptual exploration of the relation between cinema and wabi. That is, it is necessary to discuss the philosophical connections between the filmic medium and the wabi aesthetic sensibility, the sensibility that Rikyū engages in his artistic praxis for the sake of ethico-political activity. The primary theoretical question is: what is the structural relationship between the aesthetic potential of film form and the principles of the wabi aesthetic sensibility? Or, is a wabi-cinema possible?

To explore this question, I need to begin with a preliminary working definition of the wabi aesthetic sensibility. Given the widespread use of the notion of "wabi-sabi" in popular aesthetic discourse, wabi should be differentiated from its close relative, "sabi". First and foremost, as aesthetic sensibilities (rather than "genres" or "styles") they isolate, render, embody, and emphasise certain aesthetic values and ideals. Such categories are primarily about engaging and expressing a particular character of aesthetic objects and a particular way of perceiving the world. Secondly, together wabi-sabi is often characterised by a broadly rustic minimalism, but separately the two terms have their own definite aesthetic principles and ideals. Sabi has its historical roots in rendering the feeling of "loneliness" in poetry (Kuki, 1938/2004, p. 168). In broader terms, sabi refers to the rustic component of wabi-sabi, emphasising the characteristics and attributes of the material such as cracks and wear, faded colour and smoothed edges, scent and patina, and other similar signs of ageing (Railey, 1997, p. 124). Sabi in this sense incorporates and

unfolds a gradual history of exposure into the aesthetic object. As such, *sabi* does not refer to a particular damaged element, but to the worn ordinariness of a chronological age expressed in objects. *Sabi* is a cumulative sense of wear; specific elements (this particular crack, this particular smell, this particular shape) cannot be isolated as the definitive source of *sabi* value and feel. *Wabi*, in contrast, has its roots in a different evocation of feeling in poetry: “a strong emotional saturation” brought about by a sense of “deprivation” or “languishing” (Izutsu, 1981/2011, p. 1224). It refers to the minimalistic component of *wabi-sabi*. It is associated with an appearance of “destitution,” unadorned austerity, “desolation,” or poverty in the aesthetic object, expressing a restrained yet composed simplicity (Izutsu, 1981/2011, p. 1224). Lack of ornamentation, and the absence of signs of perfection and wealth are therefore central to a *wabi* feel. *Wabi* and *sabi* sensibilities readily complement one another, with the *wabi* sense of unadorned minimal beauty highly receptive to the natural degradation that imparts a *sabi* feel. The aforementioned *suki* sensibility, characterised by indulgence in perfection and completeness, therefore runs counter to both the *wabi* and *sabi* ideals. According to these, cracks and other natural or accidental deformations are to be admired since such marks contribute to the sense of rustic wear or unconcealed poverty at the heart of aesthetic objects (Izutsu, 1981/2011, p. 1225). In this sense there is a basic conflict of values between *wabi* and *sabi* on the one hand, and *suki* on the other.

With these working definitions and contrasts in place, I can now investigate the basic conditions that ground a *wabi*-cinema. The sense of austerity and bare immovability that characterises *wabi*, along with the time-bound deterioration that characterises *sabi*, is in clear contrast with some of the fundamental principles of the filmic medium. On the one hand, the moving aspect of cinematic images conflicts with the immutable poverty of typically *wabi* objects (such as rock gardens and simple sculptures). Such movement supplements aesthetic experience with phenomenal change and introduces relations of motion between otherwise unornamented objects. Cinematic movement, with all the aesthetic baggage of the medium, risks undermining the stillness at the heart of *wabi* poverty. On the other hand, the photographic/cinematographic preservation of filmed objects runs counter to the *sabi* sensibility, which privileges the organic aging of aesthetic objects. Motion and preservation, two core processes of cinema, thus in theory preclude the full depth of *wabi* and *sabi* sensibilities. While the representation of *wabi-sabi* in a generic and reductive form as mere rustic minimalism is readily compatible with film, *wabi* and *sabi* strictly defined seem to resist cinematic use.

However, a more critical analysis can demonstrate that the aesthetic conception of movement and time in *sabi* and *wabi* is more complex, and that they need not be purely associated with chronological aging (*sabi*) or atemporal simplicity (*wabi*). A strict and more detailed analysis of these concepts makes it possible to detach them from their association with a loosely defined rustic minimalism and to interrogate their more nuanced relations to time. One model of movement and time that can account for *sabi* and *wabi* can be built by drawing parallels with Gilles Deleuze's concepts of the movement-image and the time-image of cinema. If this model can be sustainably applied to these sensibilities, then the notion of *wabi-cinema* as a specific form of filmic composition – with its own unique phenomenology and film-philosophical potential – is possible. *Ask This of Rikyū*, as one example of *wabi-cinema*, would therefore be capable of not only rendering Rikyū's *wabi* sensibility and its ethical significance in narrative and representational terms, but could also situate it aesthetically within the present. This would open up a concrete ethical experience of the immediate political value of aesthetic practices of resistance.

With this goal in mind – the aesthetic conceptualisation of movement and time – an examination of the broadest ontological levels of Deleuze's philosophical treatment of film can establish the general conditions for a comparison with *wabi*. Preceding the categorisation of particular types of images, Deleuze's general conception of movement and time developed in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983/2013a) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985/2013b) is largely drawn from commentaries on Henri Bergson that focus on two major philosophical points. The first point extends Bergson's suggestion that movement is not composed of disparate instants, but rather that instants are the artificial decomposition of organic movement (Deleuze, 1983/2013a, p. 1). The second point is that Bergson signifies the advent of a new problem where psychic reality qua image and material reality qua movement can no longer be considered strictly distinct (Deleuze, 1983/2013a, pp. 63–4). Deleuze argues (against Bergson's own critique of cinema) that by presenting movement as an experienced whole, rather than as a set of discrete moments, film brings the viewer closer to a more ontologically fundamental sense of movement that the viewer has been alienated from by the representational schematisation of movement into instants (Deleuze, 1983/2013a, p. 65). Instead of being a mechanical recombination of movements from particular moments, film is essentially the (re)production of real organic movement. Film does not build up movements progressively from individual frames, but expresses a phenomenal whole. This whole may only retrospectively be analysed to be constructed from a set of individual

frames. A collection of independent static images, on its own, does not produce movement. This general condition of movement is most explicit in the aesthetic experience of film.

Following this argument, *sabi* aesthetic objects can be faithfully rendered in cinematic form. Film's capacity to express movement in time allows it to present the organic process from unblemished aesthetic objects to worn aesthetic objects without reducing *sabi* feeling to determinate instants. This need not be limited to art-objects with *sabi* traits (such as wooden figures, tea bowls, paintings, and so on), but can be applied more generally. Everyday objects (like drinking cups, door handles, and light switches) can also attain *sabi* characteristics. In such cases these objects can enrich the film's symbolic meaning. They demonstrate the impact of time and contribute to the general aesthetic mood. Furthermore, the *sabi* sensibility can also include characters, for example a naïve or childlike character can undergo change throughout a film's narrative by experiencing hardships and pain and thus become exhausted and world-weary. These changes are not necessarily demonstrated through their personality and dialogue. Such characters are often poignantly developed by expressive aesthetic changes: changes in how the character moves, changes in the appearance of the character that contrast with their chronological age, and changes in the energy offered in the performance. In *sabi*-cinema, *sabi* characteristics would be integrated into the composition of the film at the level of the medium. Though the above examples do not demonstrate that a formal *sabi*-cinema exists in practice, they do show that the presentation of organic and real movement in film can allow additional *sabi* effects to emerge, despite the fact that film is an essentially reproductive medium. The *sabi* sensibility and Deleuze's movement-image appeal to the same aesthetic conception of organic time: movement is construed as continuous mono-linear change in space that produces material effects and is only retroactively divisible into discrete parts and elements.

Deleuze extends his analysis of movement in film further, into the domain of the time-image, which he presents as the result of fully developing Bergson's account of movement and time. Deleuze suggests that the notion of movement as immanent and intensive change requires a conception of a dynamic whole as that which provides the durable forms that undergo movement – the “things” that move:

[... Not] only is the instant an immobile section of movement [the proposition that defines the parameters of the analytic of the movement-image], but movement is a mobile section of duration, that is, of the Whole, or of a whole. Which implies that movement expresses

something more profound, which is the change in duration or in the whole.
(Deleuze, 1983/2013a, p. 9)

The movement-image makes explicit the quantitative system of intensive movement that can be decomposed into parts, or a series of instants subsumed into a single vector. However, this vital telos of movement, this form of organically quantitative change, is itself conditioned on the more fundamental qualitative change of the whole. The movement of an object from one determinate space to another simultaneously relies on the establishment of a form which moves. This is coupled with a shift in relation between given objects, which thus expresses a change in the quality of the totality of objects itself. This means that the whole is in a state of continuous qualitative transformation and therefore it is neither given nor giveable. So in Deleuze's reading of Bergson, "if the whole is not giveable, it is because it is the Open, and because its nature is to change constantly, or to give rise to something new, in short, to endure" (Deleuze, 1983/2013a, p. 10). The time-image is the kind of image that throws the movement-image into question, giving the viewer a vantage point from which they can grasp this sense of the dynamic, transformative whole. In the process of opening up the whole through the disruption of the organic foreclosure of movement the time-image is made explicit. This disruption prevents any specific kind of movement from establishing itself as a definitive overarching principle from which instants are produced. The time-image therefore exposes the constantly changing transformative expression of the whole as the uneven and infinitely open qualitative ground of perceived movement. *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Lung Bunmi Raluek Chat, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010) is one example that engages this time-image sense of open temporality. The film also anticipates certain elements of the wabi cinematic aesthetic. By extending segments of time and integrating the supernatural into the ordinary, *Uncle Boonmee* establishes a deep reflection on time embodied by a gentle meditative mysticism. The unintrusive, slow, and delicate examination of caves, forests, and rivers by the camera, combined with intimately slow movement and dialogue create a sense of a quiet and soothing but vibrant naturalism that draws declining bodies into the digestive vitality of an infinite and timeless nature. In this context, an intensive and expansive sense of time paired with a contemplative naturalism causes the motor drive of cinematic action to recede before the mystical power of nature as a whole.

As suggested above, the movement-image is loosely parallel to the sabi sensibility. Both emphasise irreducible temporal continuity and a cumulative aesthetic of organic movement. Similarly, the time-image is

parallel to the wabi sensibility. Emphasising austerity, imperfection and impoverishment, wabi stresses the depth of simplicity in artistic composition. From a wabi perspective, to create a seamless and perfect object is to necessarily diminish its aesthetic quality by hiding the emptiness of the sensible behind a veil of adornments. As such, wabi focuses on how an experience expresses the dynamic emptiness of existence through simplicity and austerity. Though static objects can express the wabi sensibility (like sculptures or rock gardens), the practice of *chadō* enacts the performative and temporal dimension of the aesthetic. In *chadō*, wabi is “no longer a mere idea indicating aesthetic asceticism [... but instead comes] to constitute the highest aesthetic-ethical value, providing the Way of Tea [*chadō*] with a solid metaphysical background” (Izutsu, 2011, p. 1225). A wabi type of movement can reveal the actual processes of emptying phenomenal perception on the one hand and express the emergence of meaningfully rich action from this emptied state on the other (Izutsu, 2011, pp. 1126–1127). Wabi strips movement of ornamentation, including organic or accidental elements, and explores the minimal conditions of movement.

In the context of film, this means that movement itself can be transformed, thrown into question, and become an “object” of wabi sensibility. For example, movements may become wabi when performed in an unnaturally restrained manner around slow and deliberate actions, or when minute emotive gestures take place in a formal and geometrical space, or when actions are disconnected from mechanical causes. In such cases the accidental and embellished element of pre-reflective common sense movement disappears. Such movements are decomposed and recomposed into a new form, their unity is disrupted, and the sense of anticipation that drives viewers’ expectations and affective immersion is undermined. The result is a minimalistic and impoverished but composed movement that plays with the temporal conventions of classical cinematic movement and expectation. Such aberrant movements strip performance of natural ornamentation and reveal the uneven and dynamic structure of time and space that underlies movement in general. In this specific case of cinematic movement, wabi engages a similar aesthetic rationale to the Deleuzean time-image. Through the disruption of regulated patterns of movement and anticipation, a deeper and less representationally stratified sense of time and change can be recovered. Wabi movement opens up the pre-organic spatio-temporal conditions of activity and movement.

Ask This of Rikyū both depicts wabi works of art and renders its images in a wabi form. On the one hand, the film is abundant with *chadō* and austere, minimalistic art works. On the other hand, it elongates periods of action and situates the works in highly formal and emptied spaces thus

creating impoverished and barren segments of time. Aesthetic events, expressed in both cinematic form and narrative content through Rikyū's works, then reconfigure these segments of time. This combination discloses the monumental, intense, and highly dynamic beauty behind these events, imparting an overwhelming and startling grace to these moments while preserving their fundamental emptiness. The alienated detachment of its temporal aesthetic is revealed to ground and sustain moments of sublime beauty.

There are however central differences between the wabi aesthetic and the Deleuzian ontology underlying his cinematic aesthetics. Most notably, wabi minimalism draws attention to empty space and lack, while the Deleuzian aesthetic ontology seeks manifestations of purely productive differential force. Even in Deleuze's discussion of Ozu Yasujiro's films, the emphasis is on empty space as a "landscape" that constitutes a "purely optical (and sound) situation" that actively draws out "an unchanging, regular nature" and explores the fundamental forms that make change possible (Deleuze, 1985/2013b, p. 16–17). The role of the negative is not to strip away and transform what is phenomenally given, but to give affirmative power to the banal.

This parallel does not necessarily establish the possibility of a wabi-cinematic practice, style or genre, but it does demonstrate that specifically cinematic movement can be the focus of wabi appreciation and that both the understanding of filmic movement and the domain of wabi sensibility enrich one another through this encounter. Film is not only capable of depicting wabi objects and re-presenting the performed wabi of chadō, but it is also capable of rendering wabi temporality in a unique way. Filmic movement can engender the wabi sensibility and express additional elements that are not fully captured by wabi objects or tea ceremonies. It is in this sense that I will use the term wabi-cinema to characterise the sensible aesthetic form of *Ask This of Rikyū* that intensifies and reframes the wabi and chadō content.

At the most general level of this analytic, wabi-cinema is most clearly defined when explored alongside its Japanese cultural-aesthetic roots, but it also has potential aesthetic utility in other traditions. Wabi, in this particular use, is not confined to Japanese artistic practices and it is not a general aesthetic trait of Japanese cinema. For example, *Utamaro and his Five Women* (*Utamaro o meguru gonin no onna*, Mizoguchi Kenji, 1946) has a similar narrative set up to *Ask This of Rikyū* but uses a different aesthetic approach for different thematic ends. Though both films focus on an artist and their devotion to their craft in a particular socio-political environment, *Utamaro* eschews a wabi approach in favour of theatrical staging and complex sets that organise organic dramatic movement.

Thematically the emphasis is on passion and obsession explored through Utamaro's craft. The use of shadows, fog, architecture, and bodily expression highlights bodily desires, and evokes the hard materiality of artistic production and the urban environment. Through these techniques it mirrors elements of film noir. If wabi is not a general Japanese aesthetic "style," then the restricted sense of wabi-cinema can be detached from a general cultural-historical analysis of the emergence of the concept of wabi. In contrast to such an approach, I will focus on an exploration of the broader unique contribution of wabi-cinema to aesthetic phenomenology.

Nishida and Deleuze: Wabi as an Aesthetics of Forces

Having established a structural relationship between the temporal phenomenologies of wabi and cinema, one which unfolds a dynamic and uneven sense of time through wabi movement in a different register to the real-life practice of chadō, I intend to investigate the question of exactly what kind of aesthetic experience this engenders. While the standards that ground judgements of wabi aesthetic value are relatively well-established, wabi's relation to and effect on the contemporary art of film calls for a renewed interrogation of the sensible structure of its aesthetic experience. To explore this I will draw on modern developments that evoke the Zen ethical ontology that the wabi sensibility is based on, and enrich them by further pursuing the comparison with the Deleuzian aesthetic ontology that is most expansively detailed in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981/2003).

Chadō, and the wabi aesthetic more generally, is built on a ground of austerity and minimalism that is in clear conflict with Deleuze's account of Francis Bacon's paintings in *Francis Bacon* (1981/2003). Bacon's paintings depict chaotic, wounded, and structurally deformed meaty Figures that are depicted as slipping painfully in and out of human form. In contrast, in the bare minimalism of the wabi sensibility there is no sense in which the dynamic agony of spasmodic bodies is injected into movement. Wabi bodies are not caught in the middle of strained semi-impossible poses, and in chadō the figure of movement does not violently engage with its own limitations. Despite these surface contrasts, I have established that wabi draws on a structurally similar understanding of the differential ground of movement as qualitative change. This understanding of the aesthetic ground of movement and sense perception is also expressed in the specific typology of techniques and figural concepts that Deleuze explores with respect to Bacon's paintings. Therefore I can now compare the richer ontological conditions of aesthetic movement and sensation that these otherwise radically different types of artistic expression engender.

Deleuze centres his argument on an esoteric concept of sensation. He describes it as a pre-representational experience that “acts immediately upon the nervous system”; it traverses “both subject and object” and accomplishes a “unity of the sensing and the sensed” (Deleuze, 1981/2003, p. 31). For Deleuze, sensation is not so much a synonym for sense data, but rather it is a pre-individual shock to the system that cannot be intellectually schematised. One can reflect on a Bacon painting – analyse the context of its creation, understand the specific techniques used to compose it, and articulate the historical styles that influence its conception – but the actual aesthetic experience cannot fully be rationalised. An attempt at rational analysis cannot fully dispel the disturbing feeling one experiences. This feeling bypasses reflection as a nervous sensory disruption. The experienced shock is pre-individual and pre-representational, it precedes the delineation of specific senses and a determinate sensing-subject/sensed-object relation. This is because sensation produces its effects before definite forms can be applied. Therefore sensation for Deleuze refers to an unarticulated and general trans-subjective affect. The viewer cannot identify “where” the sensation is, and one cannot necessarily assign definite emotions to it. As such, in the emergence of sensation “[the] painter would thus make visible a kind of original unity of the senses” (Deleuze, 1981/2003, p. 37, emphasis removed). In this sense, sensation is *primordially synaesthetic*.

With this conception of sensation in place, Deleuze analyses how the dynamic unity of the sensuous is expressed in the sensation-content of Bacon's paintings: the Figure. Much of Deleuze's analysis is dedicated to describing the various conceptual and compositional conditions of the emergence of certain kinds of Figure in Bacon's paintings. These categorisations isolate particular ways that paintings render forces. These could be “elementary forces such as pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, germination” or the general dynamic conditions of perception, such as “time, which is nonsonorous and invisible” (Deleuze, 1981/2003, p. 48). The arts are able to capture these non-sensible forces which are the condition of sensuous experience and render them as sensation (Deleuze, 1981/2003, p. 48). The dynamic unity of the sensuous is in this sense composed of forces. This is why Bacon's paintings are so important for Deleuze: they generate Figures by deforming bodies and they reveal those forces which affect bodies but are otherwise invisible (Deleuze, 1981/2003, p. 50). What is significant is not the surface violence of Bacon's paintings, but the deeper violence of the activity of forces that emerge through sensation.

As a counterpoint to Deleuze's focus on the deeper violence that emerges through sensation, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, writing about *chadō*,

characterises this same differential holistic ground in terms of peace. For Hisamatsu, the significance of *chadō* lies in its expressive capacity to aesthetically embody a sense of peace, where “[true] peace is the ground of activity itself, where tranquility, movement, and stillness work as one” (Hisamatsu, 1962/2011, p. 1195). Though this articulation is opposed to Deleuze in terms of the rhetoric that characterises the quality of sensuous dynamic unity, both thinkers identify the deepest significance of aesthetic experience as its capacity to express the pre-representational, pre-rational, and pre-agential vitality that grounds existence. This is the sense in which Hisamatsu suggests that *chadō* involves a “vital essence” (Hisamatsu, 1962/2011, p. 1195). *Chadō* therefore evokes a structurally similar ontology to that which Deleuze suggests underlies Bacon’s paintings. *Wabi*, as the general sensibility exemplified in its performative dimension by *chadō*, therefore engages the dynamic ontological basis of aesthetic activity and sense experience. In this sense, it fulfills the same imperative which for Deleuze is satisfied by Bacon’s paintings. The key differences lie in the techniques of engagement and the specific quality of what is revealed at the core of the ontology. Regarding the first point, in Deleuze’s case this fundamental differential play of forces is uncovered by material techniques of de-formation in painting that violently clear away representational forms. On the other hand, in the case of *wabi* this dynamic is revealed through desolation and impoverishment stripping away the sensible ornamentations that obscure the inner life of aesthetic experience. In the second case, for Deleuze, what art can unveil is the affirmative power of sensation that emerges through the pressurised flow of metaphysical difference. From the perspective of the *wabi* sensibility, on the other hand, it is the depth and vitality of a radical emptying of aesthetic perfection where all that remains is the openness and power of the emptiness at the base of experience.

There is therefore a structural parallel between Deleuze’s conception of sensation and the *wabi* sensibility. They both seek the pre-representational, vital, dynamic, and differential forces that ground aesthetic activity and experience by clearing away conventions of perception and value. However, the character of the metaphysical whole engaged in aesthetic experience is significantly different between the two perspectives. For Deleuze, the dynamic whole of forces that forms the pre-condition of phenomenal movement is expressed in sensation and the time-image. Whereas for *wabi*, the forces of this “unarticulated whole” are found when “[things] and events [...] go on to efface themselves [...] by gradually turning their own articulations in the phenomenal dimension of being to the pre-phenomenal state of nothingness,” clearing the way for a “spontaneously expressive process of metaphysical evolution”

that emerges from emptied space and time (Izutsu, 1981/2011, pp. 1226–1227). Wabi invokes a dual transformative movement of clearing and emergence. Deleuze's metaphysics emphasises de-formation, whereas wabi emphasises trans-formation.

These elements of the wabi sensibility, the opening and transformation of time and space, are also engaged to a certain extent in canonical works of Japanese post-war cinema. Ozu Yasujiro's films often use furniture and architectural design (particularly sliding doors, cabinets, tables and tatami mats) not as mere props or decorative features, but in relation to the static position of the camera as ways of dynamically framing action. This framing creates spaces which open and close, loosen and tighten, around the characters. As they engage in personal, familial and community dramas, these architectural elements construct new emotional contexts and reorient meaningful actions and gestures. The phenomenal background recedes and is emptied to varying degrees by this reframing. This emptying in turn produces differing intensities of emotional effects. The wabi element of Ozu's films lies in the minimisation of extravagant bodily action in favour of using variably emptied spaces to create a detached intimacy and enrich the everyday and banal. Ozu's films shift the dynamic element of aesthetic experience from bodily action to the affective spatio-temporal whole. Films like *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Dàhóng dēnglóng gāo gāo guà*, Zhāng Yimóu, 1991) also use this aesthetic-cinematic logic but to vastly different effect. The hard architectural lines and muted colours of the estate setting dynamically frame and reframe dramatic action from cut to cut with a sense of oppressive and claustrophobic weight. The repetition of simple colour contrasts, aural themes, and visual patterns regulate a sense of atmospheric severity and emotional poverty. In the narrative, this establishes practices and relations that reproduce this feeling of enclosure and oppression at the personal level.

This critical comparison of wabi and Deleuzian aesthetics allows me to develop the idea of nothingness, or emptiness⁴, as an expressive place of forces for the filmic wabi movement of *Ask This of Rikyū*. Nishida Kitarō

4. Emptiness and nothingness are technical terms in Buddhist and Buddhist-influenced philosophy. The latter is generally the preferred term for philosophers of the Kyōto School such as Nishida. However, nothingness invokes Daoist influences that are not included in most Buddhist scholarship, which generally prefers emptiness. In this essay they are largely interchangeable but I have switched between the terms depending on the context I am referring to: classical Zen Buddhist traditions that the historical Rikyū would have been schooled in (emptiness), and modern philosophers that draw on more varied traditions (nothingness).

develops one of the richest and most influential modern ontologies from the Zen principles that ground the ethical-aesthetic practices of wabi. For Nishida, at the most abstract level nothingness refers to the dynamic ontological unity that conditions the emergence of both being and non-being as cognitive categories (Nishida, 1945/1987, pp. 64, 109). This sense of nothingness can be articulated in more specific Buddhist terms as formlessness, non-substantiality, and the co-dependent interconnectedness of things (Krummel, 2015, pp. 114, 121). Formation, becoming, and interactivity are therefore the most fundamental processes of both existence and aesthetic experience since they expressively and concretely point towards a ground that precedes determinate form, sustained being and established independence (Nishida, 1945/1987, p. 98). The dynamic elements of sensuous aesthetic experience therefore engage a more profound sense of life and existence.

For Nishida, nothingness is most concretely expressed in the interactive and transformative movement of history (Nishida, 1945/1987, pp. 103, 109). History is not simply a chronology of causes and purposes, but the fundamental drive of the whole to expressively transform itself through the interactive work of existential selves in the here and now (Nishida, 1945/1987, pp. 84, 90). Thus, this idea of a creative history perfectly complements Deleuze's concept of duration as a dynamic whole and the differential forces of sensation with a fully-fledged notion of history. Following Nishida's reasoning, art and morality, as two of the most self-reflective or self-aware forms of interactive expression, are key operators in the movement of this force-saturated vital history (Nishida, 1923/1973, p. 154). Artistic styles and practices explore and expressively transform "historical space" (Nishida, 1941/1989, p. 174). Film, therefore, has the dual function of generating dynamically historical art worlds and creatively transforming the historical world in which we find ourselves. In *The Human Condition, Part One: No Greater Love* (*Ningen no jōken dai ichi bu Jun'ai hen*, Kobayashi Masaki, 1959), the location of a mine in occupied Manchuria serves as a desolate and overbearing frame. With its monumental and bare mounds of rubble surrounded by an empty skyline the mine evokes a saturated sensation of parched stillness and an atmosphere of exhaustion. In this setting, even the most extreme individual actions feel blunt and dull against the quiet and overwhelming background. Acts become futile against the silently oppressive weight of the landscape. This serves as an aesthetic and affective expression of the political circumstances that the protagonist finds himself in. The film uses a wabi framing to craft a perceptual regime that evocatively reflects on the relation of the individual to oppressive political systems. The result is a film that forces the viewer to reflect on the

historical realities of the Second World War and the ethical demands we continue to face in its wake. From this Nishidian perspective, the whole that is expressed by the time-image is a world of historical forces that continuously reasserts itself in aesthetic immediacy.

Wabi, as the aesthetic sensibility that most explicitly evokes emptiness, therefore expresses historical forces in their transformative depth through the emptying of space and time. A wabi-cinema therefore aesthetically and ethically explores the possibilities of vital histories and the forces that compose them by using wabi techniques, practices, and phenomenology.

Rikyū's Resistance: Life, Death and the Historical World Weaved into Art

Having explored the aesthetic ontology of *chadō* and wabi with respect to film, the final goal of this paper is to investigate the cinematic-ethical significance of Rikyū's artistic practices in the face of suffering and personal political oppression. In what way is Rikyū's own style of wabi aesthetics his own form of self-assertion and protest? Furthermore, how is the ethical experience of this aesthetic resistance reconfigured in a filmic context?

Ask This of Rikyū explores wabi-cinema by having Rikyū stage a series of artistic events. These events interrogate the temporality of the wabi sensibility in the broader context of the aesthetics of transience associated with Japanese art and aesthetic appreciation. This emphasis on temporality allows the restraint and austerity of wabi to bring forth an imposing sense of empty space, drawing out the gaps, breaths, and cracks in movements. Furthermore, this filmic aesthetic sensibility interrogates the conditions of movement and the material forces of qualitative change that constitute this dynamic pre-sensible whole. Emptiness, in wabi-cinema, functions as the opening or clearing power of forces. This sense of emptiness clears the way for the power of nature to surge forth and intermingle with the compositional refinement of the technical, choreographed gestures of Rikyū's art. The austerity of wabi-cinema is constituted through the relations of forces of nature to such technical gestures. The result is that the material conditions of artistic creation are shown in a new light and the viewer's attention is drawn to them. Such a relation is demonstrated in the film's first tea ceremony, where Rikyū and his disciple serve tea to noblemen. As the tea is served, the disciple moves over to the sliding doors to open them. The camera cuts to a close up of a falling cherry blossom petal suddenly caught by the wind. The petal lands in the tea just as a nobleman is about to drink it. They all look up in surprise and the camera follows their gaze. A spectacular display of cherry

tree branches is revealed on the roof of the tea room. The wind gently blows through the room, causing a shower of delicate petals.

In Rikyū's artistic events, the viewer's attention is always drawn firstly to the technical minimalism and stillness of the performance and movements, and then to the power of nature in its immediacy presenting itself in a re-framed context. These revelatory moments range from the moon reflected in a patterned box filled with water and Rikyū using a flower stem to anoint his dead daughter's lips with tea, to Rikyū's final act of bleeding out dressed in a white robe in a tiny tea room. All these artistic acts exploit the uneven temporality of cinema in order to add new dimensions to wabi austerity. They generate a techno-vital sense of life and death. This is possible because movement is denaturalised and emptied. It is exposed as a highly composed and choreographed performance. The viewer's natural anticipations of cinematic movement are disrupted, and instead movement itself is transformed into a sublime experience and an object of aesthetic veneration. Rikyū uses the technical practices of wabi art to unveil the emptiness behind organic movement, creating a bare stage for the creative power of nature to emerge out of time. By opening up this historical space, these wabi-cinematic events in turn open the viewer's perspective up to the "unliveable Power" that Deleuze describes (Deleuze, 1981/2003, p. 39). In the face of the austere power of nature and time, we are confronted with the limits of our liveable being.

Rikyū's practices of aesthetic living stand in stark contrast to the grandiose excesses of Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi is enraptured with opulence and extravagance, grand gestures, and lasting monuments to his political power. Running and dancing around, glorying in the spectacular vibrancy of golden splendour and huge, decorated spaces, Hideyoshi's movement draws energy from wealth. Though his movements are in no way abnormal, in contrast to Rikyū they appear clumsy and erratic. *Ask This of Rikyū* stages the conflict between two opposed aesthetic regimes of movement and two opposed aesthetic sensibilities. On the one hand there is Hideyoshi's suki and on the other hand there is Rikyū's wabi. This is not simply a conflict of tastes, but a conflict between ways of living.

In this initial conflict between tastes and values, the wabi aesthetic sensibility becomes a politico-ethical act of defiance. Wabi is not simply restrained, but captivating, austere and powerful. In its simple elegance, wabi can open up a spatial emptiness and find depth in the ordinary and the unadorned. What is supposed to be provoked by this opening is a sense of awe in the face of a transcendent yet concrete emptiness. The wabi aesthetics of emptiness therefore reveals an intimidating spatial force. The way in which Rikyū utilises this is especially clear when

contrasted with Hideyoshi's own taste for the aesthetics of chadō, which are represented through his use of an elaborate gold screen to serve as a portable tea room. The brutal and intimidating austerity of the wabi style, its sublime character that explores the depths of simplicity, serves as a heavy counterpoint to the excesses of Hideyoshi's political rule. In this context, Rikyū's wabi aesthetics is fundamentally intrusive, as it undoes everything that Hideyoshi strives to do. If profound existential value can be found in objects of impoverishment then Hideyoshi's material and symbolic power is baseless.

Beyond this conflict between tastes, the film makes explicit to the audience the immediacy of wabi: the filmic and singular quality of Rikyū's aesthetic performances make the viewer aware of something fleeting in the wabi aesthetic. Rikyū's events are always transient, but the temporality of film means that these aesthetic stagings are never fully inscribed, harnessed, captured, or made-timeless. Instead they are repeated and reproduced, emphasising their fleeting and singular nature in movement. This wabi cinematic temporality opens up not only spatial emptiness but also temporal emptiness. On one hand Rikyū's artistic events use restrained movements and gestures expressed across unnaturally long periods to stretch time to its limits. While on the other hand, the wabi sensibility also values breaks and singular aesthetic events, in contrast to the sabi sensibility which emphasises cumulative aging. Both of these aspects of temporality are at work in a later scene in the film. During a flashback, a local tea master takes Rikyū as his disciple. The tea master complains that an alcove that houses a vase in the corner of his new tea room feels incomplete. Rikyū slowly walks over to the vase. With the camera facing him and the vase out of shot, in a swift but delicate movement he breaks one of the two small handles off the vase. The tea master is shocked by what he now sees. The following reverse shot reveals the vase with its broken handle lying next to it. This small event technologically reconfigures the spatial whole. Such instances, where space is remade through singular, revelatory moments, demonstrate that wabi is especially evental in that its artistic quality often lies not in claiming victory over time through material permanence but in disclosing how its objects become historically empty, and how movement can empty out space for elemental forces to emerge. *Ask This of Rikyū* makes the viewer privy to the wabi of the here and now: it is not a question of how cumulative time has wounded an object over generations, as with sabi, but how the object is wounded and impoverished now as an expression of its position in time as a whole.

In other fictionalised iterations of the life of Rikyū, such as *Death of a Tea Master* (*Sen no Rikyū: Honkakubō ibun*, Kumai Kei, 1989), the aesthetic

focus lies elsewhere. In this example, the *sabi* sensibility has a more prominent presence, with rustic objects and the material work of hands in *chadō* being used to intensify the sense of age and decline playing out in the memories and quiet reflections of its narrator, a disciple of Rikyū. Rather than exploring the vibrant temporal depths of the present moment, as *Ask This of Rikyū* does, *Death of a Tea Master* interrogates the nature of memory at the end of a historical epoch⁵.

It is in this way that *wabi* can reveal nothingness as a dynamic of forces which affect all things. While on the one hand the sense of restraint and simplicity emphasises the empty space between and around things, it is the wounds, breaks, and cuts that reveal the empty space within things and movements. *Ask This of Rikyū*'s *wabi*-cinema uses its technical procedures to reveal the invisible forces of nothingness.

So Rikyū's aesthetic stagings serve the purpose of revealing the inescapable forces which push and pull at all things. As an artist, he is most keenly aware of the forces which work through all things. His works are both his activism and his pacifism: an acknowledgement of the circumstances beyond his power (his service and *de facto* enslavement to Hideyoshi) and an assertion that Hideyoshi's power is merely an illusion in the face of the forces of nature and history (*qua* nothingness). His art is his protest, but time, history, and death are harnessed as retroactive revenge. Rikyū sees Hideyoshi's failure in his art. Artistic creation expresses the same forces of socio-historical transformation that will ultimately bring about Hideyoshi's historical downfall (which the film leaves implicit) – a crushing defeat at the hands of Korea during an attempt to invade mainland China. It is no coincidence that, in the film's most prominently fictionalised element, Rikyū's artistic life takes its most decisive turn with the death of his first passionate love, an abducted Korean woman that he tries to escape with⁶.

Furthermore, at the level of the film as a historical-fictional story and a manifestation of Rikyū's own artistic sensibility, the narrative serves to throw the actual historical role of Hideyoshi back into question. By tying together historical record and fictional narrative through the robustly historical aesthetic expression of the *wabi* sensibility, the ethical point within the film about the creative power of art to (re-)engage history is repeated at the level of the spectator. Art revitalises and re-energises

5. For more on the many ways understandings of history are constructed in Japanese cinema, see Nygren (2007).

6. In this way the film may be read as invoking a more general rejection of forms of Japanese nationalism, both historical and contemporary.

history, investing it with the affective significance of immediate experience and reconfigures it as an immediate ethico-political question of creativity and expression.

The capacity of politicians to use their power to violently shape history is thus a mere surface effect of historical forces; in contrast artists passively shape the time of cultural memory and enable the creative contestation of history, past and future. Rikyū's life is reasserted through his death – a strikingly wabi death, an act of seppuku conducted in his private tea room, despite its small size preventing a merciful decapitation – and influences the lives and traditions of many to come. This is the aesthetic function of nothingness grounding an art of life and death, and an ethics of unending historical transformation.

Rikyū's expressive aesthetic praxis, cinematically rendered in the depths of an uneven and dynamic sense of time, unveils the rich vitality of historical transformation. Through a wabi-cinematic reflection on aesthetic living, Rikyū is shown to be in touch with the transformative power of nature and history – the same power that will unravel Hideyoshi (the Hideyoshi of historical record). Rikyū's passive but stubborn insistence on his artistic practice is cinematically demonstrated to be an ethico-political act of resistance. Rikyū, in his unwavering commitment to beauty through wabi and chadō, makes himself the herald of Hideyoshi's downfall, as an expressive agent of vital history.

In this paper, I have shown that *Ask This of Rikyū* can serve as a paradigmatic example for an aesthetic analytic of what I called wabi-cinema. The film demonstrates on the one hand that the wabi sensibility can make a contribution to cinema that opens up novel types of image and cinematic composition, and on the other hand that cinema expands and enriches wabi aesthetics. Further, *Ask This of Rikyū* actively exploits the possibilities of wabi-cinema to explore a certain kind of ethical experience: artistic praxis as political resistance. Beyond merely understanding an individual artwork as having a specific political meaning, in this film artistic praxis and aesthetic living embody a personal expressive relationship with the forces that drive history and nature. The artist is capable of both creatively affirming their own life in the face of hardship and making a historical address to the systems and individuals that oppress them.

Ask This of Rikyū stages a scenario in which the artist enacts and expresses the vital forces of nature and historical inevitability in order to protest against unjust rule and make tangible and perceptible the processes which will bring about the oppressor's downfall. Rikyū's personal political resistance, stifled by a situation in which he is incapable of enacting it directly, is displaced onto the vital and collective power of

nature and history. In a certain sense, Rikyū entrusts his agency to the only forces strong enough to bring down Hideyoshi. The combination of the historical-fictional narrative with wabi-cinematic expression is in a unique position to engage this vital sense of history. Time and space are emptied of their determinate phenomenal contents, enabling the narrative to engage the dynamic fluctuations of creative nature and history.

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