

## TOWARDS A NEW AESTHETIC VISION: RYŪNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA IN THE POLYPHONIC READING OF YASUNARI KAWABATA

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RODICA FRENȚIU<sup>\*</sup>

**Abstract.** The present study debates the way in which the Japanese author uniquely re-semanticises old Japanese aesthetic concepts such as *mono no aware* ('the beauty of simple and transient things') or *yūgenbi* ('mysterious beauty'), by exploiting the valences of sight, in an interdisciplinary analysis where the poetic perspective and that of cultural semiotics is foremost. If touch, taste, smell and kinesthetic sense are senses centred on the body, which privilege direct, unmediated contact, it is acknowledged that hearing and seeing are senses that imply distance and perspective. Harnessing this characteristic of the optical, the Neo-Perceptionalist Japanese author Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1970), in his novel *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (*Nemureru bijo*, 1961), transforms sight into a narrative technique that tries to re-sacralise the real world. A millennium after the *The Tale of Genji*, the first Japanese novel, signed by Murasaki Shikibu, in which the ideal of pure beauty was given by the faceless woman, reduced to long hair and 12 layered kimonos (*junihitoe*), the nude and sleeping female body in *House of the Sleeping Beauties* becomes the transient moment of pure beauty in what the Japanese woodblock print calls "the floating world" (*ukiyo*) or the infinite variety of an ephemeral world. In a house of pleasures where elderly clients either dream pleasantly or remember their youth during the nights they spend next to (drugged) sleeping maidens, old Eguchi, who delights in contemplating the sleeping beauties' bodies, finding himself somewhere between mystery and voluptuous fantasy, gains "the last gaze". Before fading away, it captures the image (*imago*) and the icon (*eikon*) of impermanent things, changing them into purity and beauty.

**Keywords:** sight, *mono no aware* (the beauty of simple and transient things), *yūgenbi* (mysterious beauty), *ukiyo* (the floating world)

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<sup>\*</sup> Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. rfrentiu@hotmail.com

*Alive today in this floating world,  
tomorrow I may end as sea-wrack on the  
rough shore...*

Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693)

*If I reduce myself as a man, I get "my  
animate organism" and "my psyche", or  
myself as a psychophysical unity – in the  
latter, my personal Ego, who operates in  
this animate organism and, "by means  
of" it, in the "external world", who is  
affected by this world...*

Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1968, the Japanese athletics champion Tsuburaya Kōkichi committed suicide at the age of twenty-seven. His farewell notes were published in the press at the time, and the one he addressed to his parents, in which he confessed not only to the "pleasure" he felt when celebrating the New Year with them, but also his weariness with running, peaked the interest of Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) in particular. The latter was interested in the aesthetic quality<sup>1</sup> of an amateur's note, which he believed to be superior to his own writing, through its "beauty", "sincerity" and "sadness": "In the simple, plain style and in the context of the emotion-ridden note, the stereotyped phrase 'I enjoyed' is breathing with truly pure life. It creates a rhythm pervading the entire suicide note. It is beautiful, sincere, and sad."<sup>2</sup>

Beyond emphasizing the literary merit of the suicide note, however, the Japanese author's commentary also revealed interest in the "qualities" of the outlook of he who has decided to die, probably the only viewpoint that can offer extreme lucidity over the reality of things. Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927), one of the founders of modern Japanese literature, who committed suicide at 35, called it "the eyes of a dying man" (*matsugo no me*). Feeling that the "beast" within him was dying, or, put otherwise, that the strength to live was leaving him, Akutagawa rediscovered the world with a different eye. The last image of the world, imprinted on the retina of he who is about to leave it forever, became the true revelation of life:

I am living in a world of morbid nerves, clear and cold as ice... I do not know when I will summon up the resolve to kill myself. But nature is for me more

<sup>1</sup> See Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers and The Nature of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990), 198–199.

<sup>2</sup> Yasunari Kawabata, apud Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, 199.

beautiful than it has ever been before. I have no doubt that you will laugh at the contradiction, for here I love nature even when I am contemplating suicide. But nature is beautiful because it comes to my eyes in their last extremity.<sup>3</sup>

Clear headed observer and a born aesthete, Yasunari Kawabata openly confessed the admiration that the phrase "matsugo no me" ("the eyes of a dying man") stirred in him. He did so not only in the essay he wrote as a young man, *Matsugo no me* (1933), but also in his Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech (Stockholm, 1968), called *Utsukushii Nihon no Watashi (Japan the Beautiful and Myself)*. Kawabata admitted that, for those brought up in the faith of Buddha, the concept of death is completely different from that of the West – in fact, death means to live, since there is no art superior to it: "Among those who give thought to things, is there anyone who does not think of suicide?"<sup>4</sup> The Japanese author considered that, beyond all doubt, these "eyes of a dying man" are the only ones that can see the "sadness" of daily reality, turned to rustling crystals of beauty. Thus, it is not at all surprising that Yasunari Kawabata would devote his entire work to "eyes in their last extremity" and to the affinity that these can distinguish between "sadness" and "beauty". For example, in the novel *Snow Country (Yuki Guni, 1935–1937, 1947)*, the voice of a heroine can be heard "so beautifully it becomes sad," while in the novel *House of the Sleeping Beauties (Nemureru Bijo, 1961)*, a female body moves "to tears" with "so much beauty". In truth, Kawabata translated into words what Japanese aesthetics calls *mono no aware*, or the "pathos" caused by the beauty of simple and transient things: "In traditional Japanese aesthetics, 'pathos' referred to an emotional impact that emerged when a person was confronted with an immense cosmic power and was sadly made aware of the mutability of human life."<sup>5</sup>

Before the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) the standards of Japanese intellectuals had been represented by the studies of Chinese classics, although a reaction to this movement quickly appeared in the form of a nationalist ideology which had Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) as an illustrious representative. Motoori Norinaga, later considered the most important savant of "national studies" (*kokugaku*), attempted to counterbalance the "Chinese spirit" (*karagokoro*) and the "Indian" (*hotokegokoro*) with a "Japanese spirit" (*yamatogokoro*) through the formula known as *mono no aware* ("the beauty of simple and transient things"). This would symbolise the literary ideal of the first Japanese novel, *Genji Monogatari (The Tale of Genji)*, written by Murasaki Shikibu in the 11<sup>th</sup> century: "A voir, à entendre

<sup>3</sup> Ryūnoske Akutagawa, apud Yasunari Kawabata, "Discurs" (Discourse), *Tribuna* 36 (1970): 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, 200–201.

quelque chose, on pense que c'est émouvant, triste, etc. Ce mouvement du coeur, c'est précisément éprouver le *mono no aware*."<sup>6</sup>

In Japanese culture and mentality, *aware* expresses the nostalgia of the transient, but it also becomes an answer to the impermanence of perceiving a sound, a gesture or a season. This is the mournful background claiming all literary works signed by Yasunari Kawabata.<sup>7</sup> The loneliness, death and beauty of this "floating world" (*ukiyo*), in which man is meant to live his life, were also carefully explored by the Japanese author in the novel published in 1961, titled *Nemureru Bijo* (*House of the Sleeping Beauties*). Kawabata replied to the present proudly by using the past, attempting to translate the "mysterious beauty of the world" (*yūgenbi*) into words: "At the same time, he can appreciate the visual charm (*en*) of beauty and convey the deepest mystery of *yūgen*."<sup>8</sup>

The title of the novel, *Nemureru Bijo*, is extremely ambiguous – it follows a tradition that preferred euphemisms to direct naming. For example, *nakunaru* ("to disappear") is favoured in Japanese when speaking about death, rather than the verb *shinu* ("to die"); *kabuki* (歌舞伎), which would literally translate into "the art of song and dance", although the initial meaning was "debauchery" or "abandonment", as it was believed that women seduced men by dancing and singing; *shunga* (春画), the Japanese equivalent for erotic (even pornographic) woodblock prints, whose literal translation would, in fact, be "painting of the spring"; or *baishunfu* (売春婦), a name used for pleasure houses, but whose literal translation would be "woman who sells the spring". The verb *nemureru* means "to sleep", while *bijo*, composed of two ideographs: 美 (*bi*, "beauty") + 女 (*jo* "woman"), could find an English correspondent in the noun "beauty". Yet, seeing that the Japanese noun does not bear the grammatical category of number and determination (definite or indefinite), the term could also be translated with "a beautiful woman", "some beautiful women" or "the beauty", and "the literal translation of the title would become "the beauty/the beauties who sleeps/who sleep". But it does not speak of Sleeping Beauty, fallen under a spell and waiting for a prince, but of the young bodies of virgins in artificial sleep, alongside whom lonely old men spend their nights, admiring them or resting beside them. Physical pleasure is replaced by dreaming or reverie.

Eguchi, the protagonist of the novel, is 67 years old and visits this unwonted house with no signboard above its door, which shelters the sleeping beauties. He calls on them five times, in a time interval spanning the end of a year and the

<sup>6</sup> Motoori Norinaga, apud Kōjin Karatani, "D'un dehors à l'autre. Kawabata et Takeda Taijun," in *Littérature Japonaise Contemporaine. Essais*, ed. Patrick De Voss (Bruxelles: Editions Labor, 1989), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gwenn Boardman Petersen, *The Moon in the Water. Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979), 155.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

beginning of the next, and the sleeping beauties aid him in connecting the present, through sight, touch or smell, to the memory of the past. As such, *Nemureru Bijo* is not a love story, but rather the tale of a soul that alternately emphasises its *animus* (masculine) and *anima* (feminine) components. This is achieved through reverie, a reverie without drama, without events or complications, offering Eguchi “feminine rest”,<sup>9</sup> or true rest. Although, in Japanese, one cannot speak about the “feminine” or “femininity” of words, since the Japanese noun is deprived of the grammatical category of gender, dreams and reverie, daydreams, illusions and memories seem to set the protagonist's states of mind in the feminine as well. Within him dreams his own *anima*:

More than sorrow or loneliness, it was the bleakness of old age, as if frozen to him. And it changed to pity and tenderness for the girl who sent out the smell of young warmth. Possibly only for purposes of turning away a cold sense of guilt, the old man seemed to feel music in the girl's body. It was a music of love. As if he wanted to flee, he looked at the four walls, so covered with velvet that there might have been no exit.<sup>10</sup>

For Eguchi, reverie is not a fallen dream, lacking mystery, but a spiritual event, through the intervention of conscience. If nocturnal dreaming seems connected to censorship and repression, reverie does not cancel the lucidity which makes Eguchi admit to himself that visiting the house of sleeping beauties is a story that he only tells himself. Through reverie, a personal world is born, in which Eguchi sinks carefully, but fearlessly. A beautiful world that offers the ego a close, friendly non-ego,<sup>11</sup> with the help of which the ego connected to the world of the real is freed from the function of the real through reverie. It frees itself by assimilating it and determines Eguchi to create what he sees: “Was that why, in ‘the house of the sleeping beauties’, as he lay with the girl's arm over his eyes, the image of the camellia in full bloom and the other flowers came to him?”<sup>12</sup>

The dreamy loneliness in which he finds himself helps the protagonist, who is preparing for death, enter a cosmic reverie in which memories take the form of paintings, and the sets come before the drama. His remembrances are neither sad nor happy, but laden with a halo of melancholy:

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<sup>9</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei* (The poetics of reverie), trans. Luminița Brăileanu, preface Mircea Martin (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2005), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Yasunari Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, trans. Edward Seidensticker, introd. Yukio Mishima (New York: Kodansha International, 2004), 21.

<sup>11</sup> See Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 53.

It was a house frequented by old men who could no longer use women as women; but Eguchi, on his third visit, knew that to sleep with such a girl was a fleeting consolation, the pursuit of a vanished happiness in being alive. And were there among them old men who secretly asked to sleep forever beside a girl who had been put to sleep? There seemed to be a sadness in a young girl's body that called up in an old man a longing for death.<sup>13</sup>

As it unfolds, the entire novel shapeshifts into dream from reverie and into reverie from dream. And, since the past invoked by reverie is not a “stable” one,<sup>14</sup> it does not have the same features or the same nuances when recalled to memory. The past remembered by Eguchi is not just one of perception, but also of imagination, while reverie idealises both its subject and its dreamer.

At the end of his life, Eguchi lives his own reverie, in which the first sleeping beauty he meets, whom he likens to “life itself”, reminds him of the first love of his youth, a love lost and regretted. The strong scent of the second maiden reminds him of his daughters, especially of his youngest. When travelling alongside her to the Tsubaki temple, the two had seen a 400 year old camellia tree, in which flowers of five different colours bloomed. The third sleeping beauty he meets is young and inexperienced, wild and uneducated, reminding him of a relatively recent extramarital affair, which had made him think that it might have been his last relationship with a young woman. In the fourth night, spent in the company of a girl smelling of sweet perfume, he remembers a kiss that had happened forty years before, but also stirs demonic thoughts in him. On the fifth and last night, he meets two girls who somehow reflect the contrast of light and darkness – one of them is small and white-skinned, radiantly beautiful, while the other is dark-skinned, cold and oily to the touch, bringing back memories of his mother's death and preparing the end of Eguchi's experience in that house.

This time as well, Eguchi had taken his sleeping pills, but, when he awakes, he realises that the dark-skinned girl is dead. Immediately summoned, the house matron ceaselessly denies the death of the girl, asking Eguchi to return to the other maiden, since the house rules do not permit leaving at such an early hour. But allusions to a possibly manifested death have already been made in the text through the use of the numeral “four / *shi*” (the fourth night, the fourth girl), a homophone for “death” in Japanese. Also notable is the white (mourning colour in Japan) butterfly he glimpses in the reverie called forth by the company of the first beauty, the white of the camellia flower in the presence of the second girl or the multitude of butterflies in the company of the fourth. However, the mystics of harmony<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> See Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont S.A, 1982), 254.

contained by the number five (five colours of the rainbow, of the camellias, five senses, five nights) will enrich the symbolism of death which burdens number four. What seemed to be life has gained the connotation of death, and, conversely, what seemed like death has turned into life.

Eguchi's reverie is the "offering of an hour"<sup>16</sup> which knows the plenitude of the spirit, a reverie that feeds on itself. Yet, the quiet of a feminine essence met in the house of the nameless sleeping beauties is combined with the sadness of the "floating world", creating images of older or newer memories. At one point, the camellia flower becomes the "direct object"<sup>17</sup> of reverie. Eguchi placed the world under the spell of this object, to be found nowhere else: "Camellias are said to be bad luck because the flowers drop whole from the stem, like severed heads; but the double blossoms on this great tree, which was four hundred years old and bloomed in five different colours, fell petal by petal. Hence it was called the 'petal-dropping' camellia."<sup>18</sup>

In Japan, *ukiyo* (浮世), or 'the floating world', becomes an interest theme in woodcut and literature in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, illustrating courtesans and tea houses (brothels), actors and *sumo* wrestlers, merchants and *ronins* (masterless samurai), the shop, the street, the theatre. The world of pleasure is that of a "floating" world, unshadowed by moral or intellectual preoccupations.<sup>19</sup> Writers and painters admire beauty and life wherever they can be found, especially in the world of fleeting pleasures, of unwritten laws, known to those interested in them, a world that has sidestepped the supremacy of strict Confucianism. *Ukiyo* reminds one of the brevity and uncertainty of life, although by the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it had already acquired the acceptance of "modern", "fashionable", or even "quick".<sup>20</sup> Racy gossip was called "*ukiyo* stories", while songs interpreted by courtesans were known as "*ukiyo* tunes". Ultimately, *ukiyo* means a life of pleasure, without concern for the future. In this "floating" world, life is a multitude of meetings and partings, and Yasunari Kawabata reascribes the meaning of the term in the novel *Nemureru Bijo* with the lucidity of memories stirred by "the eyes of a dying man." Allowing himself to drift on the currents of life, Eguchi tastes the pleasures offered by the company of the girls or the flowers around him. And, as he recalls them during his reveries, his imminent end confers a different value to his remembrances, regaining the Buddhist sense of the term, which suggests the mournful passing of worldly things towards death. Despite the fact that it is a hedonistic, materialistic attitude, directed preferentially towards the concreteness of life, as suggested by the bodies of the five

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<sup>16</sup> Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Howard Hibbett, *The Floating World in Japanese Fiction* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Hibbett, 1996), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 11.

beauties, it seems to be the somewhat static axis of the whole novel. The sleeping beauties move in their sleep, whether quiet or haunted by nightmares, and their lascivious movements betray energy and temperament, even impulsiveness, vanity, shyness or coquetry. The gala of Eguchi's experience, remembered during his reveries in the presence of the sleeping beauties, occupies the span of an entire lifetime, and it is his approaching death itself that seems to endow it with uniqueness.

Within a dialectic of light and shadow, Eguchi experiences the manifestation of the human, but, in reverie, life and death somehow become terms that are too direct. As a result, only the metaphysics of night<sup>21</sup> could cancel out the possible borders between existence and nonexistence, between ego and non-ego, between day and night... If sometimes the night, in opposition to the day, is simply a sign of a dark heart and of the hopelessness of a lonely soul, here it becomes a prologue to the aforementioned day. It is ineffable and mysterious, allowing lost memories to resurface in the heart,<sup>22</sup> the same as sunset mist, while the sleep that accompanies the night opens a path towards rediscovery of the maternal home and femininity. While light favours ascensional schematics, nocturne opacity makes way for intimate descent, and night reverie dyes the drapes that cover the house of sleeping beauties blood-red. Eguchi's memories are steeped with the colours of the rainbow that accompanied him, sometime during his youth, on his journey to Kyoto with the first girl he loved – this remembrance opening the series of reminiscences in the house of sleeping beauties begins.

However, all the visual remembrances that happen during these visits at the house of sleeping beauties unfold over the background given by the roar or the silence of the nearby sea. This background amplifies the peace of reverie and leads Eguchi to a state of restfulness given by the "good of anima".<sup>23</sup>

The high waves were near and seemed a great distance away, partly because here on the land there was no wind. He saw the dark floor of the night of the dark sea.<sup>24</sup>

In the Japanese novel as well, the sea seems to be that "feminised and maternal abyss",<sup>25</sup> the archetype of descent and return to original sources of happiness; as, in fact, openness towards the world happens during childhood through a "revolution of the soul".<sup>26</sup> Reverie cannot be narrated; it only creates guiding moods that lead through one's own self, liberating it from the past. As such,

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<sup>21</sup> Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> See Gilbert Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului* (The anthropological structures of the imaginary) (Bucharest: Univers Publishing House, 1977), 271.

<sup>23</sup> Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> See Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, 278.

<sup>26</sup> Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 107.



for Eguchi, memory seems to be “a disorderly crowd of recollections”<sup>27</sup> which need to be reinvented here and there: “[...] Beyond the path they climbed a blue stream, where a waterfall roared down, its spray catching the sunlight. In the spray the girl stood naked. The facts were different, but in the course of time Eguchi's mind had made them so.”<sup>28</sup>

But reverie is also a “polyphony of senses”<sup>29</sup> through which the spiritual void can be banished. From visual, olfactory and tactile points of view, Eguchi rediscovers the memory of a lost time, and the association of senses leads him to a “personal season”.<sup>30</sup> He spends this season in the house of the sleeping beauties, a privileged space that has integrated, through thoughts, reminiscences, and dreams, an old man in search of sleep similar to that of the maidens with whom he spends his nights.

Eguchi sees his hand touching the bodies of the beauties and thus becomes aware of his own corporality and perceptive organ. However, since it senses distance, sight is not enough to achieve realisation of the body, and only touch, through the closeness it acquires, makes this possible. From that of a stranger, his body has become his own, his sensations have been localised, and the sheltering house has acquired history, ensuring not only physical security for the guest, but also moral safety. From an exterior, invisible entity, for Eguchi the abstract body has become a concrete physique, interior and visible in its corporeality. The body, as a reality from which man cannot distance himself, is firstly expressed as a physique endowed with different sensory fields (visual, tactile, auditory, etc.). Eguchi perceives the things around him through his own body, in the specific sensory fields, and the sensations he experiences seem to later be constituted within the features of those things themselves.

In turn, the sleeping beauties do not seem to possess bodies, but they are the body itself, becoming the face of another and offering new openings for non-verbal language through this “interface”<sup>31</sup> of the carnal. If verbal language conveys information, body language expresses an “interpersonal attitude”,<sup>32</sup> emphasising the reaction of a subject towards what he is saying, hearing or feeling. The expressive or emotional function of the body as language is strongly exploited by reverie, since the dreamer contemplates the worlds through the senses, without the “distance”<sup>33</sup> that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>28</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>31</sup> See Cristian Ciocan, *Întruchipări. Studiu de fenomenologie a corporalității* (Embodiments. A study of the phenomenology of the corporality) (Bucharest, Humanitas, 2013), 284.

<sup>32</sup> Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării. Corp, imagine și relaționare* (The communication empire. Body, image and relationships) (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2011), 21.

<sup>33</sup> Bachelard, *Poetica reveriei*, 179.

marks the world when perceived genuinely: "There could be no greater happiness than thus drifting off into a sweet sleep. He wanted to do just that. He slid quietly towards her. As though in reply, she turned gently toward him, her arms extended under the blanket as if to embrace him."<sup>34</sup>

The rapport between one body and the other is complex and plurivocal in the Japanese novel. If, in general, a meeting between two bodies leads to an erotic relationship,<sup>35</sup> and if viewing a nude acquires, *par excellence*, such significance, in the case of Kawabata, however, an ethical relationship of an ascetical type is established through the nature of the context. Although, normally, the ethical neutralises or inhibits the eros,<sup>36</sup> "erotic ethics" may be recognised when it comes to the Japanese author. Here, the nudity one usually associates with lust has been replaced by the metaphysics of death.

In *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, nudity lies under the sign of fragility and evanescence, while the feminine prolongs the mystery of a world unseen to the naked eye, but visible by means of reverie and "the eyes of a dying man". Nudity and night, mysteriously connected to femininity, bring to the foreground reverie and the memories it triggers, opening them within the phenomenological dimensions of fecundity and filiality, maternity and paternity. Somehow provoking the ensigns of tradition, the sleeping nudes in the Japanese novel exploit the positivity of nudity. Indeed, the beauties seem to feel comfortable in their own skin, although, through the sincerity of Eguchi's gaze, these nudes could be seen dressed in the pure beauty of youthful innocence. For Kawabata, to be dressed seems to mean to be caught in visual form, in a determined mundane context, since, in the outside world, the other becomes an "object" when dressed.<sup>37</sup> In the case of the Japanese author, the definition of the body/physique ends with the tension of a phrasing that joins nature and culture: if the physique seems to be regarded as a mass of fragile, sensitive, ephemeral flesh (*ukiyo*), the body seems to relate to cultural meanings (*mono no aware*).

The existence of man is corporeal, but submitted to constant social and cultural treatment,<sup>38</sup> so that each society, within its vision of the world, possesses a singular cognition with regard to the body: "The modern notion of body represents an effect of the individualistic structure of the social field, a consequence of the

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<sup>34</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 40

<sup>35</sup> See Ciocan, *Întruchipări*, 304.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Ibid., 311.

<sup>37</sup> See Thomas Laqueur, *Corpul și sexul. De la greci la Freud* (Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud), trans. Narcis Zărnescu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. David Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului și modernitatea* (The anthropology of the body and modernity) (Timișoara: Amacord Publishing House, 2002), 5.

rupture of solidarity that conjoins the person to a collective and to the cosmos through a web of correspondences where everything is connected.”<sup>39</sup>

Representing a symbolic construction and not a reality in itself,<sup>40</sup> in Japanese society as well, the body does not appear as an indisputable given, but as an effect of a social and cultural construction. Thus, in Japanese culture, the body has for centuries been only a stand for clothing, somehow generating an asymmetrical relationship between it and the soul. If Greek and Roman art propounded a beauty ideal based on corporal nudity, the Japanese artist was uncertain when converting the three-dimensional perspective into the two-dimensional perspective, even in the *shunga* erotic woodblock prints. He preferred to dress the body in countless garments, until it nearly disappeared, while the face remained uncovered but was so stylised that it seemed to be a mask.<sup>41</sup> Within a Confucian ethical tradition, which projected man as a holder of social status, clothes represented the first clue in this direction, while the nude would certainly have seemed vulgar<sup>42</sup> in such a social context.

But the absence of the nude in Japanese art also emphasises the fact that the body was not seen, in this part of the world, as a form realised through the proportional balance of component parts, as was the case with the Greeks and Romans. Nor did it turn into the carnal, becoming the opposite of the spirit and the source of evil, as in Early Christianity, and neither did it transmute into a symbol of the sacred, as in the case of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>43</sup> Strongly influenced by Confucian ethics, Japanese tradition has stressed upon society rather than nature, showing greater interest in political power rather than sexual power. It also gave priority to history rather than mathematics. As there is no motivation to justify the idealisation of the nude independently from its social role, the feminine ideal (*bijin-zo*) shaped itself under the influence of the Chinese pattern from the Tang Dynasty (618–907). In the Heian era (9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century) it implied a round face, with full cheeks, strong eyebrows, narrow eyes, a small mouth, showing the entire body,<sup>44</sup> but covered with many garments from head to toe, completely hiding its shape. Thus, the Japanese women in the scrolls that illustrate *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*), from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, are dressed in *jūnihitoe*, ceremonial clothing that consisted of 12 overlapping kimonos. Their faces show the stereotypical expression of the *hikime kagibana* style, with a straight nose and narrow eyes, drawn in a few lines, while the hands are only slightly exposed. These are female faces that can

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ibid., 11.

<sup>41</sup> See Shuichi Kato, *Japan. Spirit and Form*, introd. Roger Goepper, trans. Junko Abe and Leza Lowitz (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1994), 11.

<sup>42</sup> See Ibid., 13.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Ibid., 160.

<sup>44</sup> See Ibid., 165.

express emotions, but they are not at all personalised, since the feminine ideal of the period is given by a faceless person, reduced to clothing. However, Buddhism cannot be held responsible for such an attitude, as it introduces the notion of beauty in the human body.<sup>45</sup> Neither can one reproach Confucianism for the attitude, since the doctrine, albeit promoting the practice of abstinence, will influence Japanese society only later in time. Thus, the only available explanation is a cultural one, connected to the emphasis on the social significance of clothing. The portrayal of beauties continues in Japanese art with the *Bijinga* current ("portraits of beauties"), which appears at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and whose heroines are no longer the beauties at the imperial court, but dancers, prostitutes, the wives and daughters of merchants, or *kabuki* actors performing female roles. Therefore, the groundwork is laid for *ukiyo-e* ("images of the floating world"), or the Japanese woodblock print. It is a product of the culture specific to the Edo period (1600–1868), becoming famous throughout Japan during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its subjects are beautiful women and red light districts (pleasure districts), and it uses a special lighting technique: "In terms of color, the use of the tonal shading techniques is absent in *ukiyo-e* prints. Light is emitted from one source and spreads evenly over the entire picture with no sharp contrast between light and dark tones."<sup>46</sup>

As such, Japanese society seems to have first discovered the body and only later, the physique. Late preoccupations with the individuality of the subject led to art that concentrated directly on the person and on the refining of feature representation, where man came to enclose himself in his own physique:

In community type societies, where the meaning of existence marks fidelity towards the group, the cosmos, and nature, the body does not exist as an element of individuation because the individual is not singled out from the group. At most, he represents a singularity in the differentiated harmony of the group. [...] The body of modernity, which results from the recoil of popular traditions and the apparition of Western individualism, marks the frontier between one individual and the other, the closing of the subject within himself.<sup>47</sup>

Against this background, the novels of Yasunari Kawabata intervene, revitalising the mystery of the body and reactivating the corporeal dimension as a place of beauty and death, not as a machine or a mechanical toy. Furthermore, the author supports the phenomenological perspective, arguing that man is inseparable

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>47</sup> Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului*, 21.

from his body, which cannot be considered a “circumstantial possession”, since it embodies man’s very being in the world.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the Japanese author calls upon the nudity of the sleeping beauties in an attempt to prove that existing does not mean owning a body as an attribute, for, in this case, death would mean very little; nothing more than losing an item, to be precise: “The ambiguity of the notion of body is a consequence of the ambiguity of man’s embodiment: the issues of existing and having a body.”<sup>49</sup> With Kawabata’s narrative, the geography of the body and the physique changes in Japanese literature. The body no longer favours the mouth as an organ of avidity or of contact with others through speech, and the eyes become the centre of interest. Sight now acquires the significance of distance, authorising communication but also keeping the “reserved attitude”<sup>50</sup> of the speaker. The body turns into the physique that becomes a mediator between the subject and the world, participating in the sensory awareness of the world. Since their eyes are closed, the beauties keep Eguchi from the possibility of discovering them. Yet, if their eyes cannot speak, nor be read, their bodies are free to express themselves. A seeker of emotion, Eguchi needs sight to anchor himself in the presence of another, but he is refused and this is precisely why reverie is possible. The domination of unidirectional sight allows Eguchi to appropriate the space that surrounds him and makes way for the natural association of the sleeping maidens and life memories. Although nothing dramatic seems to happen as the story unfolds, the internal conflict of the narrative falls on visual-tactile and visual-olfactory rapports in the construction of the hero’s corporeality. The interference between sensory fields does not promote the certainty of reality as much as it does the favourable conditions for reverie, in the pre-reflective experience of insomnia. Although every object seen is simultaneously touched, what does “seeing” mean, to Kawabata? Touching passively or actively? In what sensory degree? Intentionally or not?

In the house of sleeping beauties, with a touch that seems to be existential, sight then associates with scent, as extremes of the sensory hierarchy, scent being the sensory stimulus which attempts to communicate possibly the most intimate and least transmissible facet of the physique. The sleeping beauties have turned into an olfactory cover which signals their presence in the world. Their physiques have become scents, or “the sensory part of the soul”,<sup>51</sup> and the sensations that Eguchi experiences in their presence, the emotions, gestures, attitudes that control his interactions with the sleeping beauties happen with a high degree of variation. In a society somehow based on the absence of the physique, where rites of avoidance prevail (not to touch another, not to expose one’s nude body, to suppress expression

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

of feelings), it is easy to understand the privileged position that sight occupies, as a method of distancing oneself. However, Kawabata endows it with a particular connotation that does not remove the sensory fields of touch and scent, but brings them closer. Eguchi is a contemplative subject with an aestheticising psychology, who enjoys the freedom to dream. He recognises the beauty of the world he contemplates, which he has come to know through the senses:

He locked the door, drew the curtain, and looked down at the girl. She was not pretending. Her breathing was of the deepest sleep. He caught his breath. She was more beautiful than he had expected. And her beauty was not the only surprise. She was young too. She lay on her left side, her face toward him. He could not see her body – but she would not yet be twenty. It was as if another heart beat its wings in old Eguchi's chest.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, to Kawabata, the body also seems to be the link between man and time, in the same way that the physique links the human being and death. In other circumstances, the physiques of the maidens could not be conceived in the presence of helpless old men. However, since sleep suspends the depreciative gaze of another, the personal consciousness of aging is somehow delayed and old age ultimately proves itself to only be a feeling. Perhaps, in some way, the sleep of the maidens is a blessing, as the physique consumed by the passing of time is not exposed to the gaze of another in an unfavourable light. The aged physique retreats within itself, closes itself inside its own territory. His relationship with his own aging reminds Eguchi of the precariousness and fragility of the human condition in this “floating” world. To avoid an increasingly restricted and devalued self, Eguchi frequents the house of sleeping beauties. With their help, through “the eyes of a dying man”, he attempts to keep his senses awake. Proust considered that, out of all human realities, old age remains the most abstract for the longest period of time.<sup>53</sup> Yet, in this house, Eguchi recognises the passing of time, and the physiques of the sleeping beauties re-ascribe value to the consistency of life, for only an instant. At the same time, they offer him the possibility to reconnect with the world, from a certain point of view. The physique as such and the discursively constituted physique, situated between “seeing” and “imagining”, originate in the various obligations of the observer when in the position of looking (touching) and imagining:

If she were to awaken upon such a slight motion, then the mystery of the place, which old Kiga, the man who had introduced him to it, had described as 'like sleeping with a secret Buddha', would be gone. For the old men who

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<sup>52</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Apud Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului*, 143.

were customers the woman could 'trust', sleeping with a beauty who would not awaken was a temptation, an adventure, a joy they could trust. Old Kiga had said to Eguchi that only when he was beside a girl who had been put to sleep could he himself feel alive.<sup>54</sup>

In European tradition, the two constitutive "realities" of the human being, the body and the spirit, were initially coined by Greek philosophy in a strict axiological and ontological hierarchy,<sup>55</sup> and the physique was considered from essentially distinct comprehensive angles: metaphysical, theological and scientific. Seen as an "instrument" of the soul, the body was ontologically subordinated to it, while the soul (rationality, thought) had to "master" the body and "free" it from the yoke of primal instincts. Furthermore, from an ontological point of view, the soul was regarded as the eternal "true being", while the body represented the "transitory being", fragile and perishable. Later on, Christian theology assumes the Greek duality, but affirms the "deification" of the body, so that biological and medical sciences would see the physique as a perfect machine created by nature. As such, from the "metaphysical depreciation" of corporeality, there is a passage to a paradoxical theoretical position of "theological restoration", which also led to a "deepening study" of the subject from biological and medical perspectives.<sup>56</sup>

However, in Yasunari Kawabata's narrative, the usual dualism does not rip the body from the soul, but offers them countless hypostases, depending on circumstances. It is not the "body" object that immediately preoccupies, but the experience of sensations through the body and the existential connotation that it could receive. If in good working condition, the body turns into the physique without particularly standing out. Special circumstances are needed for it to be noticed, and one of these is the process of aging. Eguchi discovers his body in a particular way, not representing it artistically or looking at himself in a mirror, but through the sight of the bodies of sleeping beauties. The emotions caused by the visual sensory field are combined with tactile and olfactory sensations. "The eyes of a dying man" have the suppleness of associated perception, which permits the protagonist to react to the multiplicity and volatility of images in the immediate reality or in reverie. They are perfectly integrated in the movement of Eguchi's body or the bodies of the sleeping beauties, in order to construct "more direct sensations".<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> See Ciocan, *Întruchipări*, 14–15.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> See Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Trupuri de femei – priviri de bărbăți. Sociologia sânilor goi* (Female bodies – male gaze. The sociology of naked breasts), trans. Violeta Barna-Nathan (Bucharest: Nemira, 1998), 27.

[Her pulse] was gentle and regular. Her quiet breath was somewhat slower than Eguchi's. From time to time the wind passed over the house, but it no longer carried the sound of approaching winter. The roar of the waves against the cliff softened while rising. Its echo seemed to come up from the ocean as music sounding in the girl's body, the beating in her breast, and the pulse at her wrist added to it. In time with the music, a pure white butterfly danced past his closed eyelids. He took his hand from her wrist. Nowhere was he touching her. The scent of her breath, of her body, of her hair, were none of them strong.<sup>58</sup>

Preoccupied with his body, Eguchi gives his existence a physique. When he rediscovers the reserve of emotions he had stored during his lifetime, he tries to dissipate anxiety by relating with another through data that refers to the body. Within the sphere of his emotion, he analyses not only *what* he perceives, but also *how* he perceives his meetings with the sleeping maidens. The world itself seems to have disappeared and Eguchi, now concentrating on the reflexive method of perceiving his own acts and sensations, manages to gain closeness to his personal ego within the body he had regained as a psycho-physical unit. But this search causes the divine to irrupt in the man,<sup>59</sup> and the reverie regarding bodily beauty somehow brings about the sacralisation of the body:

He had seen it at an inn by a river in Kanazawa. It had been on a night of snow flurries. So stuck had he been by the cleanness that he had held his breath and felt tears welling up. He had not seen such cleanness in the women of all the decades since; and he had come to think that he understood all cleanness, that cleanness in secret places was the girl's own property. He tried to laugh the notion away, but it became a fact in the flow of longing, and it was still a powerful memory, not to be shaken from the old Eguchi.<sup>60</sup>

Eguchi becomes aware of the fact that his presence in the world is determined by his body, that he acts upon the world through his body. In the same way, the world acts upon him through his very body. Phenomena of the body, like nudity or old age, constantly define human existence and configure one's way of being in the world. Starting from itself, the physique finally becomes a body again, passing to a higher level of significance. In the case of the Japanese author, that is an aesthetic level: "Probably there was no one in the world besides Eguchi who knew of

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<sup>58</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului*, 169.

<sup>60</sup> Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, 29.



that incomparable cleanness, and with his death, not far away now, it would quite disappear from the world."<sup>61</sup>

Yasunari Kawabata committed suicide on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1972, without leaving a note. An apparent mystery, but his death seems to confirm his delicacy of senses associated with sensitivity to beauty. As he himself affirms in the lecture held at Hawaii University (May 1969), a short time before his death, his purpose in life as a person and as a writer seems to have borne the mark of revealing the beauty of the "floating world" one can find everywhere. It is a world that can be glimpsed in the light of a tropical morning or in regular objects at close quarters:

And yet I discovered, by means of the morning light, the beauty of drinking glasses on a terrace restaurant. I saw this beauty distinctly. I encountered this beauty for the first time. I thought that I had never seen it anywhere until then. Is not precisely this kind of encounter the very essence of literature and also of human life itself? If I say this, is it too much of a leap, too much of an exaggeration? Perhaps so, but then again, perhaps not. In my seventy years of life until now it was here that I first discovered and become conscious of this kind of light which is given off by drinking glasses.<sup>62</sup>

Yasunari Kawabata is a contemplative subject who constructs reality, an eternally unstable truth, through literature that creates meanings. He constantly recognises the saddened beauty of the world (*mono no aware*) revealed by "the eyes of a dying man" (*matsugo no me*), which they constantly affect. But the Japanese author not only sees the world beautifully. He also prolongs this beauty, reuniting, through literature, all the fragments of the tangible universe of the "floating world" (*ukiyo*) in a universe of eternal beauty (*yūgenbi*).

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 30–31.

<sup>62</sup> Yasunari Kawabata, *The Existence and Discovery of Beauty*, trans. V. H. Viglielmo (Tokyo: The Mainichi Newspapers, 1969), 19.