

SUBTLE *MISE-EN-SCÈNES* OF THE MIDDLE AGES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this paper the author compares the concept of a Noh play, Matsukaze, with a Slovak altar painting from Košice Cathedral. The article uses Japanese Noh, where stage continuity has been preserved up until the present day, to reconstruct European medieval stage practices reflected in 15<sup>th</sup> century painting. Referring to the platonic tradition, the second speech represents a corrective to the first, thus legitimizing a sense of passion in the process leading to catharsis, or enlightenment.

**Key words:** *mise-en-scène*; medieval; gesture; passion; enlightenment.

*For Haruo Nishino and Reiko Yamanaka*

## Speech one

Drawing inspiration from Pavel Florenskij<sup>2</sup> on the nature of the medium and extending his reflections on icon, oil painting and engraving to include stained-glass window, we find that the eventual comparison of stained glass and poster overestimates the parameter of two-dimensionality and is of little significance. A poster's job is to inform and provoke a response of those who are external to the event. In a cathedral, this function is performed not by stained glass but by the sculpted decoration of the exterior.

As such, a stained-glass window is dead and dark from the outside—it does not speak. It is meant for those who are inside, in the church. It is the exterior light *going through* a translucent material that brings the latter to life. In the universe of a gothic church, stained-glass windows are complementary to panel painting—the West's successor of the icon that comes alive by *reflecting* light. That the painting has successfully defended its position within the art of the cathedral is surely due, among other things, to window's dependence on natural light.

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<sup>2</sup> "The individual artist [...] may not be thinking about this, yet his fingers and his hand are – through collective sense, the sense of culture as such" Florenskij (1995, 194).

A comparative analogy between stained glass and film (cf. Faulstich 1996, 169) seems more apt for our purpose. Both media share a narrative dimension and a relationship with light<sup>3</sup>—a narrative only comes alive when we are enclosed in darkness or, find ourselves inside a rather darker space. The major difference between stained glass and film seems to lie in their diverging sources of light.

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The following reflections will seek to dispense with updating analogies and the comparison will be made on a synchronous basis; by shortening the temporal axis, we will be able to cover more space and focus on solving similar issues in diverse media in order to establish what theatre and the visual arts have in common.

Even though we are limited by an absence of continuity in stage productions<sup>4</sup> that would be comparable with the Far East, the very existence of sculptures with movable heads or hands shows that sculptures have been used in a theatre-like manner.

Additionally, in art history we find examples of transfer between paintings of the passion play cycle and stage productions of the Passion. The process of mutual inspiration between painting and theatre is documentable with respect to Christmas, the Magi, the Ascension, the Annunciation and other key events in the liturgical year (cf. Hlaváčová 2009).

These supports are much scarcer to find in the visual representations of the lives of saints, however. Notwithstanding the close proximity of artworks realised in the same visual canon, we can merely speculate that it was this transfer between theatre and the visual arts that produced a specific means of expression in both media and substantially shaped the nature of medieval painting. In a sense, a painted composition of dense meaning seems to have condensed the processuality of stage—fixing the development of a theatrical performance in time. This is also evident with themes where there is no record of stage production. Accordingly, the theatrological concept of “*mise-en-scène*” has entered the realm of the visual arts. Such *mise-en-scène*<sup>5</sup> represents, in figurative art, a manner of “unearthing, running *it* through a certain structure, arrangement or construction... in search of condensed being, its mystery” (Balthus 2010, 79).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “With its flashy images and frenzied technology, cinema is the very opposite of my painting, which strives to capture the hidden tension of things, the underlying struggle of beings, trying to intervene in time to suspend the latter’s devilish course. And yet, both share the common effort to explore and elucidate the world” (Balthus 2010, 95).

<sup>4</sup> There are few records of medieval stage productions in what is now Slovakia, and those that exist are often merely a single line. These are references in book-keeping entries of notable towns, including mining towns and favourite pilgrimage sites. According to such sources, it is reportedly known that passion plays were staged in Bratislava in 1439, 1477, 1494, 1519, 1520, 1539 and 1540. Unique evidence is provided by a list of *dramatis personae* of passion plays staged in Bardejov, dated 1439–1450 (cf. Cesnáková-Michalcová 1997, 7–8). Descriptions of medieval stage productions are extremely rare also in other parts of Europe and they differ in quality and scope.

<sup>5</sup> The title of this study uses the French term *mise-en-scène*, to the same effect.

<sup>6</sup> “When, at the height of mindless enthusiasm for abstraction, I was accused of being a figurative painter, it was beyond their imagination to conceive my painting as pursuing any intention other than to

Let us take a closer look at the *mise-en-scène* of a painting from the cycle dedicated to Saint Elisabeth of Hungary, in Košice Cathedral. This painting is part of the main altar retable dated 1474-1477. It portrays the female saint cutting the hair of a beggar. Leaving the other marginal figures in the painting aside, let us concentrate on the trinity constituted by Elisabeth, Louis and the beggar. The core of the message lies in the rhythm created by analogies of the postures of the depicted figures, so we will restrict ourselves to looking at the positions of their faces and heads.

Elisabeth's head is balanced off the vertical axis at exactly the same angle as Louis', and both faces have similarly harmonious and restrained expressions. The analogy of the physical stances of both figures conveys the spiritual intimacy of husband and wife—there is an underlying harmony which reassures that Louis consents with what Elisabeth's action.

In a realist perspective, the position of the beggar's head follows the movement of scissors. If read symbolically, however, the beggar's face is just about to achieve an inclination analogical to that of the couple's heads. Nonetheless, the beggar's head does take part in the painter's narrative, and its subtle deviation from the parallelism of the heads of the husband and wife conveys that—in the moment depicted at the painting—the beggar is discreetly waiting for Louis' consent with Elisabeth's dealing with the beggar and not her husband.

Both the husband and wife are looking at the beggar's face, which has a similarly calm expression and—despite its rougher features—displays a certain overall similarity with Louis'. By emphasising the form of the depicted figures, the painter reminds us of "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".

This interpretation conforms with that of Ivan Gerát<sup>7</sup>, who maintains that the beggar shares some of Christ's features, as depicted in other paintings of the Košice cycle. By making the beggar appear similar to Christ, the painter follows the Gospel's call to "see thy neighbour as thou see Christ".

The staging intelligence of the painter rests in his ability to abandon the cliché of the *ménage à trois* in order to embrace more subtle spiritual meanings instead.<sup>8</sup> In the unity of

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represent figures. The great masters of sacral and religious painting, both in the West and the East, are not merely figurative painters. Surely, they represent and refer to something; above all, however, they let you see some other place; their painting shifts the view towards the inside, being meditative and touching on fundamental questions of spirituality. It would be pointless if they were content with mere representation and not transcending to something new, not based on inner reverberations. Not unlike the sacred paintings of India, the great medieval painters refer to an inner theology; what they show is revelation; what is recorded on their canvases leads to an intimate reflection, a spiritual edification. To a metamorphosis" (Balthus 2010, 161).

<sup>7</sup> "Elisabeth and the beggar thus form a certain analogy to Mary and Jesus. This interpretation is upheld further by the fact that the beggar is frequently identified as Jesus in paintings of Works of Mercy based on the words of Matthew's gospel" (Gerát 2009, 201).

<sup>8</sup> "The point is always to be heading somewhere, moving something somewhere. (...) Every painting has its own accuracy to it – the moment when it is clear that the work has been done or when the painter finds his bad conscience cannot be pushed any further and his canvas is finished. This is the point when we might talk about beauty" (Balthus 2010, 115).



**Photo 1.** St. Elisabeth -Institute of Art History Archive

matrimonial love, Elisabeth represents the active and Louis the contemplative dimension of love.

More civil and minimalist means—and perhaps more convincing at that—are employed to convey an idea analogous to that in the painting of the Miracle of the Cross where Louis finds a cross lying on his matrimonial bed and not the stranger as suggested by scandalmongers. As it was indeed the beggar whom Elisabeth put into the bed, the miracle serves as a token of truth for Louis.

Unlike the Miracle of the Cross painting, the painter's mise-en-scène of the event from the life of Elisabeth of Hungary does away with supernatural occurrences. In this picture of the lady of the castle cutting the hair of a beggar, the artist uses Louis, Elisabeth's husband, to show us the mystery of merciful love. The deceitful simplicity of this mise-en-scène means that a much broader audience can identify with it—since it addresses our contemporaries today as well as those of the painter.

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Arguably the closest staged analogy to the subtle means of expression used in the Košice painting could be the masterpiece of the Japanese middle ages—the performance of *Matsukaze* from the repertoire of the Noh theatre.<sup>9</sup>

This study does not intend to deal exhaustively with *mise-en-scène* issues in European medieval painting; rather, it seeks to use a particular example to test the hypothesis that the effect of a painted composition can be elucidated by comparing it with a Japanese Noh performance—a stage phenomenon of uniquely continuous *mise-en-scène*. This is what the study hopes to introduce as something new. As theatrical performance is more complex and more difficult to underpin, both verbally and visually, and considering that Japanese theatre is rather unknown in our environment, a particular Noh performance will be dealt with more extensively here.

In general, Noh theatre only employs male performers and this genre is by nature analytical as opposed to psychological-realist: each gesture seems to convey a particular thought. There is no particular character for the audience to identify with; instead, the totality of events onstage penetrates deeper and deeper into the mind of the audience, in a way that is similar to when a person acts while observing his actions at the same time. Normally, the performer of *waki*, a travelling monk or a pilgrim, observes his mask-wearing partner performing the role of *sh(i)te*, representing a secular character. This is the Noh invariant.

The Noh variant *Matsukaze*<sup>10</sup> is unique in the optical doubling of the masked role of *sh(i)te* by introducing the role of *tsure*. Dramatically, however, *tsure* bears some properties of the *waki* character, which makes the *waki* role appear as if it is doubled. Accordingly, the traditional Noh structure becomes internalized and multiplied. At the same time—given the frugality of the Noh genre—the two masks are perceived as abundance. In this play, *waki* is passive, all the substantial things happen in his head as we see him dreaming onstage. The monk dreams—and is awake—while seated on his knees with his eyes open; the *waki* actor thus appears to resemble any theatregoer<sup>11</sup>, sharing with him the dream in which he seems to see himself.

Typically for the Noh, the plot is rather sparse. The subject of *Matsukaze* is a simple story, focusing on the relationship of two sisters Matsukaze (performed by *sh(i)te*) and Murasame (performed by *tsure*) to a dead man, without any intervening issue of feminine competition or *ménage à trois*. The two sisters do not symbolise a polygamous relationship or the confused heart of Yukihiro, their beloved courtier (who does not appear onstage at all); rather, they themselves are a metaphor of having dual sentiments within a single human heart.

Wind and rain are intertwined poetic images, and this intertwining is expressed in the sisterly bond between the two women romantically involved with a single man. Matsukaze (Pining wind) and Murasame (Autumn rain) are two faces, two aspects of a single being—

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<sup>9</sup> The most ancient surviving record of *Matsukaze* is the “utaibon preserved in the archive of Kanze-sōke [the head of the Kanze school of the Noh] from 1517” (Rumánek 2010, 178). It is a copy, as the original play was written by Kan’ami (1333-1384), whose text was revised to its definitive version by his son Zeami Motokijo (1363-1443).

<sup>10</sup> The title of the play *Matsukaze* is identical with the main hero Matsukaze.

<sup>11</sup> Originally, the audience viewed a Noh performance in the same physical position in which the *waki* is seated.

similar imagery is used by the Chinese poet Po Chü-i to describe two strings of the lute: “the great string is loud like autumn rain; the little string is urgent like the whisperings of lovers”.

The joy of a theatrical performance is based on the audience identifying with the character whose play we observe. The joy of doubling right onstage is even greater—a doubling which is entirely non-technical, as the sisters Matsukaze and Murasame have similar robes but their masks are slightly different.

In addition to the masks and costumes, the doubling extends to each element of the stage production. The key metaphor in the first half of the play is salt-gathering—the salt is two-fold: salt from the sea and salt on the sleeves wet with tears. And both are collected—the sea salt is swept into a brine cart with fans, while the tears are wept away with a weeping gesture (*shiori*). In the play *Matsukaze*, the weeping gesture is duplicated in a unique manner—it is made by both masked characters at once. At the highest pitch of the lament, Matsukaze hides her face behind a sleeve.

In stage design, the doubling is conveyed by pines. This particular play is unique in that it uses an actual pine tree located centre stage in a rectangular stand. The pine-tree occupies the middle of the performance area, which shifts the stage action towards the front edge of the stage. Notably, behind this actual pine tree, an enormous illusion of a pine tree is seen painted on the rear wall of the stage, which provides a background to all plays. In *Matsukaze* the pine tree on the rear wall (*yogo no matsu*)—by which the deities descend and which is the meeting point of worlds—is duplicated by the prop (*tsukurimono*) of an actual pine tree contained in a white structure. Obviously, as in any other Noh play, the bridgeway ending on the square-shaped stage is lined with three real pine trees. In this respect, *Matsukaze* is also an ode to the pine tree, which is associated with permanence and immortality.

The multiplication of images also occurs in the play itself—in reference to the reflections of the moon of which is said to be one, despite the multitude of reflections:

The moon is one,  
reflections two<sup>12</sup>,  
three the brimming tide,  
fo(u)r/ tonight we load our wagon with the moon”<sup>13</sup>

So far, we have been analyzing *Matsukaze* in terms of doubling. As our comparison relies, in both cases, on the spatial relations of composition and the characters’ gestures, let us take a look at a variant of the Noh play *Matsukaze* in chronological terms—with the emphasis on stage shiftings and movements of the soul.

In the initial three scenes, the convention (the Noh invariant) is minimally modified:

1. The monk’s (*waki*) entrance, on his way from the Capital to the Suma shore.
2. The monk’s exchange with a local villager (*ai – kyōgen*) about the place and the story of the sisters.
3. The monk’s prayer for the girls’ souls.

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<sup>12</sup> The image’s underlying arithmetic is also correct in Rumánek’s Slovak translation: both sisters carry a bucket each, and each bucket gives a reflection of the entire moon.

<sup>13</sup> The Japanese original plays on the homophony of three/tide, four/night. In English translations, this polysemy is perhaps most consistently rendered by Royall Tyler (cf. Bethe, Emmert 1992, 35).



**Photo 2.** Matsukaze – Nogami Nogaku Memorial Institute

4. As they sing about the seascape, autumn and their beloved, the sisters enter stage. Initially, they are seated sideways, one behind the other—they are identical both in appearance and in their slow and infrequent motions. These motions, however, are made at different levels so the audience can see. The focus is on the timing of their gestures; it is as if they were made by a single entity. This rhythmical similarity continues for several minutes and then gradually two separate characters emerge.
5. The differentiation process begins by one sister going to the brine cart, scooping brine up into the bucket and weeping. The other sister then joins in; they are both on the line dividing the stage and the auditorium, and are as close to the audience as is possible in Noh theatre. Sharing their work, they sing about the moon and the moonlit buckets.
6. The monk's dialogue with the sisters concludes as he enters the house; the monk is now in the imaginary house and—at the same time—closer to the core of the story.
7. The dialogue between the monk and Matsukaze—the monk recites Yukihiro's poem and the sisters weep.
8. The sisters' narrative—they introduce themselves and bring out Yukihiro's cloak. Matsukaze is unable to throw the keepsake cloak away, turning around while clinging to the cloak as if embracing her beloved.
9. Matsukaze puts on Yukihiro's cloak and hat, which brings life to his ghost that seems to be possessing her.
10. Plunging into memories of her deceased beloved, Matsukaze grows impassionately entranced. As Matsukaze dances, Yukihiro's ghost becomes embodied in the pine tree or at least she believes to see Yukihiro in the pine tree. At that point, Matsukaze approaches the pine tree; just as pining wind (*matsukaze*) belongs to a pine tree (*matsu*), so—analogically—do people who love each other belong together.
11. In response, Murasame stands up—symptomatically, her final motion begins by getting up from the rear center, drawing the viewers' attention to the key gesture of the play by a swift walk through the length of the stage.

12. As Matsukaze puts out her hand to grasp and embrace the pine tree, Murasame stops her with a single motion of her hand, as if to say, “this is only an illusion, it’s a tree.” Thus, she prevents her from succumbing to the illusion. The fine point of this is that Matsukaze is stopped by her sister, by someone that is almost her other self and not a stranger. The action is resolute but moderate, as Murasame does not hold her.
13. Due to her sister’s intervention, however, Matsukaze loses her original track, making a circle around the pine tree.
14. The play comes full circle with a series of feet-pounding, as Matsukaze conveys the fact that she has abandoned her illusory idea and is no longer clinging to the transient world and its characters. The ancient characters of Murasame and Matsukaze vanish at the bridgeway as the monk’s visions disappear—as he awakes from his dream. Fragments of human speech seemingly overheard in the wind are but an illusion that will go away.
15. Nevertheless, both the monk (in his dream) and the audience (in the *mise-en-scène*) have experienced a touch of the Other World. In the separation process, nature is cleansed by the falling away of the burden of human projections.<sup>14</sup> To borrow from the play:

Night opens into dawn.  
It was autumn rain you heard,  
but, this morning, see:  
pining wind alone lingers on.<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, the doubling principle allows the particular stages of separation to unfold during stage action. In this process, one sister represents the active while the other represents the contemplative stance. The separating actions result in *catharsis*, which, in Noh, is provided by the character’s liberation from its illusionary belief. In fact, this shifting point in Noh could have wider implications: in Japanese, the term enlightenment (*satori*) is used meaning a transcending into another realm of knowledge rather than purification.

In *Matsukaze*, the *tsure* actor (Murasame) initially plays with *sh(i)te* (Matsukaze) but eventually becomes separated from the latter. *Tsure* is like a spectator of ancient Greek drama: up to a particular point, he remains identified with and even “follows” the protagonist. There is a point, however, where *tsure* sets himself apart from *sh(i)te*’s path—and can thus

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<sup>14</sup> The homophonic images, too, are conveyed separately: the sound of *matsu* means both *pine* and *await* – the act of waiting as a human, not nature’s phenomenon, and, as such, a *signifier* for human beings.

<sup>15</sup> Since this article is in English, we quote here from the well-known translation by R. Tyler (page 73). There are, however, other renditions worth mentioning. Czech japanologists Miroslav Novák and Dana Kalvodová translate *matsukaze* as *vítr v piniích* (wind in pines)—playing on the repetition of the *i* (pronounced *ee*) sound, suggesting the whistling of wind while keeping the substantiveness of the Japanese form of the sisters’ names (cf. Kalvodová, Novák 1975, 88). Similarly, in his poem *The Autumn*, Pushkin suggests the sparkling of ice and snow... In his translation Ivan Rumánek opts for an oscillation between **sny/sosny** (dreams/pine trees), which becomes homophonous when declined **so snami/ sosnami** (with dreams/ pine trees) and it seems to take the words apart, as if carried by the wind. Rhyme-like this solution takes into account the repetitive ending of the Noh play delivering both meanings of homophonous expressions and recalling at the same time the disintegrated, grass style of calligraphy, which is close to the refined poetics of the Noh.

later help *sh(i)te* do this as well. This resembles the processes of separation involved in laboratory work.

Or, in other words, the traditional Noh model seems to have been split into two phases: first, one of the sisters, *tsure*, identifies herself with *waki*'s contemplative approach, and then does so the other, *sh(i)te*. A theatre within a theatre is thus possible even within such a sober genre as the Noh!<sup>16</sup> Unlike in ancient Greek tragedy where compassion and fear are experienced internally, within the self, the Noh performance of *Matsukaze* reflects the spectator's perception back onto the stage or, for that matter, it is incorporated into the stage action. Hence, we are able to observe, rather effortlessly, the ripening of our own decision.

As mentioned above, *Matsukaze* is unique in the way it employs two masks<sup>17</sup>: but also by the fact that *tsure* (Murasame) ostentatiously assumes and by doing so, in a way, doubles the role of *waki* (the Monk). Given the external similarity of *tsure* and *sh(i)te*, this resonates, in an exceptionally radical manner, with the Mahayana axiom that the Active and the Contemplative (the sober and the hallucinating, or the restrained and the enraptured, remembering and forgetting, dreaming and awake) are one. If we are to consider this in light of the relationships between the sister characters, then the active (*Matsukaze*) and the contemplative (Murasame) are one. This oneness is underlined by the twin-like visual similarity of the two sisters. As described, by purifying its psyche, the audience opens up to for a transcendent experience.

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It would appear then that in this example of Noh the contemplative reigns supreme while the Košice panel painting does this with the active. In fact, both these essences are complementary in the culture of Christianity and in Mahayana Buddhism, where a contemplative person sets free an impassionate person or someone clinging to an illusion.

The clearest analogy is one that compares contemplative characters: what the observer sees dictates what further action or non-action he or she takes. If the observer approves of the partner's action, then he or she is passive (Louis); if the observer disapproves, then he or she intervenes actively (Murasame). Since the observer's intervention is premeditated, his or her goal is accomplished with a single gesture.

No less significantly, in our comparison, the facial expressions in the panel painting of the Košice retable have something in common with the neutrality of a mask. Noh performance itself incorporates the phenomenon of sculpture, as it is constructed around a mask. The fact that both masks and panel paintings are made of wood, links us back to theories that see the origins of the icon lying in the mask or in the Fayum mummy portrait.<sup>18, 19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Besides the three characters of *waki*, *tsure* and *sh(i)te*, the play only features one other character, *ai*, a simple local villager.

<sup>17</sup> This major innovation was introduced by Zeami's revision of Kan'ami's lost play that featured a single mask.

<sup>18</sup> Art history may find it inspiring how this phenomenon is captured by poetic intuition – on his visit to an ancient theatre of Orange in Provence, Rilke (1989, 214) wrote: „I sat down, blissfully horrified. What was hanging up there [...] was a solid, all-penetrating ancient **mask, behind which the world**

Obviously, there is no intention here to make different systems of religion appear as if they were one; rather, the aim is to show that artistic expressions in cultures with different religious background may employ remarkably similar means in order to achieve transcendental reality.<sup>20</sup>

The use of *mise-en-scène* in a painting implies that the figurative aspect should be viewed not as the ultimate goal but rather as a means of achieving other intentions. At the same time, broad stroke references suggesting that such intentions are representative would be exceedingly reductive, as demonstrated in the comparison of the Košice panel painting and the Japanese Noh performance.

With Noh, there can be no talk whatsoever about the art of representation in the customary sense—not least because making this lively content available for half a millennium is beyond the lifespan of the individual and, in this case, even the dynasty.<sup>21</sup> If something similar to representation is vaguely present in the earliest instances of the genre, this would

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**has been compressed into a face.** Here, this vast half-circle of a stage was ruled by a wait-and-see, vacuous, absorbing being: everything was happening on the other side [...] Now I understand that this moment has made me a permanent absence in our theatres. Why should I bother going there? Why should I bother looking at a stage which is now devoid of **hard wall (the iconostasis of Russian temples)**, as there is no strength left to mould through it, in the form of gas, action that leaks through in thick, oil-heavy drops. Now are the pieces falling, in fragments, through the thin sieve of stages, heaping up only to be dumped when they are plentiful. It is the same unfair reality that is lying on the streets and in the houses except the stage sees more of it amassed than a single evening would normally bear. (Let us face the truth: we have no theatre as we have no god either: both would require a community. Every person has its own extraordinary ideas and fears and lets others see only such portion of them he finds convenient and worth it. We keep diluting our understanding, constantly, just to keep it alive, instead of demanding loudly a wall of our common misery, beyond which the uncanny has the time to recover and brace itself up.)”

<sup>19</sup> “I let myself go in happy consternation. What was rearing up opposite [...]: this was the strong antique **mask that altered everything, behind which the world coalesced in to the face.** Here, in this great curved seating space for the spectators there reigned a sucking, expectant, empty existence. All action was on the side facing them [...] That hour, I understand it now, shut me out from our theatres forever. What would I do in them? What should I do presented with a stage in which this **wall (the icon wall of Russian churches)** has been dismantled because one no longer has the energy to press the action through its hardness, the vaporous action that exudes in heavy, full drops of oil. Now plays tumble in pieces through the coarse crude sieve of the stages and pile up and are carted off, when there are enough of them. It is the same raw reality that lies around in the streets and houses, only that more of it collects in these plays than fits into an evening in the theatre. (Let us be frank, we have no theater, as little as we have a God: for that you need a community. Everyone has his own particular ideas and fears, and he reveals to others just enough of them as is useful to him and appropriate. We are continually diluting our understanding so it will cover things, instead of screaming toward the wall a common will behind which the incomprehensible has time to gather and harness itself.)” (Rilke 2008, 170-171).

<sup>20</sup> In relation to the regularities of general harmony, let us quote a point made by Balthus: “The forced split that set the Eastern and Western cultures apart during the Renaissance is arbitrary and damaging. I believe in the bonds that unite these two cultures, and I cannot see any difference in the way they come to perceive the world and understand its meaning. There is no difference between my dear masters of Siena and the art of the Far East” (Balthus 2010, 73).

<sup>21</sup> Muromachi (Ashikaga) Shogunate founded by Ashikaga Takauji dominated Japan from 1338 to 1573.

simply mean promoting an aesthetic vision that is embraced by the Zeami's patron Shogun Yoshimitsu<sup>22</sup> rather than identifying the patron with the character.

In view of the comparison with Noh, we argue that figurative painting can serve higher and much more selfless pursuits; even though we can see specific historical characters in it.

## Speech two

Although happy to see that the first version of my *Subtle mise-en-scènes of the Middle Ages* (cf. Hlaváčová 2011) has managed to inspire more than purely theatrological reflections, I believe (without spoiling my joy in the first place) that this is primarily due to the merit of the works of art I dealt with in that article.

Both analyzed works of art—the retable and the Noh performance—are vastly removed from the aesthetics of naturalism. They were not made for the sake of direct representation. Their primary goal is not to show but rather—to borrow a term from Japanese aesthetics—“to work within the heart” of the audience. For similar intents and purposes, the West uses the term “initiation techniques”.

This kind of art apparently shares common ground with that stream of philosophy which defines its own goal as spiritual guidance through speeches. This common ground is picked up by Róbert Karul (2011, 129-130) in his perspicacious study “Láska ako hybnosť a nehybnosť” [Love as Momentum and Inertia] on Plotinos’ *On Love*, relating it to Plato’s dialogues *Faidros* and *Symposium*.

The way in which Róbert Karul summarizes my *Speech one* (the previous version of this work), accepting it as a sort of definite insight into the problem, inspires me to deepen my earlier reflections and—to borrow from Socrates—compels me to write yet another speech to supplement, not revoke, the previous one. Speech two, then, is borne out of my concern to avoid reductionism, awe-struck as I am by a theme of such grandness.

My first task is to consider the limits imposed by applying the comparative method. These are inherently given by the spatio-cultural distance of the phenomena being compared and, more importantly, by the differences in painted and staged phenomena. In retable painting, the *mise-en-scène* approach was adapted to the nature of this particular medium. In it, the successive is necessarily represented as being simultaneous, and we simply reconstruct (retrospectively) the chronological order in which the concise gestures were made.

In the hair-cutting scene, we infer that Elisabeth picks up her scissors without anybody noticing. Our inference is supported by the painting’s composition, which puts Elisabeth in the centre of the scene while Louis is placed at the edge—by the end of the yard wall which conceals the act of mercy.

The facial expressions on the painting are deliberate, thus leading the observer to perceive a serene scene devoid of any conflict.<sup>23</sup> Here, initiation into the mystery of merciful love has taken the form of a positive example of a Christian deed and contemplation. This is the way of profound souls, *par approfondissement constant* (through a constant deepening of the heart).<sup>24, 25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358-1408)

<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, facial expressions in painting often provide an unconscious imprint of the painter’s personality. A certain similarity of characters might sometimes be encountered in drama.

From the perspective of initiation, however, the moment of conflict appears almost to have been missed, as so many future saints were former sinners—those who were heart-stricken enough to have had a change of heart.

Change of heart and catharsis are best attained through works of theatre thanks to its own internal dynamics—as both staging and initiation are processes in which contents are accurately “dosed” in time. Thus, we will now put painting aside to focus strictly on theatre; the essence of which lies in the interaction of characters. Of all the possible conflicts, only internal conflict is subject of this article.

In Noh, the internal conflict is represented by creating stage hypostases of conflicting desires of the human heart. While Noh may visually appear to be intersubjective, this is only because contemporary European theatre stage—in all its diversity both visual and in terms of substance—is dominated by an aesthetics in which internal conflict is systematically represented as a single character monologue while other options are omitted.<sup>26</sup>

That said, the Noh technique of initiation is still unique even in the Japanese context, because—even if several arts and artistic activities offer ways of preparing their adepts to attain enlightenment (*satori*)—this theatre opens up the possibility of such experience for the audience. Thus, it offers much more than a cerebral explanation of the phenomenon.

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The *kōan* narrative, for instance, of a person attaining *satori upon hearing the crow croak* appears incomprehensible to someone who has not yet attained this state of mind. But even once the *kōan* technique has been explained we are only helped to gain an understanding of this phenomenon on the outside, theoretically, cerebrally: there is a moment between a sound being heard and sound identified—the moment before the association is made. This is the moment when a familiar sound can be experienced as something new—and once it is decoupled, freed from the past and the future we can encounter our genuine self—in the way similar to a perception of a child or incomer who has never heard a crow before.<sup>27</sup>

A similar case in point is the *kōan* of *one hand clapping*. There is and must be a fraction of a second before we realize that this is impossible—a moment in which we are not contained by the limits of our body or, more exactly, we are not aware of being contained. Buddhist monks make it a point of their lives to be perceptive to micro-moments such as these where they can experience being part of something that is larger than themselves. One way of achieving this end is to slowly follow a path of discipline and asceticism, along which similar micro-moments mount up until the monk is led to persistent enlightenment.

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<sup>24</sup> “We found the Christian path through a constant deepening of the heart, following the same road. We did not find it in returning. We found it at the end. And so we will never deny the tiniest particle of our past]” (Le Guay 1997).

<sup>25</sup> “As a person of deeply mystical roots he later returned to the Christian faith. He returned not because of sudden conversion but due to a constant deepening of his inner life” (Péguy 2004, 187).

<sup>26</sup> Apart from the occasions when serious mental disorders are dealt with.

<sup>27</sup> Even though the child’s or incomer’s “ignorance” is natural, knowledge is essential for the moment of “disconnectedness” and, ultimately, for the higher ignorance to arise.

Through its slow-paced action, Noh extends the duration of such micro-moments, opening up this unique time-space to anybody who comes. The audience is invited to gain momentary insight, even if the transience of such an experience is rather like a flash of light (*kensho*): a more permanent higher consciousness must be sought more actively.

To counter the impression that this is unique to Buddhism, we should note the differences between a monk and a poet: the monk climbs taking patient and regular steps, paving the way for others to follow, while the poet rushes ahead in leaps and bounds, and even if he reaches the very top, he cannot explain how he did so. He cannot remain there, and leaves only his poems as dazzling evidence of higher knowledge.

In Noh, both ways are combined: the play is often written, literally, “around a poem”, yet the actual interpretation practice of actors has a good deal of a monastic discipline in it.

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In the Noh play *Matsukaze*, the character of Matsukaze (Pining Wind) grows to believe she is seeing her beloved Yukihiro. Murasame (Autumn Rain) stops Matsukaze with a gesture and the words “it is just a pine”. But when Matsukaze (Pining Winds) cites Yukihiro’s verses, Murasame (Autumn Rain) recalls the poem and the action then proceeds in a single harmonious direction (the gesture to stop apparently did its job, deflecting the character from her original direction).

From this point on, Murasame (Autumn Rain) observes Matsukaze (Pining Wind) as she—accompanied by the singing chorus—dances out her clinging to the world of transience. Thus, she breaks the bond connecting her to illusion, setting herself and all the others there free from it.

Pining Wind:

Oh, what joy to see! There in the shadow of the pine is Yukihiro  
calling: “Pining Wind!” I am going to him! (Rising, walks towards the pine. Autumn Rain  
comes closer to her, touching her right sleeve)<sup>28</sup>

Autumn Rain:

How awful! This state you are in is exactly what drowns you in the sin of clinging. You have  
not yet forgotten the mad passions you felt when we still belonged to the world. That is a pine  
tree. Yukihiro is not there.

Pining Wind:

You are too cruel to talk that way! That pine is Yukihiro! **And those lines –**  
*though for a time we may say good-bye,*  
*should I hear you pine, I will return*  
**– were those lines not his?**

Autumn Rain:

Why, you are right! I had forgotten!  
And while, perhaps, we may say good-bye,

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<sup>28</sup> This gesture of minimalist proportions provides a breakthrough of the play.

but should you miss me, I will come:  
those were the words.

Pining Wind:  
I had not forgotten, pining  
wind is rising now:  
he promised he will come –

Autumn Rain:  
news to start an autumn rain,  
leaving sleeves a moment moistened;

Pining Wind:  
yes, pining still, he will return:

Autumn Rain:  
we rightly trusted

Pining Wind:  
his dear poem:

Chorus:  
*The Mount of Say Good-bye* (In tears, Pining Wind runs onto the bridgeway while Autumn Rain, also weeping, goes to sit before the chorus.)

Pining Wind:  
*overgrown with P I N E S*  
*should I learn you are alive,*  
*I will rush to you*  
**Bound for Inaba's pines that say good-bye;**

Chorus:  
**how long have I longed for him,**  
here on Suma shore pines: Yukihiro  
back with me once more, while I,  
beside the tree, rise now, draw near:  
So dear, the wind-bent pine –  
I love him still!  
(Pining Wind ceases weeping to start dancing the final breakthrough dance around the pine.)  
In the pine a wind blows wild.  
The Suma breakers rage night-long  
while wrongful clinging brings you this, our dream.  
In your kindness, give us comfort!  
Now, farewell:  
receding waves fall silent  
along Suma shore  
a breeze sweeps down from off the hills.  
On the pass, the cocks are crowing.  
The dream is gone, without the shadow  
night opens into dawn –  
It was autumn rain you heard,

but, this morning, see:  
pining wind alone lingers on  
pining wind alone lingers on.<sup>29</sup>

As we can see, rather than pinning down who is right, the play is more interested in revealing an internal conflict. Both sisters—Matsukaze (Pining Wind) and Murasame (Autumn Rain)—are hypostases of their author, or more generally speaking, of the inner nature of a human being. Closer to each other than twins, they are rather like the two hands of a single human being...

The Lotus sutra—an important text in Mahayana Buddhism—emphasizes the non-dualism between the observer and the observed, among other things, in a statement that is often cited in Noh dramas: “Passion and enlightenment are one.” Yet, such oneness would not exist were it not for the folly<sup>30</sup> of Matsukaze (Pining Wind) who believes her beloved has returned from the other world.

She is the one who believes, for a moment, that time *can* be reversed—that one hand clapping is possible. Hers is a reality of love which does not yield easily to be anchored in time and space; indeed, love can survive beyond the grave, including one’s own.

Considering that both sister characters are souls from the other world—and are but a spiritual dream of the travelling monk—the divide between the actual and the unreal which previously seemed to separate the sisters shifted to the dividing line of awakening: between the monk’s dream and his vigil under the pine tree through which a breeze blows softly. Here, the monk is literally a *bodhi*—the awakened one.

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<sup>29</sup> This English translation combines Royall Tyler’s translation (which is adhered to), unless it departs dramatically from Rumánek’s version (bold marked details translated from Slovak) that we wanted to make accessible to the international readers. Kannami: Vaniesosnami (Macukaze) (cf. Rumánek 2010, 353-355).

<sup>30</sup> This idea, too, is not exclusive to Buddhism: “The Christianity of the new era will reveal the entire meaning of eros, without ignoring its dangers, and whatever folly of passion it may encounter, it will respect that those who live and die with such passion are marked by the seal of the absolute” (Clément 1997, 124).

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