

I love the smell of napalm in the morning: aesthetics against society

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Most readers will recognise will recognise my title as the declaration made by the US Air cavalry commander played by Robert Duvall in Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam war epic *Apocalypse Now!* His transgressive aesthetic appraisal of the smell of warfare confronts one with the philosopher of art Arthur C. Danto's suggestion that the "mystical chrysanthemums" caused by high altitude bombing are not a fit subject for "an aesthetic attitude" (cited by Hanson 1998:205), an issue discussed by the philosopher of aesthetics Karen Hanson in an article memorably titled "How bad can good art be" (Hanson 1998). This itself seems a distant echo of Walter Benjamin's sardonic commentary on the Futurist Marinetti's's eulogy to a war that is beautiful because it "enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns" (Benjamin 2008:).

'Bad' aesthetics and ethics

Chrysanthemums and war take us neatly to the topic I want to focus on here, namely military aesthetics in Japan and what, anthropologically speaking, it is possible to say about its *ethics*. But before we get there I have to mention another matter. This concerns my enthusiasm for the topic and my lack of expertise in it. For thirty years I have worked on Indian popular visual culture, focusing on mass-produced popular devotional and political images and also on the early history of photography as well as current vernacular small-town studio practices.

However, recent visits to Japan have fired an intense enthusiasm for woodblock prints and chromolithographs, especially for those depicting battle scenes from the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 (Virgin 2005; Sharf et.al. 2005). The contents of this paper are my first stumbling steps in a new field and I hope that I make clear my indebtedness to the scholarship of others who have laboured long and hard in this area and who possess skills that it will take me decades more to acquire.

The aesthetic impact of Ukiyo-e on European art has been well-documented (Put 2005). We know that Manet, Degas and Monet were admirers of Japanese woodblock images and that Vincent Van Gogh, collected over 500 examples (see Rappard-Boon et. al.) and made copies of two famous Hiroshige prints. These are vivid examples of aesthetic contact zones and of a transculturation which operated in both directions, for Japanese artists were extensively influenced by Western techniques, this being most apparent perhaps in the so-called Nagasaki-e and then Yokohama-e genres (Chaiklin 2005; Merrit & Shigeru 2005) which gave form to Japan's fascination with the new people, commodities and technology which would rapidly transform it from feudalism into a rapidly urbanizing consumer society. Nagasaki-e, inspired by Chinese Buddhist New Year's prints, offered "glimpse[s] of mysterious peoples and worlds from beyond the ocean" (Chaiklin 2005:225) and were widely diffused throughout Japan. Timon Screech brilliantly suggests that Nagasaki-e, with their "view from on high", reflected their subject's status as a place of visual alterity characterized by an ambiguous relation to the "normal space of the realm" and which unleashed "a general unbalancing of scale" (2002:217). Woodblock prints increasingly became a space for commentary on "the customs and habits of ... Western strangers" (Merrit & Shigeru 2005:266) following the arrival of Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" in Tokyo Bay in 1853, through Yokohama-e, a genre of images which vividly traces the fascination with foreigners, their material culture and the dramatic impact their presence was having on the port of Yokohama which was frequently presented in bird's eye view.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the relocation of the capital from Kyoto to Edo (present day Tokyo), the stone buildings of Ginza, street scenes with bicycles, and the newly built railways all became popular subjects for woodblock triptychs. Kunitaru II's 1870 triptych of a street-scene by the Nihonbashi bridge in Tokyo is exemplary in this regard. A metaled road takes up the first two thirds of the foreground of the image, with a sprawling Edo skyline in the distance locating us at the centre of a bustling metropolis. The road is crammed with vehicular traffic and pedestrians: large horse-drawn carriages, small buggies, rickshaws, tricycles,

bewildered women, lost children and an excited dog. An extraordinary sense of fissiparous movement is created by the diversity of devices and trajectories, and of identities both local and foreign. We might think of it as woodblock print's presaging of what Vertov would achieve in 1929 with film in *Man With a Movie Camera*: the fusion of a new technics with a new lifeworld and mode of perception.

Japan and India

The question of transculturation and how aesthetics speaks to some people across contact zones is a subject I return to later. First, however, a little more on this subject which is so new to me and how it relates to the Indian material which I know much better. Japanese aesthetics had been mobilized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by a number of key Bengalis as part of their quest for "another Asia" (Bharucha 2007), a hinterland of political affiliation which offered an alternative to British aesthetic colonisation through Government art schools, the teaching of perspectival drawing and the seemingly inexorable rise of European academic oil painting. Figures such as Rabindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore were at first enthused by the wash techniques which seemed to repudiate the insistent materialism of European traditions but were quickly alienated by the rise of nationalistic militarism (Guha-Thakurta; Nandy) . My own experience, viewing Japanese material so to speak through the prism of Indian popular material was that Japanese popular prints were dramatically more topical and immersed *in history* than anything produced in India. Japanese images seemed to tell a history of transience, of fast moving political transformations and explosive battles, whereas Indian images seemed to deal more in, if not the eternal, certainly in the durable, in images which while not quite static evolved slowly. Japanese images seemed directed at an audience desperate for sensation, for dramatic new effects of light and form in which the daring of the artist pushed recognition and intelligibility to its limits. Indian audiences by contrast sought familiarity, newness as a kind of pastiche of modulation ("new but not too new", Jain 2007), and famously rejected experiments that seemed to confound what had already in some sense been seen in advance.

In at least one respect Japanese and Indian print production was very similar. Under the Tokugawa shogunate (ie before the Meiji restoration in 1868) all contemporary political commentary was suppressed with cases of “house arrest in manacles” and the destruction of printing block and [unsold¹] prints (Thompson 2005:318). Consequently, as Anne Nishimura Morse argues, “Artists had to resort to recasting the narratives of their own time in the historical terms of analogous precedents” (2005: 35). Thompson notes that current events were “depicted in plays, books and prints with false historical settings (most commonly the twelfth or fourteenth centuries)” (Thompson 2005:318)². Prior to 1868, allegory was the necessary refuge of political commentary, after that date events such as the Boshin War (1868) and the Seinan War or Satsuma Rebellion (1877) were pictured much more openly and consolidated an image of General Saigo Takamori as a popular tragic hero. In India, legislation such as the 1867 Dramatic Performances Act and the 1910 Press Act drove a fugitive politics to seek the alibi of a colonially authorized “religious” expression (Pinney 2009). India’s experience after 1867 would mirror that of Japan before 1868, creating an “iatrogenic” fusion of the political within the religious.

One further dimension which suggests parallels with India is astutely diagnosed by Anne Nishimura Morse. In India it was crystallised by Tagore’s *Home and the World*, which described the division between a Europeanized colonial public sphere occupied by Bengali men, and the domestic enclave of the home, in which Bengali women maintained a resistant zone of cultural purity (Chatterjee, Dirks). Morse notes that in Japan “The world of war, with its male protagonists – the domain that engaged with the Western world – was expressed in western visual language” (2005: 41). Wives and mothers by contrast sustained the home front and inhabited a quite different more conventional visual world. Morse shows how the two worlds are often brilliantly aligned (or rather, disjoined), perhaps

¹ According to Thompson there was no effort to recall sold copies of contentious images, hence the archival record is rich (2005:318).

² Thompson notes that “the public learned of the real events through illegal crudely printed broadsheets (*kawaraban*) and semi-legal handwritten accounts (*jitsuroku*)” (Thompson 2005:318)

most perfectly in Kobayashi Kiyochika's 1895 triptych *A Soldier's Dream at Camp During a Truce in the Sino-Japanese War*. At bottom left we see a soldier, asleep in his tent, positioned in a modern landscape of war. The central and right-hand *oban* panels are occupied by his dream in which he returns to a home flooded by light, flanked by cherry blossom and at the centre of which stands his kimono-ed son wearing a military cap and clutching a toy bugle. Morse perceptively notes how the "subtly shaded Europeanized features of the foreshortened recumbent soldier contrasts with the women of his household, who are shown with the traditional abbreviated features..." (2005:41-42).

Kiyochika's *Soldier* might be seen to reveal the damage done by war, and the fragility of the masculine armature that was progressively generated over successive wars. But the vast majority of woodblock prints from these early wars serve only to refute Arthur C. Danto's suggestion that the "mystical chrysanthemums" caused by high altitude bombing are not a fit subject for "an aesthetic attitude". They celebrate chrysanthemums and cherry blossoms, together with exploding shells in a visual language whose perversely ethical claims an anthropology of aesthetics needs to understand.

The chrysanthemums of course was one half of the "fire and ice" duality that Ruth Benedict used to characterize Japanese culture in her wartime report *The Sword and the Chrysanthemum* commissioned by the US Office of Wartime Information and published in 1946 (Benedict 1946). At the heart of the antinomies that Benedict explored was the fact that the Japanese were, as she wrote, "both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic" (1946: 2). Benedict's book has rightly been criticized for its totalizing construct of a culture-wide ideology which should more properly have been located in a particular section of that society and particular period of its history, but it has nevertheless been extraordinarily influential in Japan itself (selling 2 million copies in translation) and being credited with the development of the entire *nihonjinron* (or self-essentialising) discourse on the uniqueness of Japanese identity.

Rereading Benedict it is easy to see why it became so popular in Japan for it argued a case for understanding the ethical coherence of what to non-Japanese might appear puzzling. She is keen to stress the internal robustness of a cultural ideology that has always, as she writes “been extremely explicit in denying that virtue consists in fighting evil” (1946: 190). She notes what now we would term the perspectivism advanced by the 18th century Shinto-ist Motoöri who argued for the distinctiveness of Japanese ethics and their moral superiority. The Chinese by contrast, Motoöri argued, had a moral code that raised “*jen*, just and benevolent behavior, to an absolute standard” (italics added) but this was proof of their inferior nature and the need for an “artificial means of restraint” (1946: 191).

Reading Benedict on the American incomprehension of the Japanese stress on “sacrificing one’s personal desires and pleasures” and “the idea that the pursuit of happiness is a serious goal of life is to them an amazing and immoral doctrine” (1946: 192) makes one think of the Islamist slogan “we love death as you love life”.³ Benedict forces the reader (prefiguring Faisal Devji’s recent work on Al Qaeda’s “humanity”, 2008) to accept that this is indeed an ethical position, merely one that may differ from that of her readers.

The “happy ending” Benedict writes is rare in Japanese novels and plays. By contrast “American audiences crave solutions. They want to believe that people live happily ever after. They want to know that people are rewarded for their virtue.” (1946:192). This resonates with Devji’s observation that “the Christian concept of evil is not one that exists in the rhetoric of militancy...its place being taken by the Muslim’s own sin in refusing to sacrifice himself for humanity” (2008:203)

Benedict’s study of Japanese ethics and aesthetics perfectly anticipates, I think, EuroAmerica’s inability to understand the ethics and aesthetics of Islamism, and also reveals how little development there has been in mainstream EuroAmerican approaches to the philosophy of aesthetics. Exemplary of a position that differs little

³ This was a phrase used by in the “martyrdom” videos recorded by Shehzad Tanweer (Devji 2008:201) and Mohammed Siddique Khan, one of the London 7/7 bombers (Pantucci 2015) and repeated in 2007, two years before he killed thirteen service-people at Fort Hood, Texas, by Nidal Malik Hasan.

from the one that Benedict was trying to critique is Mary Deveraux's consideration of the "beauty and evil" that co-exists in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*. This documentary about the 1934 Nazi Party Nuremberg Rally which she suggests is "at once masterful and morally repugnant" (1998:227) was once memorably described by George Steiner as "forever carrying the mark of Auschwitz on its brow"⁴, a position with which I cannot disagree. Deveraux spends an inordinate time discussing how we should respond to the fact that *Triumph of the Will* "renders something that is evil, namely National Socialism, beautiful and, in so doing, tempts us to find attractive what is morally repugnant" (1998:248). Part of her solution lies in the supposed possibility of separating beauty from politics. Rather incredibly she thinks we are capable of "Appreciating the beauty of this vision (seeing the possible appeal of the idea of a benevolent leader, of a unified community, of a sense of national purpose)" without also "finding the doctrines or the ideals of the National Socialism appealing". Equally implausibly, she proposes that we can be seduced by the "concrete vision" of what is beautiful and at the same time "reject" and be "utterly horrified" by what the Nazis did (1998:249).

There is what she terms "a step" between these two positions, ("between finding the film's concrete artistic vision beautiful and endorsing the doctrines and ideals of National Socialism") and this step is a moral one which we need not (and, of course should not) take (1998:249). While of course I agree that we indeed should not take such a step the idea that in the face of so much supposed beauty we can decide that we "need not" seems utterly fanciful. The aestheticization of politics of all varieties is insidious and powerful and usually doesn't allow the spectator to stand back and make conscious decisions about which part of the package they want to accept. It doesn't offer "steps" where we can consider choices. Rather, aesthetics in the cause of bad politics usually produces infatuation and contamination. National Socialism was, as Susan Sontag has argued, a repertoire of dress codes, gestures, insignias and material crimes (what Sontag calls the aesthetics of the "righteousness of violence," Sontag 1975). Sontag implies an aesthetics of "escalation" rather than presuming that Nazism offered "steps" between which one could choose.

⁴ A comment in a television documentary, whose identity is long forgotten.

Deveraux does not even get to Benedict's starting point, which is the need to understand the powerful effect of an aesthetical/ethical system on those who have been inculcated within it (rather than watching it 80 years later on DVD). Deveraux seems to have no grasp of what Benjamin would theorize as the aestheticization of politics, Lyotard's memorably powerful statement that "there is always something happening in the arts that incandesces the very embers of society" and Ranciere's currently fashionable but rather pale Lyotard-lite echo of this insight.

For Benedict the chrysanthemum and the sword served as icons of what she termed the "dilemma of virtue" (1946:195). Her analysis attempts to culturally explain what appeared to her to be extremes of belief and behavior whom those she terms "Occidentals" have difficulty in reconciling. She is eager to explain that "in Japanese life the contradictions, as they seem to us, are as deeply based in their view of life as our uniformities are in ours" (1946: 197). Benedict then discusses how Japanese heroic narratives may puzzle the Occidental who expects heroes to "chose the better part" and allow "virtue to triumph" as she puts it. Japanese heroes by contrast tend to "settle incompatible debts to the world and to his name by choosing death" (1946: 199).

The aesthetics of Japanese militarism has come to interest me through the study and collection of popular woodblock images, images that first struck me as powerful because of their extraordinary topicality as compared to Indian printed visual culture of the same period. Japanese print culture, while it has its continuing pre-occupations with courtesans, with the 47 Ronin,⁵ and with Kabuki characters,⁶ was highly responsive to current events, especially to Japan's military adventures, and in particular the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. Within woodblock print culture enduring tropes co-existed easily with what was

⁵ Benedict suggests that the Forty-Seven Ronin is the "true national epic of Japan" ("not a tale that rates high in the world's literature but the hold it has on the Japanese is incomparable", 1946:199)

⁶ The tenacity of all these tropes being in large part a result of the strict censorship policies of pre-Meiji regimes (see Thompson 2005).

essentially a form of pictorial journalism ⁷ (in this context it is worth noting that Benedict, for all her cultural essentialisation opens her book by thanking her “wartime colleague” Robert Hashima, one of many Japanese-Americans who were “placed in a most difficult position”⁸ and very strongly stresses the rapid transformation under the MacArthur administration post VJ Day in 1945⁹).

The first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 (essentially a clash between Japan and China for control of the Korean peninsula) triggered an outpouring of war triptychs¹⁰, essentially propagandistic and often, imaginary, scenarios in part based on the journalistic accounts of war reporters and of sketch artists at the front, which were the Widescreen or Imax of their day.¹¹ Thousands of different images were produced for an eager public and some were printed in editions of tens of thousands (this, plus the disinclination of contemporary Japanese collectors to buy them, accounts for their surprisingly low prices). Many of them, let us not waste words, depict and eulogize war crimes (Shinbaku, the Tokyo publishers’ recent collection of images is appropriately titled *Massacres in Manchuria*, Hunter 2013). In ways that prefigure Marinetti, they celebrate violence and develop an astonishingly innovative visual language for the depiction and celebration of mechanized war. Images often have strong diagonals, and always stage an epic clash. I find the best of these images (and the best artist is Kiyochika although I have a fondness for the more conventional compositions of Nobukazu) extraordinary. I find myself in thrall to the amazing visual

⁷ Albeit one that played rather loosely with its sources (cf recycling of Sino-Japanese imagery into the later Russo-Japanese imagery [MIT website] and also the Sudan image, Morse 2005:43)

⁸ Benedict notes that Hashima was “interned in a War Relocation Camp, and I met him when he came to Washington to work in the war agencies of the United States” 1946: acknowledgements, n.p.)

⁹ This is the subject of her final chapter, where she attempts to reconcile dramatic transformation with her strong model of culture: “The Japanese have an ethic of alternatives. They tried to achieve their ‘proper place’ in the war, and they lost. That course, now, they can discard, because their whole training has conditioned them to possible changes of direction” (1946: 304)..

¹⁰ The dimensions of triptychs, composed of three single *oban* sheets, is usually in the region of 29 x 14 inches.

¹¹ A famous triptych by Mizuno Toshikato, *Ban-Banzai for the Great Japanese Empire! Illustration of the Assault on Songhwan: A Great Victory for Our Troops*, of 1894 depicts a group of journalists and war artists (including the Kyoto painter Kubota Beisen [Hunter 2013:29]) on the battle front (Virgin ed. 2001 fig. 26, p. 71)

effects and the sheer excitement of an art form that is decades ahead of what will come to seem revolutionary during the second decade of the twentieth century in Europe. In this respect Kobayashi Kiyochika's *Illustration of the Attack and Occupation of Tienchuangtai* with its diagonal blizzard effects (rendered as embossed hand applied stripes on the prints) seem to prefigure Edward Wadsworth and other English Vorticists (Colnaghi 1974). Kiyochika presents a carefully delineated scene in which the commander of a small group of soldiers peers towards a distantly glimpsed flag-bearing army distantly glimpsed at the left through the snowy branches of a woodland thicket. But overlaying this whole naturalistic depiction are numerous diagonal white lines, about a third of inch wide, conveying a sense of a driving blizzard with enormous success and conscripting this perilous environment, through its strong abstraction, into the harsh machinic world of war.

In the Sino-Japanese war images there is conventional beauty in the way in which waves created by (British built) Japanese destroyers or the sinking of Chinese wooden ships are depicted: these recall Hokusai's iconic *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* the first print in the *Thirty Six Views of Mount Fuji* published in the 1830s. The dark blue bodies of the building waves are decorated with elegant white frondery, transforming water into forms to which musical vocabulary might be applied. The delicate beauty of these waves is complemented by the dramatic vigour of glorious explosions created by busting shells, often seemingly harmlessly in midair but often with lethal consequences for their hapless Chinese victims, which recall the petals of red chrysanthemums and the rising sun of the Japanese flag. That flag is, intriguingly, nearly always the Imperial Japanese Navy flag (with kinetic red stripes radiating from a smaller central red sun), almost never the simple red circle Nisshoki flag¹² even in ground engagements. Perhaps that is too sun-like and insufficiently chrysanthemum-like. (Barthes on Bataille, the "declension" of the object)

The Russo Japanese war ten years later generated, the consensus has it, fewer woodblock prints and more chromolithographs and photographs. But there are masterpieces depicting this war, including to my mind some of the greatest of them all including Migita Toshihide's *News of Russo-Japanese Battles: For the Fourth Time*

¹² The Nisshoki ("sun-mark") flag has a red circle on a white background and was designated the national flag in 1870.

Our Destroyers Bravely Attack Enemy Ships Outside the Harbour of Port Arthur (1904) and what might be formally the most innovative of them all, Kiyochika's *Our Torpedo Hits a Russian Warship in the Great Naval Battle of Port Arthur* from the same year, depicting a piscine missile striking a Russian vessel before the formal declaration of hostilities. The print was published one week after this event (Till, 2008:116). The image is a homage to submersibility. A brackish green water occupies the front two thirds of the image, and its focus¹³ hovers between the sloshing surface of this torrid sea and an obscene, secret, almost divinely placid, submarine realm in which Japanese stealth punctures Russian bombast. This disjuncture between sky and sea, horizon and under-water is perforated by the lurid orange explosions of naval artillery and the quiet circles of disturbed water left in the trail of the torpedo.

Cherry blossoms and suicide bombers

The iconography established by artist such as Noakazu, Toshihide and Kiyochika was not confined to war-mongering woodblock prints. As Lafcadio Hearn documented in 1904, it spilled out into every aspect of Japanese life: “Even silk dresses for baby girls had charming ornamentation composed entirely of war pictures... blended into one astonishing combination: naval battles, burning warships, submarine mines exploding; torpedo boats attacking... colours of blood and fire...” (cited by Morse 2005:32). Many later examples of what John Dower terms an “intense socialization for war” (Dower 2012:46) are illustrated in Atkins (2012).

This fusion of a militarized aesthetics with conventional symbols of beauty has a deeper and more profound history, one that has been superbly documented by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (2002). She has shown how, from the beginning of the Meiji period, cherry blossoms became “the master trope of Japan’s imperial nationalism” (2002:3), a trope that thoroughly seduced the student soldiers who sought “the aesthetics of truth and life” (2002:4) and who would provide the *tokkotai* or “Special Attack

¹³ The image creates something akin to an auditory focus for it invites you to hear the distant blasting of shipboard artillery and juxtapose it with the subdued whir of the torpedo. Our ear/eye moves back and forward across this threshold.

Force” of whom the cherry blossom-adorned *kamikaze* are the best known.¹⁴ The issue with which Ohnuki-Tierney grapples is “how complex and interpenetrated meanings, all embodied in the symbol of cherry blossoms with various degrees of physicality – various degrees of blooming and falling – became consolidated into ‘falling cherry petals as young soldiers’ sacrifice for the emperor’ during Japan’s modern period” (2002:9). She notes how cherry trees were planted through Japan’s imperial colonies (see fig. 7), their blossoms symbolizing Japanese souls, as also at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo which became the national site of military memorialization and celebration (2002:10). Cherry blossom came to embody the idea of sacrifice as “a noble and beautiful act” (2002:5).

This Japanese evidence suggests that, despite initial appearances, there is no contradiction between Wallace Stevens’ claim that “Death is the mother of beauty” and Joseph Brodsky’s claim that “aesthetics is the mother of ethics”. Surprisingly it turns out that this is what Kant was saying all along, at least according to Thierry de Duve. In a brilliant exegesis he shows how Kant’s utopian *sensus communis* is concerned with the universal claims (the “ought-ness” of art) of an aesthetics to a humankind which he concedes will never agree on what is beautiful.

In explaining this de Duve fortuitously discusses a Ms. A who when confronted with a rose says “Oh, what a beautiful rose” and a Mr. B who says, conversely “oh, what an ugly rose” (2008:140). Obviously it makes more sense for our purposes here if we imagine them talking about chrysanthemums or cherry blossom. De Duve suggests that Kant might, as it happens agrees with Ms. A, but surprisingly, concludes that they are both right in claiming an objective validity for the opposing judgments because (and I quote de Duve) the claim “imputes to the other the same feeling of pleasure (or pain) that one feels in oneself” (2008:141). Their positions are opposed but they both agree in making a universal claim “you ought to feel the way I feel. You ought to agree with me” (2008:141).

De Duve concludes that saying both Ms. A and Mr. B are right “is to say that his call on each other’s capacity for agreeing by dint of feeling is legitimate” (2008:141). In

¹⁴ Kamikaz flew planes with adorned with cherry lossom imags and were frequently waved off with cherry branches (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002:3).

this regard, de Duve persuasively argues, Kant “understood [this question] better than anyone before or anyone since” (2008:141).

De Duve extracts from this some key principles. Firstly “every pure judgment of taste contains an ought, addressed to someone” and it is this that differentiates such judgments from the merely “agreeable” which are a matter purely of personal preference. Aesthetic judgments by contrast imply a universal address (this is a beautiful rose, not I happen to think this is a beautiful rose). Secondly “a true or pure aesthetic judgment is a call for agreement by dint of feeling involuntarily addressed to all” (2008:141 italics removed) and this holds equally true of Ms. A and Mr. B.

Kant’s *sensus communis* de Duve continues, attempts to describe a common sentiment, a “shared or sharable feeling...a common ability for having feelings in common. A communality or communicability of sentiment, implying a definition of humankind as a community united by a universally shared ability for shared feelings” (2008:141).

A conventional history would at this point say that this is where Kantian “anthropology” fails since it assumed the possibility or actuality of a universal human culture and as his pupils such as Herder would very quickly demonstrate, there are many different human cultures whose aesthetics and ethics are incommensurable.

De Duve suggests that Kant himself conceded this, recognizing that “you ought to feel the way I do” implies a universal potential although in practice “there is not a hope in the world for universal agreement among us” (2008:142).

De Duve quotes Kant at length:

Whether there is in fact such a common sense, as a constitutive principle of the possibility of experience, or whether a higher principle of reason makes it only into a regulative principle for producing in us a common sense for higher purposes, whether, therefore, taste is an original and natural faculty or only the idea of an artificial one yet to be acquired, so that a judgement of taste with its assumption of a universal assent in fact is only a requirement of reason for producing such agreement of

sentiment; whether the ought, ie. the objective necessity of the confluence of the feeling of any one man with that of every other, only signifies the possibility of arriving at this agreement, and the judgement of taste only affords us an example of the application of this principle – these are questions we have neither the wish nor the power to investigate as yet.” (*Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, cited by De Duve 2008:142-143).

So Kant doesn't know whether pure aesthetic judgement is natural or artificial, and agreement is merely a “possibility”. This is what Paul de Man would later call the “temptation to permanence”, ie that recurrent cultural error that impels us towards the natural and transcendent.

What both Kant and de Man identify is the simultaneous desire for the universal and the difficulty of universal agreement, a conclusion that all anthropology has subsequently confirmed. They both help us understand how we can reconcile the claims that “aesthetics are the mother of ethics” and also how, very often, “Death is the mother of beauty”.

Kant's achievement, for de Duve, is that he “fathomed the depth of aesthetic disagreements among humans: they amount to nothing less than denying the other his or her humanity” (2008:143). Kant, de Duve concludes, “grasped that an issue of such magnitude – are we capable of living in peace? – was at stake in a sentence so anodyne as ‘this rose is beautiful’”. De Duve suggests that we can substitute “art” for “rose” (2008:144). I suggest that we substitute “chrysanthemum” or “cherry blossom” instead.

Daesh are perhaps today's successors to early 20th century Japanese woodblock print artists, world leaders in indelible image trails and the transculturation of images and I will consider some of their productions in the light of the above history and philosophical positions. Their images occupy a position between fixed identities, establishing a contact zone, because they are all essentially acts of communication with an outside world. They force us to recall de Duve's

Kantian maxim that “every pure judgment of taste contains an ought, addressed to someone”.

It may well be that there is image production intended for the consolidation of an internal *sensus communis* of which we are not aware (although some evidence suggests that within Syria they finely tune their dictates according to the degree of consolidation of on the ground power) but those images that are visible to us are addressed to us. They appear to have two modalities which are not exclusive. Some assume that we might be potential members of the Daesh *sensus communis* and aim to attract us with their revisioning of their cause as a non-virtual incarnation of Grand Theft Auto, a more exulted version of James Bond, or Disney (these all being highly visible sources for Daesh’s image output). Here the mode of address is perhaps not unlike that of Ms. A and Mr. B: the universal claim is that that you *ought* not to be sitting at home playing a computer game when you could be shooting actual infidels in their cars, and that martyrdom matters more than whether your cocktail is shaken or stirred.

But Daesh’s most powerful imagery, produced with the same professionalism and knowingness, seems to mobilize a quite different set of communicative expectations predicated precisely on the absence and indeed impossibility, of a *sensus communis*. Consider the various execution videos, of individual journalists and aid workers despatched by the so-called Jihadi John, or the mass execution of Coptic Christians on the Egyptian shoreline. These carefully staged performances seem designed to elicit a form of incommensuration, a horror whose only reflex response would be the violent retribution that they are intended to elicit. To recall the 7/7 bombers their message seems to be not only that “we love death more than you love life” but also “you will never understand us”, indeed “you lack the ability to understand us”. The execution videos might be thought of as an Islamist echo of what in a Japanese context is called *nihonjinron*, that reverse-Orientalism that insists on the inaccessibility of a self to others. This insistence on inscrutability, establishes the conditions of self-exclusion, the grounds for a new *sensus territorialis*, where cherry blossoms and blood are equally beautiful. But in the end we would have to ask whether there

can ever be any truly abject otherness that is not as Fredric Jameson might say “a culturally arranged experience”. Daesh’s anticipation of incommensuration does not come from some impossible “outside”. It is on the contrary born from an intimate knowledge of the boundaries of an aesthetical and ethical system whose limits it understands very well. We would do well to remember the important role that Ruth Benedict’s work played in constructing postwar Japanese discourses of *nihonjinron*. In a similar way we would also need to acknowledge that Daesh’s abjection, its insistence on bringing what we might feel should remain forever ob-scene (off-stage) in front of a global spotlight demonstrates its cynically clear-headed understanding and manipulation of the system it professes to despise. At the precise moment that it declares its exceptionalism and its indifference to the suffering of the kaffar/kafir it paradoxically reaffirms what de Duve described as that “shared or sharable feeling...a common ability for having feelings in common. A communality or communicability of sentiment, implying a definition of humankind as a community united by a universally shared ability for shared feelings” (2008:141). Were it not for this shared feeling Daesh’s media strategy, its “art” would make no sense.

It could be argued that what in the Japanese case started as a communicative act aimed at generating the new Asian Century (hence the use of English captions on some woodblock prints) became increasingly inward looking military endeavor. Even more removed from the “ought” of common sentiment addressed to others that De Duve explains so brilliantly, were the Nazis who it has been suggested operated on the basis that the Holocaust was so fantastical, so grotesque, so incapable of commensuration that they assumed that no one would ever believe they had perpetrated it.

But it strikes me that the current world leaders in political spectacle, Daesh, demand a very different sort of interpretation. They might be seen as supreme exemplars of aesthetic and political incommensurability. If we recall De Duve’s claim that “refusing to endorse another’s aesthetic judgement amounts to implicitly denying their humanity: (2008:28) we might conclude that Daesh serve as the most perfect example of this: their spectacular and grotesque performative aesthetics appear

doomed to elicit a denial of humanity: barbarians, evil adherents of a blood cult and so on. And yet, if we take De Duve (and what he claims to be the legacy of Kant) seriously, we would have to admit the humanity of Daesh, not on the grounds elaborated by Faisal Devji in relation to the Taliban and Al Qaeda that they are social workers *manqué*, but because the modes of address that Daesh insistently address.

If early to mid-twentieth-century Japanese militarism was characterized by a tragic misunderstanding of how this would play globally (through a mis-diagnosis of the reception of its claim to be a new and legitimate colonial power in the European mould) one would have to concede that the media strategy of Daesh perfectly understands its mode of address to others and deserves (though we may not like this) serious considerations as the greatest artists of our time.

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Figs (8)

1. Kunitaru III. 1870. Street scene by Hihonbashi Bridge, Tokyo. Woodblock triptych. 14x27 inches. Author's collection.

2. Kobayashi Kiyochika. 1895. A Soldier's Dream at Camp During a Truce in the Sino-Japanese War. Woodblock triptych. 14x27 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
3. Kobayashi Kiyochika. c. 1895. Illustration of the Attack and Occupation of Denshodai. Woodblock triptych. 14x27 inches. Author's collection.
4. Watanabe Nobukazu. C. 1895. Naval battle during Sino-Japanese War. Woodblock triptych. 14x27 inches. Author's collection.
5. Migita Toshihide. 1904. *News of Russo-Japanese Battles: For the Fourth Time Our Destroyers Bravely Attack Enemy Ships Outside the Harbour of Port Arthur*. Woodblock triptych. 14x27 inches. Author's collection.
6. Kobayashi Kiyochika. 1904. *Our Torpedo Hits a Russian Warship in the Great Naval Battle of Port Arthur*. Woodblock triptych. 14x27 inches. Author's collection.
7. Postcard showing the Korean Peninsular and Japan covered in cherry blossom. C. 1905. Author's collection.
8. Postcard commemorating the Russo-Japanese War, showing the "Bombardment of a Land Fort by One of Our Cruisers" and cherry blossom. Author's collection.