

Cognitivism in Classical Japanese Art and Literature: The Cognitive Value of Haiku and Zen Painting

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Abstract : This paper analyses the cognitivist value of traditional Japanese theories about aesthetics, art, and literature. These reflections were developed several centuries before actual Cognitive Studies, which started in the seventies of the last century. A comparative methodology is employed to shed light on the similarities between traditional Japanese conceptions about art and current cognitivist principles. The Japanese texts to be compared are Zeami's treatise on noh art, Okura Toraaki's Waranbe-gusa on kabuki theatre, and several Buddhist canonical texts about wisdom and knowledge, like the Prajnaparamitahrdaya or Heart Sutra. Japanese contemporary critical sources on these works are also referred, like Nishida Kitaro's reflections on Zen painting or Ichikawa Hiroshi's analysis of body/mind dualism in Japanese physical practices. Their ideas are compared with cognitivist authors like George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Mark Turner and Margaret Freeman. This comparative review reveals the anticipatory ideas of Japanese thinking on body/mind interrelationship, which agrees with cognitivist criticism against dualism, since both elucidate the physical grounds acting upon the formation of concepts and schemes during the production of knowledge. It also highlights the necessity of recovering ancient Japanese treatises on cognition to continue enlightening current research on art and literature. The artistic examples used to illustrate the theory are Sesshu's Zen paintings and Basho's classical haiku poetry. Zen painting is an excellent field to demonstrate how monk artists conceived human perception and guessed the active role of beholders during the contemplation of art. On the other hand, some haikus by Matsuo Basho aim at factoring subjectivity out from artistic praxis, which constitutes an ideal of illumination that cannot be achieved using art, due to the embodied nature of perception; a constraint consciously explored by the poet himself. These ideas consolidate the conclusions drawn today by cognitivism about the interrelation between subject and object and the concept of intersubjectivity.

Keywords : cognitivism, dualism, haiku, Zen painting

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