

35 The pursuit of nothingness in Japanese aesthetics: application to fashion design

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Abstract

This study considers the concept of nothingness in light of the theories of philosophers Daisetsu (D.T.) Suzuki and Kitaro Nishida, and compares them in terms of relationships with Japanese art and design. It also aims to clarify the nature of creativity inspired by nothingness, and to verify whether it can be a source of new possibilities in fashion design.

Nothingness is often defined as 'the opposite of something' (Hiromatsu, 1998: 1559), but is it really so simple? Speaking of the emptied no-mind, Suzuki said: 'Emptiness... liable to be mistaken for sheer nothingness is in fact the reservoir of infinite possibilities' (Suzuki, 1997: 86). Nishida described the perception of absolute nothingness as 'seeing the form of the formless and hearing the sound of the soundless' (Nishida, 1987: 77).

In works of Japanese art such as Tohaku Hasegawa's folding screen *Pine Trees*, nothingness is not merely represented as a space or blank, but is employed as a means of conveying crucial but invisible things by depicting the surrounding scenery. This rendering of the seen and the unseen taps into a limitless well of emotion.

In Japanese product designs such as Mujirushi Ryōhin (hereinafter called 'Muji'), nothingness brings adaptability that is recognised as adding value to the products. Their simplicity and blankness imparts not only the beauty of functionality, but also the ultimate in adaptability, so they can be accepted by any user.

In its 2011 autumn/winter collection, the Japanese fashion brand Matohu expressed the beauty of plainness in delicate colours and infinite gradations. In their 2015 spring/summer collection, a spirit of utilising the material's innate properties conveyed

simplicity and purity. The infinite creative potential of nothingness promises to foster the development of new possibilities in fashion design.

Introduction

In recent years, getting rid of things has attracted a great deal of interest, as well as minimalist style and decluttering. What will there be if you get rid of things? There will be nothing there, but will there really be nothing? Nothingness could be just nothing, but might not be just nothing. Because nothingness is nothingness, it could contain every possibility. In other words, the concept of nothingness can be said to have the power to create something. The purpose of this research is to examine the concept of nothingness from the theory of Daisetsu (D.T.) Suzuki and Kitaro Nishida, to clarify how the creation of nothingness is born through art and design, and to verify through the creation of works whether it is possible to develop the creativity that nothingness brings to fashion design.

The research method is summarised in the following four sections. Section 1 explains the notion of nothingness: understanding the concept of nothingness that Daisetsu Suzuki and Kitaro Nishida preached, and specifically considering the subject based on materials such as Suzuki (1997), *New edition oriental views*, Suzuki (1950), *No-mind*, and Nishida (1987), *Places · I and you: Six other stories*. Section 2 explains nothingness and art, and examines the relationship between art and nothingness based on concrete examples such as Japanese paintings: works such as Tohaku Hasegawa's folding screen *Pine Trees* and the text Chikaato (1998), *Reconsideration of Japanese beauty: Art and image between*. Section 3 explains nothingness and design. Japanese designs use elements of nothingness that are employed not only as functional beauty, but as more than that. The adaptability that nothingness brings is recognised as part of the added value of the product. This section examines the relationship between nothingness and design based on examples such as Muji Japanese design products, and specifically materials such as Hara (2008), *White*, and Nikkei Design (2015), *Muji's design*. Section 4 explains nothingness and fashion design, and analyses the relationship between nothingness and fashion design through past collections of works by the Japanese fashion brand Matohu: the 2011 autumn/winter collection *Plain Beauty* and the 2015 spring/summer collection *Primary (White)*. After the analysis, the development in fashion design will be verified through the creation of the author's own work.

1. The notion of nothingness

There are various concepts of nothingness such as zero, emptiness, and absolute nothingness. In Western philosophy, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and others perceived nothingness as 'the essence of nihilism. A place without being exists as a place to form the truth of existence, and existence itself appears in the way that it is rather absence or nothingness' (Hiromatsu, 1998: 1560). On the other hand, in Indian philosophy, nothingness is regarded as

an identical concept of absence and negation, and nothingness was regarded as a kind of existence which became a target of perception as a specific event limited in place and time. For example, 'there is no bottle on the ground' is interpreted as 'there is nothingness of bottle on the ground,' and the perceptions see 'nothingness of bottle' in front. (Hiromatsu, 1998: 1561)

Furthermore, in China, the concept of nothingness developed together in philosophy and the world of Buddhism. 'Nothingness as a Chinese concept originally seemed to be an unclear ambiguous state and the concept was dilute. Nothingness had once been kept away from the meaning of Buddhism's emptiness, but it was pushed back to the front of Buddhism again by Zen. Now this nothingness is a Chinese-style practical expression of emptiness and Buddhism' (Hiromatsu, 1998: 1561). With Daisetsu Suzuki and Kitaro Nishida, their notions of nothingness are also extensions of this.

Daisetsu Suzuki (1870–1966) was a Buddhist scholar, born in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan. He wrote many books about Zen in English, and spread Japanese Zen culture abroad. Suzuki described Oriental philosophy as follows: 'The Oriental people were conscious of improving the spiritual direction of their lives, not physical improvement. Beauty lacking spiritual beauty is just that, and it has nothing more than that any more. In philosophy as well, in the Orient, emphasis was placed on thought in the spiritual aspect directed inward' (Suzuki, 1997:29). Suzuki also mentioned no-mind as follows:

In Buddhism, no-mind often occurs. It is against the u-shin. U-shin is the mind with something behind it. It hides the planning that it has intention, a purpose. On the contrary, no-mind is the case of acting reflectively and unconsciously in earnest. [...] Even if so, no-mind does not necessarily mean that it is like wood or rock. Rather there is infinite work inside; it is empty like the zero' (Suzuki, 1997: 85-86)

Suzuki also mentions the difference between nothingness and nihilism: 'It is not just nothingness for mere existence. Since it is nothingness that transcends existence and nothingness, this should not be referred to as negative nihilism. It is the ultimate positiveness with absolute aggressiveness' (Suzuki, 1997: 116). Suzuki also describes the difference between philosophy and religion with regard to the experience of nothingness: 'There is existence on one side, nothing on the other side. And there is also something in a place away from that existence and nothingness. Though ideally it may be so, those who see it from the experience of religion do not say that. I would rather say existence is nothingness, nothingness is existence' (Suzuki, 1950: 31-32).

Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945) was a philosopher born in Kahoku City, Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan. He was also the founder of the Kyoto School, which was a Japanese philosophical movement centered on Kyoto University. Nishida described the relationship between nothingness and existence as follows: 'True nothingness must include elements such as nothingness and existence; it must be a place where nothingness and existence are both established' (Nishida, 1987: 77). Moreover, nothingness is not just a blank, but can create something, so Nishida stated: 'In knowledge it is thought that it reflects existence by nothingness, but in intention nothingness produces existence. What is behind the intention is creative nothingness. Nothingness that can create must be deeper nothingness than a reflective one' (Nishida, 1987: 98). That is, to make existence from nothingness is to 'reflect even mirrors to reflect. The material (*hyle*) itself could be also an aspect (*eidōs*). The mirrors themselves reflect what is behind the actions, so that latencies become reality and the materials work as well. It is to make material from nothingness' (Nishida, 1987: 108).

Suzuki's idea of nothingness is closer to Buddhist Zen-like nothingness. It is nothingness which has caught emptiness together and developed from there, and there are many assertions of aggressiveness and affirmation in nothingness. Rather than a philosophical consideration, Suzuki emphasises consideration from religious experience. On the other hand, Nishida insists on philosophical nothingness as consciousness. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between nothingness and existence, and a strong claim is made for nothingness's place from examples of reflections. Nothingness is not a blank that reflects existence, but it creates existence. Here his idea of nothingness departs from the Buddhist viewpoint of emptiness equating to nothingness. Nothingness has been mentioned in several philosophical fields, but it remains in reference to the fact that there is nothingness and only its existence is proven, but it is not considered that there is to be something born from there. However, both Suzuki and Nishida recognise existence as nothingness, and

even found possession originating from there. In other words, they also define the role of nothingness, and note that it is a rather aggressively creative one.

2. Nothingness and art

Spaces and blanks are used for composition and balance in artworks, and especially in paintings. However, from the viewpoint of nothingness mentioned above, these are not merely just spaces and blanks. Tohaku Hasegawa (1539–1610) was a painter born in Nanao, on the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan. In his early days he named himself Nobuharu Hasegawa; he worked as a Buddhist painter and he himself was also a Buddhist. He became a proper painter in Kyoto in his thirties. Hasegawa was influenced by ink paintings by Xia Gui and Muqi Fachang from China as well as Sesshū Tōyō. It is said that the reason why Hasegawa became interested in *Kannon*, *Monkeys*, *Crane* by Muqi Fachang (Figure 1) is probably in the existence of its dense atmosphere and pale light which envelops the monkeys and crane. Moreover, although they are not actually drawn, by expressing bamboo groves, dead trees or the margin area using the shading of black ink and with the strength of the brush, it creates an impression as if the atmosphere and light actually exist. Hasegawa was attracted to this magic-like technique of ‘drawing without painting, in other words, the infinite possibilities of ink’ (Tokyo National Museum et al., 2010: 40). These ink painting techniques that were brought from China were widely and deeply researched by Japanese painters such as Hasegawa. As a result, Japanese painters established the world of Japanese ink painting expression incorporating descriptions by chance, such as unique blurring and bleeding.



Figure 1 *Kannon*, *Monkeys*, *Cranes* by Muqi Fachang

Another thing that attracted Hasegawa and that he made as his ideal was soundless paintings. ‘Soundless paintings and noisy paintings should be carefully examined. Hasegawa’s idea of a noisy painting is something that is sunny and depicts the

activities of people. On the other hand, a soundless painting is something with snow, night, rain, moon, smoke and fog' (Kuroda, 2010: 37). After learning from Muqi Fachang and various studies, Hasegawa completed his own soundless painting *Pine Trees* (Figure 2) in 1593–95. What was drawn there was the expression of a black and white world of pine trees, or rather, a world of nothingness. 'It is clear that there is a dense fog enveloping the pine forest. However, the fog itself is not actually drawn. Expressing the front pine trees with rough darker ink and background ones with soft lighter ink, it is as if the mist embraces the illusion that the fog actually exists there' (Tokyo National Museum et al., 2010: 237). Here, nothingness has been drawn to represent important invisible motifs through descriptions of adjacent scenes, not just spaces or blanks. The depiction of this drawn part and the part not drawn brings infinite emotion.



Figure 2 *Pine Trees* by Tohaku Hasegawa

In Japanese art, not only in paintings, but also in Noh and poetry, there is something invisible, and we have found value as infinite possibilities.

It is a feature of Japanese beauty and art that the blank, motionless, voiceless, soundless space is the main part, not the part of the branches drawn. It can be said that the space is imaginary. The imaginary is nothingness, and the imaginary and the real are related to nothingness and existence. There is a philosophy of beauty of Japan in this invisible part, that is, where nothingness speaks. (Chikaato, 1997: 8)

Nothingness in Japanese art can be said to be one of the most important and special expressions to evoke infinite emotions. In addition, gradation, blurring and bleeding of ink have a crucial role of creating a creativity of nothingness by being at the boundary between nothingness and the world of existence. With delicate expression, that is, not just a completely blank whiteness, the creativity and emotion evoked by nothingness can preserve a creative consciousness.

3. Nothingness and design

This section examines the relationship between nothingness and design based on the example of Muji Japanese product design. Muji started as a private brand of Seiyu Co., Ltd. in 1980. At that time in Japan, when capital logic had precedence and sellable manufacturing was prioritised, Muji became its antithesis. Japanese graphic designer Ikko Tanaka (1930–2002) was one of the inventors of Muji and worked there as an art director. The thought that Tanaka wrote for Muji is as follows: ‘There should be a world in which simplicity does not hold back to luxury, but rather the intelligence and sensitivity that are hidden in simplicity are sources of pride. If we can expand such a value system, we can enrich our lives with fewer resources’ (Kunitomo, 2009: 147). This thought became the Muji brand concept, and since its creation it has always been maintained by an organisation called an advisory board consisting of external designers. As of September 2018, the advisory board was composed of four people: creative director Kazuko Koike, graphic designer Kenya Hara, product designer Naoto Fukasawa, and textile designer Reiko Sudo.

Muji started from the no-brand concept. The basis of product development is to make what is necessary, which is the basis of life, in a form that is necessary, rather than to expand their own brand name value. In order to create Muji’s necessary products they decided upon three principles: ‘selection of material, inspection of process, and simplification of packaging’ (Fukasawa, 2011: 59). However, this kind of elimination does not mean they are doing less, but rather what Muji is doing is actually more, to achieve more. ‘Muji’s aim is not to create products with strong taste such as ‘This is good’ and ‘This must be it,’ but to have a reasonable level of satisfaction as ‘This is OK.’ This ‘This is OK’ does not include giving up or minor dissatisfaction: it is a clear and self-confident ‘This is OK’ (Nikkei Design, 2015: 54). This is a concept similar to Suzuki’s denial of negativity in nothingness as mentioned above. It is an idea of positive subtraction of desire, decoration and strong taste. Hara describes the characteristics of Muji’s products as follows: ‘A product made from a very reasonable production process is very simple, but this is not minimalism as a style. It is like an empty vessel. In other words, because it is simple and empty, there is the ultimate adaptability to accept the thoughts of all people’ (Nikkei Design, 2015: 54). In addition, Hara elaborates on the difference between the characteristics of this emptiness and simplicity in detail as follows:

Empty and simple are different. About 300 years earlier than Western countries reached simplicity, Japan had already reached some sort of simplicity. [...] Through cultural developments such as Shoin-zukuri

architecture, the Japanese tea ceremony, Ikebana, gardens and Noh that matured in the Higashiyama culture era, Japanese people had already noticed that subtracted things have the ability to attract human images.
(Nikkei Design, 2015: 67)

In other words, it is a simplicity that produces imagination rather than simplicity that produces functionality. In Muji, we see an ancient Japanese spirituality which suppresses desire and individuality, subtracts from decoration and luxury, and also respects the process of lacking. Where there is nothing, it is not poverty but spiritual creativity, and it is a way of enriching people's daily lives.

4. Nothingness and fashion design

Next, the relationship between nothingness and fashion design will be analysed based on the example of Japanese fashion design brand Matohu's past collections. Matohu was launched in 2005 by Hiroyuki Horihata and Makiko Sekiguchi, and it incorporates Japanese traditional cultural aesthetics into fashion design. They presented the *Japanese Eyes* series in 2010–2018, which consisted of 16 themes based on abstract words symbolising Japanese traditional culture. From this *Japanese Eyes* series, this section will especially focus on and investigate the 2011 autumn/winter collection *Plain Beauty* (Figure 3) and the 2015 spring/summer collection *Primary (White)* (Figure 4) in relation to the concept of nothingness.

Matohu explained *Plain* as follows: '*Plain* here is not 'Plain' which has erased everything, but it includes all diversity. *Plain*, but there is something that cannot be put into words. There is plainness in the sense of infinity' (Matohu 2011AW Collection Invitation, 2011). Matohu also mentioned that this *Plain* could be discovered from everyday life: 'When we review everything in our daily life again, the world is quite rich. *Plain* is never subdued. On the contrary, it shows a delicate colour and infinite change, and starts to shine quietly beside us' (Matohu 2011AW Collection Invitation, 2011). Furthermore, Horihata has described the world that *Plain* produces as follows: 'There is a sense of *Plain* in Japanese aesthetics that has passed down through history. Japanese people love such a rich world that is beautiful with plain expressions. What they have in common is patterns that cannot be made intentionally by humans. The naturally made pattern and the signature that was born with time will make something a one-and-only existence' (Horihata, 2016). That is, Matohu's *Plain* is about a pattern with delicate colour and infinite change cut from nature and daily landscapes.



Figure 3 Matohu 2011 autumn/winter collection *Plain Beauty*

Matohu explained *Primary* as follows: 'It is the source colour without colour. It contains everything. The colour of the material as it is, without addition or bleaching or anything else. It always polishes cleanly and it will soon be damaged in time if it is not rebuilt. That was the most precious and sacred *Primary* colour for the Japanese' (Horihata, 2016). Matohu had observed Ise Shrine's regular removal, which is a ceremony to rebuild ornaments and plain wood trees once every 20 years. The former shrine, 20 years old, was a heroic figure. From this experience Horihata mentioned: 'The Hinoki cypress which has been stripped of bark is a bare material, so the change is also intense. Consider *Primary* itself under the aspect of finite time. Continue to repeatedly make things anew, to embrace changing time permanently. These two things will make the Japanese *Primary* more *Primary*' (Matohu 2015SS Collection Invitation, 2015).

That is the power that *Primary* has. Of course there is a value that human beings can never produce in the purity of *Primary*, but this purity will actually further increase its radiance as it changes over time. The intensity of change represents the purity even more. Matohu's suggestion of nothingness presumes that the philosophical motives born from abstract words are supported from the perspective of Japanese traditional culture and crafts. Matohu visualised this as a collection by linking creativity that human beings cannot produce such as nature and time with the creativity of nothingness.



Figure 4 Matohu 2015 spring/summer collection *Primary (White)*

Next, these considerations will be used to examine whether creativity inspired by nothingness can be developed for fashion design. Four key conceptual categories can be extracted that symbolise the creativity of nothingness. First, the existence of nothingness, nothingness and emptiness, infinite nothingness, nothingness and existence, nothingness that can create, and aggressive and positive nothingness. Second, draw by not drawing, nothingness that can speak, space, nothingness as a space of imagination, aftertaste, and suggestiveness. Third, undecorated, empty vessel, ultimate adaptability, and the ability to attract human images. Fourth, plainness that includes all diversity, infinite change, and purity in finite time.

The creativity of nothingness can be perceived from various viewpoints, and specifically the following points mentioned in Section 2: nothingness has been drawn to represent important invisible motifs through descriptions of adjacent scenes, not just spaces or blanks; and the depiction of this drawn part and the part not drawn brings infinite emotion. From here, attention shifts to the 'boundary' of nothingness and existence. Nothingness cannot be a permanent nothingness. The creativity of nothingness is born through a depiction that leads from something-is-there to nothing-is-there. In other words, the boundary, or certainty, which separated nothingness and existence, can be reborn into the creativity of nothingness by description of the fluctuation and the blurring of the adjacent scene.

In the process of the author's fashion design, these considerations are reflected in the following points. Firstly, it is a total of eight looks of design, but all the silhouettes are aligned, while changing the material and length, and graphically expressing the boundary in each design. Secondly, overlaying the fabrics and colours, the elements of the design were made ambiguous. Doing so creates an expression like the boundary between object and object, with the design and the design boundary

disappearing like the blurring technique (Figure 5). Thirdly, the print pattern was inspired by Hasegawa's brush expression. Close observation of *Pine Trees* reveals that the beautiful gradations and elegance perceived from a distance were actually drawn with rough stroke expressions. Although expressing a depiction that leads to something in nothingness, rather it expressed complicated inks that divide the boundary. Based on this experience, the author produced a print pattern including the effects of gradation and contrast at the same time, and printed it on fabric by inkjet printing (Figure 6).



Figure 5 completed designs

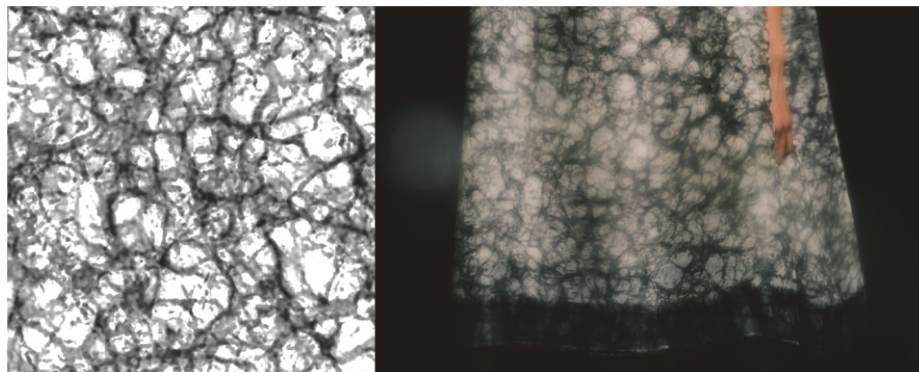


Figure 6 Inkjet print pattern

Conclusion

Section 1, on the notion of nothingness, noted examples of various notions of nothingness. There is nothingness in the meaning of negation in the sense that there is nothing, that nothingness exists as the form of absence and negation, and that nothingness is emptiness that is a higher presence that should be an aim to be reached. Among these ideas, Suzuki especially described nothingness as aggressiveness and affirmation of existence, within which is infinite work, and Nishida described nothingness as not just a blank, but with the potential to create existence from itself.

Section 2, on nothingness and art, reviewed examples of expression in which the main character motif is drawn by not drawing. It emerged that the part not drawn creates a lyrical creativity of nothingness such as imaginary space, lingering and emotion. There is a beauty of philosophy in Japanese art where this part of invisible nothingness speaks.

Section 3, on nothingness and design, presented examples in which there is no decoration, no waste, and no preference, and in which the adaptability that no one chooses to use is an advantage, and is a feature of the design. These actions are not minimalism as a style, but also consider the concept of subtraction whereby further creativity is expanded.

Section 4, on nothingness and fashion design, observed various phenomena born from nothingness such as nature as an infinite plainness and nothingness as a pure state where nothing is added, while simultaneously there is limitedness and so on. These abstract and philosophical motives have proven to lead to expression of fashion design supported by the perspective of Japanese traditional culture and crafts. In developing this into fashion design, the creativity of nothingness can be verified by expressing features such as making ambiguous the boundary between nothingness and existence.

This research enables the discovery of creativity and expressions conceived from the one abstract word 'nothingness' through various phenomena. However, regarding nothingness, it can be very difficult to think theoretically by putting it into a methodology like this. It emerges that nothingness has infinite creativity, and it is complex and intertwined with other phenomena such as emptiness and simplicity. Most importantly, nothingness itself must be disliked to be elaborated in such a unitary methodology. Such chaotic charm and unlimited possibilities of nothingness will not only lead to philosophy, but also to motivation for creative activities such as art and design, and

this suggests further possibilities for research. In addition, there are many cases in Japan that represent unseen imaginary spiritual phenomena like nothingness such as 'space,' 'evanescence,' and 'subtlety and profundity,' which are also promising phenomena for future research. At the same time, it will be beneficial to expand the field of research to the nothingness phenomenon outside Japan, and to discover new creativity of nothingness.

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Figures

Figure 1 Toda, T. (1973), *The ink painting taikei, volume 3: Muqi Fachang and Yujian*. Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha Ltd., pp. 13-15.

Figure 2 Tokyo National Museum: The TNM Collection [2018-12-15]
https://www.tnm.jp/modules/r_collection/index.php?controller=other&colid=A10471&t=

Figure 3 Fashion Press [2018-12-15] <https://www.fashion-press.net/collections/395>

Figure 4 Fashion Press [2018-12-15] <https://www.fashion-press.net/collections/3557>

Figure 5 Author's own work

Figure 6 Author's own work

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