



## *Shattering Representation From Landscape to Soundscape : Cage/Japan*

Charles Daniel

### Pour citer cet article

Charles Daniel, « *Shattering Representation From Landscape to Soundscape : Cage/Japan* », *Cycnos*, vol. 20.2 (La représentation en question – Microlectures–), 2003, mis en ligne en juin 2005.  
<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/704>

Lien vers la notice      <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/704>  
Lien du document      <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/704.pdf>

### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

### AVERTISSEMENT

*Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle.  
Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.*

*L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.*

# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

## Shattering Representation From Landscape to Soundscape : Cage / Japan

Daniel Charles

Daniel Charles, musicien (élève d'Olivier Messiaen au Conservatoire de Paris : premier prix, 1956) et philosophe (docteur d'État sous la direction de Mikel Dufrenne, 1977), a fondé et animé pendant vingt ans le Département de musique de l'université Paris VIII. Il a été responsable de l'enseignement d'esthétique générale à l'université Paris IV, puis à l'université de Nice. Il a publié, outre nombre d'articles, plusieurs ouvrages, dont six traduits en allemand et deux en japonais. Ses entretiens avec John Cage (*Pour les Oiseaux*, 1976) viennent d'être réédités (Paris, 2002) à l'occasion du dixième anniversaire de la mort du compositeur. Université de Nice - Sophia Antipolis, France. E-mail : <yes-hello@hotmail.com>.

The lay-out and arrangement of the Ryôan-ji garden in Kyoto (Japan), especially as shown in Ozu's film *Late Spring* (1949), raises the issue of the irregular and the unpredictable in art. The relationship between the sand of its surface and the fifteen stones which disrupt its surface is fundamentally enigmatic. Some time after visiting the garden, John Cage started to collect stones and composed a piece inspired by the garden. This article, a synthesis of the author's lecture, attempts to show how the concept of representation is made to slip.

Ce qui suit est la reprise d'une conférence prononcée par Daniel Charles dans le cadre des activités du Centre de Recherches sur les Écritures de Langue Anglaise, reprise faite par lui-même. Elle rejoignait, et rejoint toujours, les préoccupations théoriques du Centre concernant la problématique de l'opération de représentation ou "représentationnalité" dans l'écriture, que celle-ci relève d'un texte écrit, pictural, photographique ou, en l'occurrence, musical.

During the twentieth century, the "dry" garden of Ryôan-ji temple at Kyoto has attracted a great number of visitors, especially photographers and filmmakers, not only from the West, but also, and first and foremost, from the East. For example, Ozu Yasujiro has explored the "poethics" of the place in a well-known sequence of his film, *Late Spring* (1949). In this sequence, there are seven cuts, out of eight shots, which concentrate on the Ryôan-ji rocks. These cuts have been analysed, in a traditional perspective as emphasizing the deep contrast between the monumentality of the rocks and the "impermanence" and flimsiness of what the actors say when they speak of family life. Hence a question is raised: is such an "impermanence," in itself, permanent?

No wonder that a young Japanese artist and critic, Suzuki Yuuko, has criticized "from a Japanese point of view", during one of my seminars of Aesthetics at the University Paris VIII, what she considers as "the standard analysis," generally due to Western critics, of the function of Ozu's cuts. Far from being only "pillow shots," a word invented by Noël Burch from the Japanese *makura-kotoba*, in order to describe the interlinking of meanings which may be found in some pivotal places when one reads a Japanese poem (an interlinking which, as such, is likely to obscure the real flavour of Ozu's "continuity of no-continuity"), Ozu's cuts rather

depend upon what Suzuki Yuuko calls *ma*-shots. These disrupt time and space in such a manner that the “rhythm” which they introduce may not be controlled according to our “normal” ways of reading or phrasing. Indeed, when we read or phrase a sentence or melody, we try to ward off, at least in principle, the irregular and the unpredictable. But, to Suzuki Yuuko’s eyes, Ozu’s film may well seem to throw back in question such a “principle.”

Hence the riddle, the “enigma” to which the Ryôan-ji stone garden itself seems to invite us: doesn’t it allow by itself a perpetually other, irregular or unpredictable, manner of reading? This is what John Cage, when he visited the Ryôan-ji garden in 1962, did explain to his Japanese host; should the raked sand be equated to the Void or Emptiness, the mapping out of the rocks could as well be seen as resulting from chance operations...

Some twenty years later, Cage began to be interested in collecting stones: for him, a “particular rock” could perfectly resemble “an exhibition of several works of art.” At the same time, in 1982, he was asked by a publisher in Marseilles, André Dimanche, to design a cover for a French version of his *Mushroom Book*, which would inaugurate a series of fifteen books called “Editions Ryôan-ji,” all of which were paperbacked with a half-tone engraving of raked sand. Since there are fifteen rocks in the Ryôan-ji garden, Cage decided to draw all around fifteen small stones of his collection, “placed at I Ching-determined points on a grid the size of the cover plus the flaps.” In January 1983, he took the same stones to make etchings at the Crown Point Press. Since “what can be done with pencil on paper cannot be done with needle on copper,” he had to multiply, always thanks to chance operations, the number of stones in order to rediscover “the mystery produced by pencils.” Then, applying the same formula to his experimental drawings, he began to draw the well-known “number” series entitled

#### **Where R = Ryôan-ji**

As Ulrike Kasper has noticed, since R is taken as being synonymous with 15 — the number of rocks in the garden — the title may be read as this question: Where is the Ryôan-ji garden? The answer is immediately and tautologically given: no doubt, the garden is the garden, that is fifteen rocks; no doubt, the (innumerable) grains of sand, the incalculable sand, cannot be taken into account — and yet it exists! (Of course, one is free to add various numerical precise details concerning the gestures, or the pencils required: they will allow to identify a particular piece in the series).

The next step for John Cage was a musical one. Later that same year, an oboist asked him to compose some solos to play in Japan. Amazed to see that in order to play oboe, one has to divide the octave into twenty-four tones, the composer decided to provide an extremely precise score, and he prepared two sheets containing graphic notation — i.e. two “gardens” of sound to be “brushed” by the performer, the first (for the oboist himself) with glissandi following the curves traced from the perimeters of the stones used for the etchings and drawings, the second (conceived as an accompaniment representing the “empty” sand) for “a percussion part having a single complex of unspecified sounds played in unison, five icti chance-distributed in meters of twelve, thirteen, fourteen or fifteen” — so as to prevent one’s mind from analyzing any rhythmic patterns. Entitled Ryôan-ji, this series did grow from 1983 to 1985 with several (superimposable) parts (or “gardens”) for various instruments — flute, contrabass, voice, trombone and eventually cello, the latter was left unfinished in 1992, the year John Cage died. All of them had percussion parts added to them, but in meters quasi-impossible to sort out...

As James Pritchett said, John Cage’s Ryôan-ji music “does not so much comment about this model of the garden as it embodies it”: the two musical elements, for instance percussion and oboe, “act in the same way as the sand and stones of the garden act,” so that the resulting piece neither communicates nor expresses the image, because it “is the image — it acts in the way that the image acts.” Thus, in accordance with Ananda K. Coomaraswamy’s terms, it keeps on “imitating Nature in her manner of operation.”

In other terms, Ryôan-ji does not have to resemble its model ( the real garden ). Moreover, there is nothing typically Japanese to discover in it. Yet, its source is clearly non-Western: Cage's Orientalism may be called "conceptual" or oblique, because it is based, "not on the acquisition of new sonic objects but concerned with posing unanswerable or indefinite musical questions" (John Corbett). It is a post-modern Orientalism because, if one obeys John Cage's motto "to rid oneself of ego and style," it "functions to impart the same ideological blankness, the same unpartisan pretense and, ultimately, the same universal scientificity as experimental methodology does in the realm of hard science. Where an older model of scientific inquiry as the apex of control and rationality was the discursive formation in which serialism was elaborated, experimentalism takes the image of science as inquiry and looks forward to new paradigms of fuzzy logics, chaos theory, probability and chance" (John Corbett).

The "indeterminate" quality of the experimental process, as N. Katharine Hayles has shown in her essay about "Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science," is fully open toward the future. Nevertheless, one still has to ponder over the outcome: does it really "evade the underlying value system that produces it?" Studying some Japanese composers, from Mayuzumi and Takemitsu to Ichianagi Toshi and Takahashi Yuji, and some other remarkable non-Japanese members of the "new wave" of "Asian neo-Orientalism," such as Nam June Paik or Tan Dun, Corbett observes that, inasmuch as they belong to a "Cagean" conceptual universe, they have to turn "the usual paradigm on its head": an Asian composer "uses techniques devised by a Western composer inspired by Asian philosophy," and his work "is played for an Asian audience which hears it as an artefact of the bizarre West" — so that "Orientalism" is reflected back and forth like a multi-cultural mise en abyme."

What Corbett suggests is that perhaps fragments of "imperialist" and "colonialist" ideologies may be found here. But as he himself recognizes, "the music of the Asian neo-Orientalists, at its best and most provocative, manages to subtly subvert them both." In that perspective, the Ryôan-ji stone garden's legacy has to be explored again — since it seems to conceal a number of possibilities not yet unveiled. In the light of what we began to investigate in connection with Ozu's films, and in the wake of what Suzuki Yuuko's criticisms suggested, one would have to analyze more precisely the function of "*ma*-shots" in Japanese images, videos and films. One of the most recent of them, owed to the Japanese videast Iimura Takahiko, who had already devoted his *MA (Intervals)* in 1975–1977 to the problematics of "*ma*," concerns, as the title tells, *MA: space-time in Ryôan-ji garden* (1989). In this film, Iimura situates the place — the reference to the Ryôan-ji temple is clear — in a secondary position next to the film strip, thus articulating space and time through a dash or slash which hyphenizes both dimensions, i.e. precludes all marginalizing of one from the other, while giving to each its full independence.

In a similar, non-dualistic vein, the subtle musical "accompaniment" of Iimura's film, due to the Japanese composer Kosugi Takehisa, instead of phrasing the quiet navigation of the camera, contains some isolated percussive events which dramatically disrupt the silent ground at irregular times.

Kosugi is one of John Cage's successors at the head of the music section of the Merce Cunningham and Dance Company. Together with Iimura's images and Isozaki's poems, his music, as John Cage said about Tan Dun, "is one we need as the East and the West come together as our one home."