



Seeing Something as Something Else: The Logic of *Mitate* 見立て

Lorenzo Marinucci¹

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Abstract

Mitate is the name used to describe a typically Japanese visual trope, in which one object is meant to be *seen as* something else. While *mitate* is a defining element of Edo period *haikai* and *ukiyo-e*, a this kind of overlapping meanings can be found in much earlier sources. Its aesthetic effects are often smile, laughter, and parody, but *mitate* can also bestow a hidden depth to the commonplace and the contemporary through explicit and implicit connections to more noble and remote cultural antecedents. In this paper I examine *mitate* and *mitate*-like configurations throughout the history of Japanese aesthetics, and conclude by asking whether *mitate* is indeed a uniquely Japanese phenomenon and by analysing whether and how it can be relevant to some philosophical discussions (Husserl's and Wittgenstein's) concerned with the phenomenological and ontological status of images.

Keywords Mitate · Ukiyo-e · Haiku · Image · Buddhism · Visual studies

1 Masquerades

The two viral video clips are about twenty seconds long: they have been circulating on social media for several years by now, often with no clear credits. In the first one seven men, in yellow underwear and bodies covered in a light brown paint, crouch inside a huge glass mug. They begin furiously lathering their scalps, which are covered in shampoo. As the bubbles cover their heads and torsos, they slowly stand up, and the public starts to laugh: their messy mass now looks just like a foaming glass of beer.

In the second one, we see a green billiard table and a moustachioed player. The playing field, however, is just a frame and a green backdrop, inside which four men dressed in green, with faces painted in white and with coloured swim caps, are huddled together. They have numbers painted on their faces, and as the billiard player strikes,

✉ Lorenzo Marinucci
lorem86@gmail.com

¹ Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

they begin ricocheting inside the billiard frame with satisfying clacking sounds and hide one by one behind more green fabric in the corners. After slowing down, the last head-ball also falls in one such hole. The public has been laughing the whole time.¹

Both videos are selections from the television program *Kasō Tashō* 仮装大賞 (*Costume Grand Prix*), also known as *Masquerade* in its international airing, transmitted by Nippon TV between 1979 and 2021. The show gathered small groups or solo performers, often amateurs, who competed to stage the most ridiculous and impressive cinematic performances without the use of any cuts or special effects. Most of the props used were simple cardboard; many others relied on the presence of *kuroko* 黒衣, fabric-clad actors immediately reminiscent of kabuki theatre, while some others, like the two described above, are excellent examples of *mitate*: a Japanese visual trope in which something – human heads, in both these cases – is shown and manipulated in a way that makes them “look like” something else – beer, billiard balls, etcetera.

I begin from these examples because they show how the phenomenon of *mitate*, despite being mostly associated to the visual culture of the Edo period (1600–1868), is not only well alive in Japan, but also capable of crossing its borders. Despite the still relatively scarce studies on *mitate* outside of Japanese scholarship (Clark, 1997; Haft, 2013; Robinson, 2009; Shirasu, 2020; Tollini, 2017; Viswanathan, 2017), both its importance and its “uniquely Japanese” character are repeatedly stressed by commentators: “the concept of *mitate* [...] lies at the foundation of literature, drama and pictorial arts, and can be considered a basic element of Japanese aesthetics,” but “is different from the Western aesthetic of symbolism or abstraction” (Isozaki 1990, 157). The words “allusion” (Isozaki 1990) or “metaphor” (Shirasu, 2020) or even “art of citation” (Yamaguchi 1990) and “elegant confusion” (Robinson, 2009, 152) are used as attempts to translate it in English, but in every case its cultural specificity is stressed. I will address this claim of cultural specificity at the end of this text, but it is important to notice how the *mitate* in the *Kasō Taishō* sketches produce their comic effect on non-Japanese spectators as well. The origin of this laughter is itself an interesting puzzle. What does it mean for the head to be *like* or *seen as* a billiard ball, and why does this juxtaposition provoke laughter, in a way that is not typical of allusions or metaphors in general? Can we recognize a logical structure in this comic effect, and can the specific aesthetic environment of *mitate* in Japan teach us something about what it means to be an image at all?

2 The Proto-*mitate* of Older Sources

The term *mitate* 見立て is a compound of two verbs, *miru* 見る “to look” and *tateru* 立てる “to set up”. In modern Japanese, it has three principal meanings:

- a) the selection of something.

¹ <https://youtu.be/XPQmBCY2A80>; <https://youtu.be/RC0VpVOHPR8> [clips retrieved on 20th May 2024].

- b) a medical diagnosis (particularly in psychology and psychiatry).
- c) showing something as something else.

All three senses of the word have an aesthetic nuance, referring to processes on the threshold between perception and cognition: but it is the third one that primarily interests us in this context. Some dictionaries insert in this last header another Japanese word that is almost synonymous of *mitate*, the verb *nazoraeru* 擬える. *Nazoraeru* is not simply “to compare”, but to “provisionally see and treat something as something else”. The wider cultural implications of this mental stance were discussed already by Lafcadio Hearn, who in *Kwaidan* argued for its relevance not in an aesthetic context, but in a religious and magical one:

Now there are queer old Japanese beliefs in the magical efficacy of a certain mental operation implied, though not described, by the verb *nazoraeru*. The word itself cannot be adequately rendered by any English word; for it is used in relation to many kinds of mimetic magic, as well as in relation to the performance of many religious acts of faith. [...] For example: — you cannot afford to build a Buddhist temple; but you can easily lay a pebble before the image of the Buddha, with the same pious feeling that would prompt you to build a temple if you were rich enough to build one. The merit of so offering the pebble becomes equal, or almost equal, to the merit of erecting a temple... (Hearn, 1930, 57)

This imaginative process, allowing one thing to be seen *as* or *through* the other, can be in other words retraced in disparate contexts: from the tongue-in-cheek humour of a modern television show to the sophisticated parodies of *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 prints and *haikai* 俳諧, or event to the mystic “non obstruction between phenomena” (*muge* 無礙) of Kegon Buddhism. One more reading associated to the character 擬 is *modoki* 擬き. Meera Viswanathan’s study of *mitate* as a form of performative “reenactment, reaction and resistance” already recognizes the oppositional sense of *modoki* in early Japanese myth, for instance in the comical substitution of Ama no Uzume and Amaterasu narrated in the *Kojiki* 古事記:

We should not understand *modoki* as mimesis or imitation in which B apes the originary A, becoming an ersatz, quasi, or counterfeit A, but rather as the ongoing interplay between A and B, a kind of ludic competition [...] *Modoki*, unlike *monomane*, which is simple imitation of a physical thing, entails relational and agonistic reciprocity [...] (Viswanathan, 2017, 254)

We can therefore say that the term *mitate*, while flourishing in the context of Edo period *haikai* poetry, *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 prints and kabuki, has its own prehistory within the Japanese cultural context (Haft 2014, 69). The idea of a (more or less friendly) comparison between artistic expressions (*awase* あわせ) was already central in the context of Heian aesthetic production, and *waka* 和歌 poetry often relied on homophonic *kakekotoba* 掛詞 (“pivot words” or “hanging words”) to expand the meaning of a poem. A third element prefiguring the *mitate* of the Edo period is the substitutive appreciation of the Chinese landscapes

praised in literary classics through Japanese ones. This inscription of an imaginary or historical landscape into the present one will be later omnipresent in Bashō's travels (Shirane, 1998), in the late seventeenth century, but as argued by Yamaguchi (Yamaguchi 1991, 58) we can find examples of this tendency already in the Heian (794 – 1185) period, for instance in Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*:

One day, when the snow lay thick on the ground and it was so cold that the lattices had all been closed, I and the other ladies were sitting with Her Majesty, chatting and poking the embers in the brazier. "Tell me, Shōnagon," said the Empress, "how is the snow on Hsiang-lu peak?" I told the maid to raise one of the lattices and then rolled up the blind all the way. Her Majesty smiled. I was not alone in recognizing the Chinese poem she had quoted; in fact all the ladies knew the lines and had even rewritten them in Japanese. Yet no one but me had managed to think of it instantly. "Yes indeed," people said when they heard the story. "She was born to serve an Empress like ours." (tr. Morris, 1967, 241-2)

While Morris translates the reaction of the empress as "smiled", the original Japanese is the honorific *warawase-sorō* 笑はせ給ふ, which could also read as "laugher". Laughter, which was oppositional in the abovementioned sense of *modoki*, here sanctions instead, like a wink, a preferential connection established between the two women, as the lady in waiting is the only one to immediately "get it". The episode even reminds the story of Mahakasyapa, the only disciple who smiled as Gautama silently held a flower during his speech on Vulture Peak, from which Zen (Ch. Chan 禪), yet to arrive in Japan, established the idea of heart-to-heart-transmission (*ishindenshin* 以心伝心) (Blyth, 1974, 76).

3 Proto-*mitate* in Buddhist Contexts

This affinity to Zen's wordless understanding also means that from the Kamakura period we find more relevant examples of proto-*mitate* in a Zen context and in artistic forms heavily influenced by Zen. The religious sense of *nazoraeru* and the humoristic, contrarian sense of *modoki* are both present in this tradition: as argued by Tollini, "in the field of Zen, *mitate*, metaphors and the like are very often used in teaching." (Tollini, 2017, 34). To exemplify this rhetorical attitude, Tollini shows how, in a story discussing the status of *zazen* 座禪 (sitting meditation), a mirror, the classical metaphor for enlightened mind, can be comically conflated with the polishing of a roof tile (*masensakyō* 磨磚成鏡):

Baso 馬祖 was the disciple of master Nangaku 南嶽. Baso was sitting in *zazen* when master Nangaku came by and asked him what he hoped to obtain by sitting in *zazen*. Baso said that he was trying to obtain buddhahood. Then Nangaku picked up a tile and began rubbing it. Baso asked the master what he was doing and Nangaku replied that he was trying to polish it into a mirror. Baso said that this was impossible, and the master retorted: "how can you become a Buddha by sitting in *zazen*?" (Tollini, 2017, 36)

Rather than being a stable metaphor, the bait-and-switch of *mitate* has a polemic effect: if the empress was laughing *with* Shōnagon, Nangaku is laughing *at* Baso, a common instance in the often-antagonistic stance between Zen masters and their disciples. And yet offering a tile as a stand-in for a mirror, Nangaku is performatively explaining how zazen and Buddhahood are completely unrelated states *and yet* essentially the same, just as the opaque tile and the perfectly polished mirror are held together in the imaginative space of *mitate*. Like lenticular cards, which show two or more different images and colours according to the perspective of the viewer, both images are co-present as a potential, without fusing into one. The aim of this episode is not expressing the equivalence:

mirror: enlightenment = tile: zazen.

The first proof of this irreducibility is the fact that this neutralized exposition does not provoke any laughter. I believe that this is one of the primary distinctions between *mitate* and metaphor or simile: while in the latter case the connection between an object A and object B tends towards a one-sided, linear process, the aesthetic, comic, and even spiritual effect of *mitate* depends on seeing both things at the same time, without letting their similarity slacken this tension. Two more *kōan* 公案, “Hyakujō’s Fox” and “Isan’s Ox”, present a similarly paradoxical identity between human and animal.² In Isan’s (Kuei-shan 漉山), the traditional belief in reincarnation is presented not through the logically neutral form of a temporal succession, but to show self and other in a state of fundamental overlapping, a metaphysical conundrum that keeps the tone of a joke:

The Master came to the assembly and said, “After I have passed away I shall become a water buffalo at the foot of the mountain. On the left side of the buffalo’s chest five characters, Kuei-shan Monk-Ling-yu, will be inscribed. At that time you may call me the monk of Kuei-shan, but at the same time I shall also be the water buffalo. When you call me water buffalo, I am also the monk of Kuei-shan. What is my correct name?” (Chung-Yuan, 1971, 208)

This is “lenticular” quality of *mitate* can be interpreted as a concrete instantiation of the Buddhist notion of *muge* (Ch. *wu’ai*), “non-obstruction”, realizing itself in visual and verbal experiences. According to the Kegon 華嚴 (Ch. Huayan) School of Buddhism, historically very influential on Zen thought, on a fundamental level everything manifests itself in a state of interpenetration with anything, both horizontally, across apparently disparate phenomena (*jijimuge* 事々無礙) and vertically, between mere appearances and ultimate reality (*rijimuge* 理事無礙). A modern philosophical interpreter of *muge*, Nishitani Keiji, considered it a key term to understand the “transparency” of imagination, its spiritual value, and its ultimate identity with “emptiness” (*kū* 空) in a Buddhist sense:

² All anthromorphization is a kind of *mitate*, and it is from this recognition of human-like gestures in the animal (or even in the inanimate), or in the parodic recasting of the human in objects or animal forms, that a lot of laughter originates. Bergson’s theory of laughter conceived laughter as a sudden crossing of vital and mechanical aspects of reality, but Plessner’s recognition of this overlap in case of comic animals seems to better explain the origin of laughter in conjunction with *mitate* (Marinucci 2023a, 2023b, 54–55).



Fig. 1 The carving on Ryōanji's *tsukubai*

The delimiting wall of individuality (and self-sameness) becomes transparent, and the thing enters in a reciprocally revolving connection with others within the perspective of world-correspondences [...] Hereby “being” begins to become transparent from within itself. This shift, on a fundamental level, is the passage from the actual “reality” to image. (Nishitani 1986, 141; tr. Marra, 1999, 203 mod.)

Two more examples of *mitate* as an ironic-meditative experience can be found inside the Ryōanji temple, in Kyoto. On the veranda side, fifteen unworked stones are arranged on a bed of white pebbles. This Muromachi-period *karesansui* 枯山水 (stone garden) is a *mitate* in three different senses: firstly as it invites the visitors to contemplate dry, still stones *as if* they were roaring waves and islands; secondly, by further stressing the perspectival quality of such experience, given that it is quasi-impossible to see all stones from any single viewpoint; thirdly, by naming it “The Crossing of Tiger Cubs”, referencing a Buddhist apologue in which a tiger mother

tries to carry her three cubs through the two sides of the roiling ocean of samsara (Marinucci, 2023a, 58).

On the opposite side of the temple, the visitor finds an engraved stone basin (*tsukubai* 蹲) (Fig. 1). Shaped like a coin (first *mitate*), round and with a square hole in the centre where water gathers, on its four sides there are engraved the characters 五佳疋矢 (“five”, “bird”, “animal”, “arrow”), which make no sense together. But if the hollow square at the centre is *seen as* the radical 口 (“mouth”), each character around it is transformed, and the string now reads *ware tada taru o shiru* 吾唯足知, “I only know plenty” (second *mitate*). The clever wordplay acquires a further depth as the two levels of *mitate* interact: the positive value of the coin is problematized by its reproduction in a fountain, something that needs to be hollow in order to have a function, just as the writing on its borders can acquire its sense only through the dynamic interplay of what is present and what is absent, and yet connected to the former to create an image. The *tsukubai* was originally used for the water for tea ceremony, another artform developed in close connection with Muromachi period (1336–1573) Zen, and which shared its taste for *mitate*, for instance by “repurposing of quotidian objects as tea utensils,” (Viswanathan, 2017, 262) an innovation of initiated by the tea master Sen no Rikyū 千利休 (1522–1591). By transforming a humble object like a squash, a fishing basket, or a piece of bamboo into an exquisite flower vase, Rikyū established the hugely influential *wabi* わび (“tasteful poverty”) style of tea ceremony. The clash of contexts of *mitate* allowed for this juxtaposition of poor and rich, high and low, rare and commonplace: a lesson that the visual culture of Edo period would learn well but employ for very different ends.

4 *Mitate* in the Edo Period: *Haikai*

Even though the taste for these imaginary overlaps characterizes different ages of Japanese culture, it is from the Edo period that the word *mitate* starts being used in the sense of “seeing as”. The context around this new notion of *mitate* is the flourishing popular culture of this age, one in which economic growth is paired with strict political control, and in which the newly emerging urban class is trying to enjoy high culture – not only that of Chinese sources, but also of aristocratic and spiritual Japanese classics – without being willing (or able) to directly access it:

During the Edo period, *mitate* and *nazora* represented for *chōnin* [町人] (townsmen) culture an opportunity for reframing and reconstituting the traditions of high culture from which they were precluded in ways that ranged from the absurd to the subversive [...] the juxtaposition of unlike things (*mitate* and *nazora*) itself called into question the problem of value. The violent coupling of past and present, of *ga* [雅 courtly] and *zoku* [俗 popular], of sacred and profane, ends entropically in a question mark, forcing the observer to try to make sense of the strained juxtaposition. (Viswanathan, 2017, 264)

Haft defines *mitate* as a far-reaching “aesthetic strategy” of this age, not simply a trope to be used with single artistic works, but a way of creating new networks of

meaning through a dialectic between different genres and cultural contexts (Haft, 2013).

Indeed, the first use of the word *mitate* happened in the cultural blend of *haikai* poetry: a genre that had arisen from the Kamakura period *mushin renga* 無心連歌 (light-hearted chained poetry), allowing a greater freedom in themes and tone, and more importantly the poetic use of common words and terms of Chinese origins, which *waka* poets had to avoid. That also meant that unlike *waka* and serious *renga*, whose composition was essentially limited to higher ranks of society, *haikai* could be enjoyed by a much wider social circle, whose attitude towards its nobler antecedent oscillated between homage (for instance in the poetics of Ariga Moritake 1473–1549) and some shockingly vulgar subversions (in Yamazaki Sōkan's *Inutsukubashū* 犬菟玖波集, 1530), an opposition that presented itself also in the 1670 s-80 s Edo with the Danrin 談林 and Teimon 貞門 schools (Qiu, 2005, 25–31). The word *mitate* is first used in Matsue Shigeyori's 松江重頼 (1602–1680) 1645 *haikai* manual *Kefukigusa* 毛吹草 (Haft, 2013, 72), but we find fully realized examples of *mitate* already in the works of Moritake and Sōkan³:

落花枝に帰るとみれば胡蝶かな。

Rakkae ni kaeru to mireba kochō kana

I see a fallen flower/ flying back on its branch:/ a butterfly.

(Moritake).

月に柄をさしたらばよきうちはかな。

Tsuki ni e o sashitaraba yoki uchiwa kana

If we added a handle/ what a good fan it would be:/ the moon.

(Sōkan).

In Moritake's case, the central part of the verse literally reads *to mireba*, the conditional form of “seeing as”; hence a translation such as Carter's (“A fallen blossom returning to the bough, I thought – But no, a butterfly”, Carter, 1991, 338) underplays the way in which flower and butterfly are not simply associated mentally, but overlap in perception through a particular, “conditional” way of seeing. We find the same conditional suffix *-ba* form in Sōkan's poem, signalling the virtual expansion – from the actual moon to a round shape that can be freely manipulated in this imaginary space opened by this “if” – of a playful, active poetic mind. However, Sōkan's *mitate*, compared to Moritake's, has a stronger humour, thanks to the greater distance between the two round objects: not only in space and size, but also in terms of cultural associations. While similes between the moon and a mirror were not uncommon in *waka*, this *mitate* brings together an ancient, aloof poetic locus and a daily object that evokes sweat and summer heat: and this seeing-as extends beyond the merely visual, since this provisional unity between the fan and the moon is bringing with it the sense of freshness of the night sky in a sultry summer day. This perceptual-imaginary jump will become the characteristic trait of Edo *mitate*, in which “something contemporary, daily, small, and cheap is the starting point of

³ All poetic translation by the author. *Haikai* quoted in Kōda 1990, 65.

this ‘metaphor’ (*nazoraeru mono* 擬えるもの), and shifts into to something rare, cultural, ancient and noble, etc.” (Kōda, 1990, 65). Notably, the dialogical structure of *haikai no renga* 俳諧の連歌, in which different authors had to respond in a witty, quick way to the image presented by the preceding verse penned by another participant, made *mitate* also a way of connecting two verses (*mitatezuke* 見立て付け). In the Teimon school anthology *Kōbaisenkū* 紅梅千句 (1655) we find the following coupling of verses:

こがねばなもさけるやほんの花の春.

Koganebana mo sakeru ya hon no hana no haru

The golden kerria/ has flowered too:/ it is truly spring.

真鍮とみるやまぶきのいろ.

Shinchū to miru yamabuki no iro

Its yellow looks just like/ that of brass coins.

(Namimatsu, 2022, 35).

The yellow *yamabuki* (*Kerria Japonica*) was associated to spring in *waka* tradition; but it was used also as a colloquial term for brass coins, so that the second poem can produce a comic *bathos* by juxtaposing the classical praise of beautiful flowers, seen with the “eye of *waka*”, with an irreverent “eye of *haikai*”, concerned with much more material things. *Mitate* in *haikai* has therefore a triple function: it can produce its effect as a “visual pun” within the single poem, it can work to connect two verses by different authors with an unexpected and humorous twist, and it can be approached as the essence of *haikai* genre itself, “conceived as a *mitate* of the expressive world of *waka*” (Kōda, 1990, 68). Moreover, this shift between high and low is not always one-sided: the unresolved tension of *mitate* means that the same process can occur in the opposite direction:

Higher culture and popular culture work as a double exposure. Straddling between both, *haikai* moves in two opposite directions at once. In other words, we can ask whether it is looking for what is noble and refined (雅 *ga*, *miyabi*) from the standpoint of what is common and vulgar (俗 *zoku*) or looking for what is vulgar and common from the standpoint of what is noble and refined. (Namimatsu, 2022, 418)

This double access to not only high and low, but also the exotic Chinese past and Japanese everydayness, so that what is temporally and spatially remote is accessed not through an actual travel to the foreign land, but through specific way of looking at what is close and present, will be one of the greatest innovations of Matsuo Bashō’s *haikai*, raising it to the rank of a fully autonomous genre characterized by the paradoxical “spiritualized irony” of *sabi*. Rather than being a major device of his poetry,⁴ it is the poetic persona of Bashō himself that is constantly recast in “double exposures”: from his early pen name Tōsei 桃青, “peach green”, which was an ironic inversion on the name of the Tang poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762), “plum white”, to the much more famous Bashō 芭蕉, a *mitate* juxtaposing the forlorn-looking,

⁴ For a discussion of some examples of *mitate* in Bashō’s work see Kōda 1990, 68–70.



Fig. 2 Gikkawa Shōshū, *Ehon mitate hyakkachō* 絵本見立百化鳥 (1755) [Kyushu University Library]

wind-swept banana tree planted by his disciples before his Fukagawa hut in 1681 and the poet himself, exposed to the “crazy wind of poetry” (風狂 *fukyō*). But it is especially through the physical movement of his travels that Bashō would keep superimposing his own figure to that of others: earlier poets like Saigyō 西行 (1118–1190), masters of different crafts like Sōgi 宗祇 (1421–1502), Sesshū 雪舟 (1420–1506) and Sen no Rikyū (*Oi no kobumi*), and imaginary figures such as Chikusai or the wandering monk of *nō* theatre.

5 *Mitate*, *Ukiyo-e* and Edo Period Visual Culture

Given the strong visual quality of *mitate*, even in a written genre as *haikai*, it was only fitting for it to eventually find its way in the budding medium of print. Starting from the early eighteenth century, the word *mitate* began appearing both in prose tales (Haft, 2013, 74–75) and in woodblock prints. The 1755 *Ehon mitate hyakkachō* 絵本見立百化鳥 (“Looking-as One Hundred Morphing Birds”) by Gikkawa Shōshū 漕川小舟 (pseudonym of the *haikai* poet and writer Yamamoto Kisei 山本龜成) is a comic twist on the classic pairings of birds and flowers, in which page by page both the animal and the plant are recomposed by assemblages of daily tools. (Figure 2).

The series was commercially successful: it was followed both by more birds-and-flowers *mitate* and by another series presenting Daoist immortals (*sennin* 仙人)

assembled out of disparate objects containing the syllable *sen*, the *Fūryū nazorae sennin* 風流準仙人 (Haft, 2013, 76–77). Other notable *mitate* illustrations showed courtesans reimagined as ancient Chinese sages, as in Katsukawa Shunshō's 勝川春章 (1726–1793) and Suzuki Harunobu's 鈴木春信 (1724–1770) *Chikurin shichiken* 竹林七妍 “Seven Beauties in the Bamboo Grove”, based on a pun between *ken* 妍 “beauty” and *ken* 賢 “sage”, referencing seven mythical Chinese men finding hiding from the political turmoil of the Jin dynasty (266–420) in the Shangyang bamboo grove. This kind of humorous or sensual contemporary adaptation was also associated to the terms *fūryū* 風流 and *yatsushi* やつし (Haft, 2013, 57–59). *Mitate* prints included landscapes as well: the juxtaposition of eight spots around lake Biwa (近江八景 *Ōmi hakkei*) with the classical Chinese *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang* 瀟湘八景 (Jp. *Shōshō hakkei*) had started already in the Muromachi period, both in painting and poetry, and this trope was taken along by the likes of Harunobu (*Ōmi hakkei no uchi* 近江八景之内 1760ca.) and Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川 広重 (1797–1858). Harunobu and others also further developed this theme, projecting it onto the human landscape of stylish women from the floating world (風流座敷八景, “Eight Fashionable Parlour Views”, 1768–70). One more genre of *mitate* pictures was that of *kabuki* actors, shown in their ideal role, recast as ancient poets, warriors, trees (Clark, 1997, 8) or even transformed into semi-anthropomorphic cats, as in Utagawa Kuniyoshi's 歌川 国芳 (1798–1861) series on a foldable fan format (*Neko no hyakumensō* 猫百面相 “A Hundred Portraits of Cats”, 1841).

Kabuki at large, just like *haikai*, developed with an affinity for *mitate* already at a genre level: according to Gunji, *yatsushi* やつし (adaptations of the old and noble into the contemporary) and *mitate* are fundamental elements of its aesthetics, as it attempts to:

[...] modernize everything, to translate it into terms of contemporary society, to parody the old (though not necessarily in the grosser sense) by recreating it in terms of the present and familiar. This means, for instance, that the characters appearing in a play must adopt dual identities; they will appear, perhaps, in contemporary guise, but will make it clear that “in fact” they are well-known characters from the past, and there will be constant cross-references between the two sets of characters and settings. (Gunji, 1985, 16)

This double-look is not simply thematic and intertextual: dramatic identity reveals are a staple of *kabuki* dramaturgy, and even in the staging the visual taste for *mitate* of the age is clearly present. Gunji gives the example of the dramatic pose (*mie* 見得) assumed in *The Revenge of the Soga Brothers* (*Soga no Taimen* 曾我の対面, 1676) by the eponymous brothers, Kudō, and Asana, which was not only an impressive show of theatrics, but “was also intended to represent a crane – symbol of long life and prosperity – flying over the summit of Mt. Fuji” (Gunji, 1985, 17). And furthermore:

The swordfights that frequently occur in *kabuki*, despite their apparent blood-thirstiness, also contain many examples of *mitate* and the various formations into which the participants are arranged in the course of a fight are intended to suggest all kinds of customs and natural phenomena [...] the beauty of *kabuki*

derives in large measure from this playful, fanciful, elaborately involved attitude [...] (Gunji, 1985, 17)

And as one might expect, this texture of quotes could keep reproducing itself almost indefinitely: for instance, we have a *ukiyo-e* triptych by Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿 (1753–1806) in which the very same scene is recreated by an assembly of beautiful women, “Beauties Seen-as the Revenge of Soga Brothers” (*Bijin mitate Soga no taimen* 美人見立曾我の対面).

One more notable example of multilayered *mitate* from the late Edo period are the 38 illustrated volumes (*gōkan* 合巻) *Fake Murasaki, Countryside Genji* (*Nise Murasaki inaka Genji* 修紫田舎源氏), with text by Ryūtei Tanehiko (1783–1842) and woodblock prints by Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1865), published between 1829 and the death of Ryūtei, in 1842. Characters and themes from the *Tale of Genji* were moved not to the present day, but to the Muromachi period, while probably alluding to the dallying of the shogun, Tokugawa Ienari 徳川家斉 (1773–1841). An interesting feature of Kunisada’s visual work for the volumes is the wide presence of *Genjikō no zu* 源氏香の図 (“Patterns of the Genji Incense Game”) patterns, both on the clothing of the characters and in the bindings of the booklets. The *Genjikō no zu* are glyphs originating from an incense guessing game (*kumikō* 組香) popular in Edo period. During a session of *Genjikō*, a randomized sequence of up to five different kinds of aloeswood was registered through vertical lines intersecting at the top in case of a reappearing fragrance: this would result in 52 different glyphs, each one of them associated to a chapter of *Genji monogatari*. (Marinucci, 2023b) The incense game, further popularized among the urban classes during the Edo period, would therefore let its players delve into the ancient atmosphere of the Heian court through olfactory memory, and the quoting game of *mitate* even allowed to weave something invisible – like perfume, or the essence of past elegance – into a visual token, which could be further disseminated in illustrations, kimonos, other accessories, or even confectionery. This use of *Genjikō no zu* outside of incense games became quite fashionable, and we find many examples of it, such as Kuniyoshi’s *Nise Genji Kyōjun Zue* 准源氏教訓図会, in which scenes of daily, common life from Edo period become *mitate* of *Genji monogatari* scenes and characters through the added note of one of these patterns. For instance, in the *Utsusemi* 空蟬 (1843) print, a woman and a child playfully collect the husk of a cicada from a tree. The scene is clearly referencing the *Utsusemi* chapter of *Genji monogatari*, in which the hollow cicada husk hinted at the emptiness of all things in “this mortal world” (also read *utsusemi*), thanks to the presence of the corresponding *Genjikō no zu* in the top left corner. The popularity of *Genjikō no zu* shows how even in the context of *ukiyo-e*, *mitate* was not just a downwards movement, bringing the classics down to the later age into a (more or less affectionate) parody, but was also able to project commonplace and the ordinary in a more spiritual dimension, bestowing on them an unexpected depth.

One last example, in which these two complementary directions of *mitate* are brought together is the “Vegetable Nirvana” (*Kaso Nehanzu* 果蔬涅槃図 1794ca.) by Itō Jakuchū 伊藤若冲 (1716–1800). Under the brush of Jakuchū, the traditional holy image of the reclining Buddha about to reach *parinirvana* with his physical

death is recast in a *mitate* that uses different kinds of fruit and vegetables (Arae, 2005). At the centre of the composition, lying down on a basket, a big daikon takes the place of Gautama, surrounded by disciples that are also shown as squashes, radishes, and other kinds of produce.

Jakuchū, whose own family ran a greengrocer in Nishiki, Kyoto, and had often included fruits and vegetables in his painting, had temporarily taken over the family business after his father's death. Here the *mitate* is at the same time a parody of the utterly serious scene of Buddha's death,⁵ substituting the austere and sublime body of the enlightened one with a humble, inanimate daikon, but also a deepfelt homage to Jakuchū's origin, who after losing both parents and his brothers spent his last years in the Zen temple Sekihōji. One more key to interpret the piece, which brings it back to the earnestness of a doctrinal discussion without making it lose its humorous value, is the idea of *sōmokujōbutsu* 草木成佛 "Grass and trees becoming Buddhas". This notion developed in China and then in Japan as a result of arguments about the presence of Buddha nature (*busshō* 仏性) in all human beings, sentient beings at large, or even – in a radical nondual frame – to non-sentient life like plants. The Chinese Tiantai 天台 (Jp. Tendai) patriarch Zhanran 湛然 (711–782) defended this position basing it on "the nondualism of sentient beings and their environment (*yibao buer*, Jp. *ehō funi* 依報不二), the all-pervasiveness of the universal Mind (*xinwai wubiefā*, Jp. *shinge mubeppō* 心外無別法), and the absolute nature of conditioned phenomena (*suiyuan bubian*, Jp. *zuien fuhen* 隨緣不變)" (Rambelli, 2001, 10), while further Tendai practitioners in Japan, notably Annen 安然 (841–915) stressed how the Buddhahood of grass and trees was not merely a potential, but as for any other beings it was in a way already realized, as the "original enlightenment" (*hongaku* 本覺) shared by all beings (Sueki, 2015). This Tendai doctrine would later deeply influence Zen. In Jakuchū's *Vegetable Nirvana*, the daikon-Buddha *mitate* is therefore not only an affectionate parody, bringing the holy into the profane, but also a friendly challenge, to painter and viewer alike, to minds and eyes up to the point of recognizing full Buddhahood and encompassing interconnection even in something as humble and commonplace as a bunch of vegetables. In the productive ambiguity of *mitate*, seeing the comic in the sublime and the sublime in the comic, making them both "ready to suddenly switch into the other", created a revolving quality that according to the philosopher Kuki Shūzō characterizes the whole field of East Asian "poetic spirit" (*fūryū*), allowing it to be "a witness of the comedy and tragedy of human existence." (Kuki, 2019, 111–2).

⁵ Other *mitate-e* 見立て絵 of Buddha's death were produced in the Edo period. Sometimes they were closer to a reverential spirit, as in the case of Aoki Mokubei's 青木木米 (1767–1833) *Bashō nehanzu* 芭蕉涅槃図 (1832), representing the death of the *haikai* master as that of a high ranked monk, but with comical figures reminiscing of Buson's; but in other cases they were more irreverent parodies, such as in Utagawa Yoshikazu's 歌川芳員 *Maguro nehanzu* 鮪涅槃図, in which the lying shape of the dying Buddha is substituted with lumbering tuna.

6 *Mitate* as an Intercultural Issue

Even today, *mitate* is not dead. It can be featured in Japanese television shows; and walking through a Japanese city, one can recognize glimpses of it in advertisement, or in the *gashapon* ガシャポン (randomized toy capsules) stands that humorously bring together animal, vegetable, human and inanimate shapes through unexpected visual puns. In recent years, the *mitate* works of Tanaka Tatsuya 田中達也 (1981-) keeps this tradition alive with some interesting twists, creating miniature landscapes in which industrialized, impersonal objects become something else through the interplay of very different scales, transforming them into the protagonists of a tiny world full of harmonious activities. Much of his work has become viral through social media: and just as in the case of *Kasō Taishō*, it seems that *mitate* as a visual form of humour, independent from language or cultural associations as it was the case for *ukiyo-e*, can cross cultural boundaries without much effort.

After this first look at the various ages and scopes of *mitate* and *mitate*-adjacent phenomena in a Japanese context, I would therefore address two issues in these last sections:

- a) whether *mitate* should really be conceived as a “uniquely Japanese” visual twist;
- b) whether this “looking as” has something general (or even universal) to teach about the ontology of images.

It is hard to give a precise answer to the first question. Hearn stressed how *nazo-raeru* was untranslatable in English, and yet went on offering typical examples of mimetic magic, for which it would not be difficult to find many analogous ones across other ages and cultures. It could be argued that *mitate* is the prosecution by artistic means of what is essentially the process of pareidolia, the “tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern” (Mirriam-Webster). Even etymologically, both words contain the sense of looking at an image (*mi* and *eidolia*) and of doing so from a specific perspective (*tate*, and *para*-). Leonardo da Vinci, in the section of his notebooks dedicated to painting, offered interesting advice on a “way of developing and arousing the mind to various intentions” by exploiting this psychological phenomenon:

I cannot forbear to mention among these precepts a new device for study which, although it may seem but trivial and almost ludicrous, is nevertheless extremely useful in arousing the mind to various inventions. And this is, when you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which you could reduce to complete and well drawn forms. And these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine. (Da Vinci, 2003, 873-4)

While “trivial and ludicrous”, this visual aberration also holds within itself an “infinite variety” of possible experiences, so much that it can be recommended as part of the pedagogy of painters. Pareidolia can therefore be conceived as the original link between perception and image, the level at which something stops being merely *seen* and begins to be *seen as*, something arising out of an even more general human tendency to perceive patterns in unrelated phenomena (apophenia). On the other hand, despite this recognition of a trained pareidolia as a useful tool for the artist, *mitate* is not an explicit theme of Leonardo’s painting. What is perhaps the most immediate example of *mitate*-like images in European painting is the later work of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526–1593). Arcimboldo’s assembled visages are *mitate*-like because in them volumes and colours of disparate objects are used to compose human figures: there is even the striking parallel between his work and another famous *mitate* work by Kuniyoshi’s “Looks Fierce but he is Really Nice” (*Mikake wa kowai ga tonda ii hito da* みかけハこハゐがとんだいゝ人だ, 1852ca.), an assemblage of one big visage out of many naked bodies, which seems to hint at a parallel sensitivity despite the absence of a direct connection. But the major differences between Arcimboldo’s work and Japanese *mitate* are also obvious. First, his faces appear through an assemblage of disparate parts; there might be some inherent similarity between one object and a single bodily feature – as in the roasted chicken becoming the *mitate* of a gnarly nose in *The Cook* (1570) and *The Jurist* (1566), but most of the objects in his work can be seen as a face only because of their overall placement, not out of inherent similarities. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the random object and human figures in Arcimboldo’s paintings are explicit, openly visible, while on the other hand many cases of *mitate* – aesthetic, spiritual, comic – rely on its being a “art of quoting”, on the way it mobilizes one’s cultural capital and wit (as in the exchange between Shōnagon and the empress) to recognize something that is clearly visible and yet deeply hidden (as for the paradoxical identity of Buddha and a daikon in Jakuchū’s *Nirvana*). It is perhaps with dadaism and surrealism, that the chaotic, haunting duplicity of *mitate*-like images begins to be first fully explored in a European context. Duchamps’s *Fountain* is, after all, a peremptory injunction to see-as, working the sanitary tool and the artistic waterwork into one thanks to their shape and affinity for liquids, with the additional, disruptive result of forcing the audience to face the superimposed coincidence of artwork and ready-made object. The use of images very close to *mitate* (together with other illusions) characterizes the work of Salvador Dalì (e.g. *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937) and René Magritte (e.g. *The Rape*, 1945), an ambiguity that must be understood also in its connection with psychoanalysis. The often-parodied Freudian tendency to see all kinds of objects as genitals could also be seen as a recognition of the “seeing as” of *mitate*, exploring the ways in which these “trivial and ludicrous” double images can disclose surprisingly deep themes, both on a personal and cultural level. It is not impossible that surrealism, a movement born and centred in France, developed a visual culture close to *mitate* also thanks to decades of Japonisme, which had introduced *ukiyo-e* in Europe. This is a problem for art historians, however; and even if present, such influences might have been – fittingly – not conscious.

We can therefore answer affirmatively, but with a good deal of nuance, to this first question: *mitate* does not seem to be a common or clearly defined visual trope

in Europe; but its articulation in Japanese sources can, on the other hand, teach us to *see as mitate* other figurative works, also outside of Japan. We have, for a change, an interpretative tool originating outside Europe but rightfully applicable to European artworks.

7 *Mitate* and the Ontology of Images

Despite this comparative lack of centrality of *mitate* in European art history, a well-developed analysis of the problems entailed in layered image-consciousness and in “seeing as” something can be found in the work of two giants of twentieth century European philosophy, Husserl and Wittgenstein. Here we can offer only a most schematic account of both, recognizing how their influences and concerns are different, and how their works influenced very different philosophical traditions: and yet the economy of *mitate*, with its layering of distinct images in the same visual field, is a key problem for both thinkers. Husserl began focusing on image consciousness early in his career, in a series of lectures later published in *Husserliana* XXIII, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung (1898–1925)*. A core point of Husserl’s analysis of phantasy is his refusal of conceiving it as a “mental image”; for Husserl an image is a *presentification* (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of an object, relating to its objects “just as straightforwardly as perception does” (Husserl, 2005, 92), but without offering them as “present” (*Gegenwärtigung*). Husserl in general strongly refused any view of imagination as copy or retention of sensation (*Ideen* I §111). Husserl’s account of the imaginary tries to further distinguish *phantasmata*, in which an object of consciousness is given directly and yet as absent, and image-consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*), which shows a tripartite composition including:

- a) the physical image (“as this painted and framed canvas”);
- b) the image-object (*Bildobjekt*) “appearing in such and such a way through its determinate coloration and form);
- c) the image-subject (*Bildsubjekt*) “the appearing object that is the representant for the image subject); (Husserl, 2005, 20).

This separation, however, does not exclude the ambiguous permeation of each of the three; Husserl is interested in what happens, for instance, when a mannequin in a window appears, perhaps for a second, as an elegant woman:

Here two perceptions, or, correlatively, two perceptual objects, quarrel, each of which is posited or, respectively, has its positing quality, the one the quality of being convincing, the other the quality of striking one as strange. (Husserl, 2005, 582)

The most interesting overlap in image consciousness is however that between the image-object and the image-subject: while it is obvious that blots of ink and colour on a flat surface are not a tree or a beautiful woman, it is important to realize that neither the lines nor the drawing composition can or should correspond to it perfectly in order to be its image: art as a space for aesthetic expression and

enjoyment, rather than of momentary puzzlement before a *trompe l'oeil*, is possible because of this (usually non-thematic) gap:

The second important characteristic of resemblance in Husserl's theory is that the image object and the image subject cannot have complete likeness or overlap. To quote Husserl: "If the image-object appearance were really to be completely like the subject, not only as momentary appearance but as temporally continuous appearance, we would have normal perception and no consciousness of conflict, no image-object appearance" (Phantasy, 155; Hua XXIII, 138). Therefore it is not complete likeness but resemblance that belongs to the image consciousness (Phantasy, 156; Hua XXIII, 138)" (Nino-Kurg 2004, 68)

If the very possibility of image-consciousness is this layering, so that the image must at the same time make possible to be looked at *as* the represented object but also recognized as something else from it, then *mitate* is not some conceited and specific trick or visual trope, but rather a playful revelation of what it means to be an image in the very first place: every image-consciousness implies such a "seeing something as something else". This process is usually so straightforward to become implicit; but in *mitate* a duplication of the image subject stretches and expands this moment; and it is this very gesture of crossing and bringing together something disparate not merely through a conventional, voluntary association, but through the wider-than-expected freedom of imagination, that results into laughter.

Wittgenstein, too, in his famous remarks about "seeing as", inspired by Jastrow's duck-rabbit drawing, stresses how we "must distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and an aspect's 'lighting up'." (Wittgenstein, 2009, 204, §118). He introduces the "concept of picture-object (*Bildgegenstand*)" to stress how pictures are far from static representations, but something with which we engage actively and in different ways: "Seeing as...' is not part of perception. And therefore, it is like seeing, and again not like seeing" (Wittgenstein, 2009, 207, §137). Therefore "the lighting up of an aspect" should be understood as "half visual experience, half thought." (Wittgenstein, 2009, 207, §140). The example of bistatic images like the duck-rabbit or layered ones like *mitate* breaks the alleged neutrality of images, the chance of taking them as linear processes or transparent windows, revealing instead their creative "density". We do not see *images*, nor we do see *through* images, but as argued by Alloa, we can sometimes see *with* them:

Stating that we see with images means that, rather than being neutral surfaces of the beholder's projection, images generate gazes that, although never ultimately fixed, are by no means arbitrary. The form of the image [opens] up a space for potential vision. [...] the density of images, their material stratification and their phenomenological overdetermination demands a specific time of contemplation. Seeing with images then means that the evidence they provide resists generalization without further ado: iconic evidence is not a ladder that could be thrown away after we have climbed it, but remains inherently situation-dependent, case-sensitive and thus, ultimately, precarious. (Alloa 2011, 118)

A *mitate* is a picture that holds within itself the possibility of other pictures, meanings, and figurative moments. It brings with its materiality the chance of a little jolt of recognition, accompanied by a laughter or smile, as well as the pleasant interpersonal sensation of being part of a community of discerning viewers, to get the joke. This density holds within itself a specific time of unfolding, not only in the present act of gazing, but also in terms of temporal and historic depth, as the *mitate* reveals its sense by referencing a multitude of other pictures and visual experiences, perhaps far in time and space, but brought back into its chaotic manifold, at the same time light-hearted and surprisingly deep. As a meta-image, it has something to teach to visual studies at large; but to be relevant beyond its originating culture, it does need to become culturally neutralized; it carries with it the specific historical layering and the social tensions that shaped Japanese history, and appreciating its meanings is in equal measure intellectual challenge and aesthetic pleasure.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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