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THE ROLE OF MYTHS IN JAPANESE CALLIGRAPHY'S INTERPRETATIVE PROCESS

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ABSTRACT. ***The Role of Myths in Japanese Calligraphy's Interpretative Process.*** This article illustrates the role of myths in the interpretative process of calligraphic works. Being considerably different from Western calligraphy, Japanese calligraphy (*shodō*) may seem at times visually similar to abstract art. However, calligraphic works – and *shodō* as art – are rich in meaning and abundant of myths. Focusing on both linguistic and visual elements of calligraphy, the article depicts how myths can be identified in a calligraphic work and how they provide a better understanding of the particularities of *shodō.* In order to illustrate how myths uncover new layers of meaning, the article incorporates an analysis of a calligraphic work created by Rodica Frențiu, underlining the process of accessing the transcendent meaning.

Keywords: *shodō, Japanese calligraphy, calligraphy, cultural semiotics, Japanese studies, kanji, myth, Zen, Buddhism*

REZUMAT. ***Rolul miturilor în procesul interpretativ al caligrafiei japoneze.*** Acest articol ilustrează rolul miturilor în procesul interpretativ al operelor caligrafice. Fiind considerabil diferită față de caligrafia occidentală, caligrafia japoneză (*shodō*) poate părea uneori similară vizual cu arta abstractă. Cu toate acestea, operele caligrafice – și *shodō* ca artă – sunt bogate în semnificații și mituri. Accentuând atât elementele lingvistice, cât și elementele vizuale ale caligrafiei, articolul descrie modul în care miturile pot fi identificate într-o lucrare caligrafică și modul în care acestea oferă o mai bună înțelegere a particularităților *shodō*. Pentru a ilustra felul în care miturile relevă noi niveluri de sens, articolul încorporează analiza unei opere caligrafice create de Rodica Frențiu, subliniind procesul de accesare a sensului transcendent.

Cuvinte-cheie: *shodō, caligrafie japoneză, caligrafie, semiotică culturală, studii japoneze, kanji, mit, Zen, budism*

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1. Introduction

"Myth", a concept amply discussed by Roland Barthes in his work *Mythologies,* has been used over the years in relation to numerous disciplines and fields of study due to its ability to provide an easier understanding of the different layers of meaning contained within discourse. Seen as a central point in the study of a wide variety of disciplines because of its correlation with semiotics and sign sciences, myths have thus become an important tool in the analysis of images.

Using Roland Barthes' theory of "myth", the study aims to show how an analysis of myths contained within *shodō* contributes to understanding not only Japanese calligraphy as an art, but also individual calligraphic works. The article aims to demonstrate how the interpretative process of a calligraphic work can benefit from an analysis of the myths contained therein. Accessing the deeper layers of meaning in a *shodō* work requires a semiological analysis of both linguistic and visual signs. For this reason, myths can become one of the elements that facilitate the interpretation of the creative act and reveal artistic meaning, in some cases this artistic meaning becoming the myth itself.

2. Concepts and Methodology

This study will use Barthes' concept of "myth", illustrating how during the process of decoding a calligraphic work's meaning the receptor can get a better understanding of the message by identifying the myths contained within the work and observing their function and effect. The article offers an overview of Barthes' concept of myth and extends it to the field of *shodō,* ultimately providing an analysis of the calligraphic work *Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void* by Rodica Frențiu, interpreting the myths and their role within the work.

A "myth" in Barthes' terms is a system of communication, a message (Barthes 1991, 107). Using Saussure's terminology, Barthes defines "myth" as a sign (composed of a signifier and a signified) that later becomes a signifier for another signified (113). Barthes proposes a dual classification of myths: on the left and on the right. The myth on the left seems to take the form of pragmatism and is the "language of man as a producer" a language that "acts the object" (146) and does not include a vast and complex mythological vision because it lacks a vital element: imagination (Barthes 1997, 280). This expressive element is, however, present within the myth on the right, as this type of myth is defined by its ability to constantly reinvent itself (Barthes 1991, 150). The myth on the

right encompasses every aspect of daily life, from speech to household activities, to arts. For this reason, in the current study, the myths presented in relation to Japanese calligraphy will be perceived as myths on the right.

The use of myths allows us to take a critical look at the things that are taken for granted in everyday life (Peim 2013, 33). Further emphasizing the universal character of myths regardless of the field, Barthes underlines that nothing can escape myth (Barthes 1997, 261). Similarly, Wunenburger attests the importance of myth, considering it as an irreplaceable cultural instrument through which the sharing of meanings and values is achieved, guiding each individual to live and think (Wunenburger 1998, 46-47). These characteristics of myth make it possible to apply its theory to a wide range of fields, this study's aim being to show how myths can be identified and used within Japanese calligraphy both as a semiotic system and within individual works. In *shodō*, myth can be an important means of illustrating the way in which calligraphy is perceived and the way in which it has maintained its relevance throughout different eras, managing to reinvent itself both in the consciousness of those who study and practice this art and in the consciousness of the general public.

Although myths are the focus of our study, we will extend our critical tools beyond Barthes' "myth" with notions that can provide a better outlook on the interpretative process of calligraphic works, such as Wunenburger's dual classification of meaning and the 5 main calligraphy styles used in *shodō*. Closely related to the concept of myth is the concept of *meaning*. Given the complexity of the image and the ways in which it can be perceived by the public, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger proposed two types of meaning: an *immanent* meaning, which can be perceived by the subject without too much speculative effort and a *transcendent* meaning, specific to images with a complex informative load, which requires an elaborate interpretive approach (Wunenburger 2004, 250). These two types of meaning can be identified in *shodō* as well, the transcendent meaning bearing similar aspects to the concept of myth as illustrated by Barthes.

Relevant for the understanding of myths in *shodō* and how meaning is perceived in this form of art are the 5 main writing styles which act as important tools in shaping and emphasizing the myth. Passed from generation to generation, the 5 main writing styles in *shodō* are *tensho, reisho, kaisho, gyōsho* and *sōsho*. In order to improve their craft, every *shodō* practitioner will master each style. *Tensho* originates in China, where it could be found in various inscriptions, stone tablets or monuments. *Reisho* was created when the Chinese Emperor Shin Huang Ti ordered a standardized style of writing the existing logograms (Sato 2013, 18). For this reason, *reisho* is particularized by precise, clear lines. The most

common style of writing Japanese logograms is the *kaisho* style. Literally meaning "correct style" (Sato 2013, 19), this writing style is currently the most used way of writing in both Japan and China, as it can be found in manuals, dictionaries and numerous books. Because of its ease of identification and writing, many *shodō* practitioners start with learning *kaisho*. However, this style is one of the most restrictive ones, as each stroke must be carefully placed in order to make the logogram readable and harmonious. Consequently, *kaisho* writing is specific to *shūji* (practicing writing correctly with a brush), rather than the art of writing *shodō*. By contrast, *gyōsho* and *sōsho* are often used in *shodō*, as *gyōsho* is a semi-cursive writing style and *sōsho* is a cursive writing style. The calligrapher has great freedom of expression when using *gyōsho* and particularly *sōsho,* creating a fascinating balance within the "flow of line and active empty space" (Sato 2013, 19).

3. Identifying Myths in *Shodō*

As previously mentioned, Barthes proposes in his research a dual categorization of myth: myth on the left and myth on the right. Given the fact that the myth on the right abounds in acts of imagination and is defined by its continuous transformation (Barthes 1997, 281-289), this key aspect can be identified within the semiotic system of calligraphy as well. In the case of *shodō*, this process of continuous reinvention specific to the myth on the right (281) can be observed on two levels: macro and micro.

At a macro level, one can observe the ways in which Japanese calligraphy has been reinvented over time in order to preserve its essence and traditions, yet always bringing a note of modernity, a dynamic vitality that keeps up with the contemporary trends. This phenomenon can be observed in the food industry, namely the visual appearance of the packaging, as well as the logos of Japanese foods and restaurants. In an attempt to highlight the authenticity of the products and services provided, many *sushi* restaurants often turn to calligraphers who write the business' name, subsequently digitizing the calligraphic work and ultimately turning it into an internationally recognizable logo. Similarly, in the food industry, whether it is *wagashi* (traditional Japanese sweets) or *sake* (Japanese rice alcohol) brands, *shodō* is becoming a symbol of tradition, subtly indicating the authenticity of the products or services offered. Calligraphy is perceived as a way to attract attention and even the loyalty of consumers, while ensuring the uniqueness of the logo, which cannot be reproduced by other businesses in the field. Therefore, Japanese calligraphy has become a myth of tradition in an age of digitalization.

Because *shodō* has constantly reflected the contemporary Japanese cultural changes, the process of mythicization of art by media (Kalyva 2016, 156) can also be felt in the case of calligraphy, as *shodō* is mythologized by its presence in all aspects of modern life: from advertisements to postcards sent on the New Year (*nengajō*), to using calligraphy to depict the names of businesses, restaurants, websites and create their logo by digitizing a calligraphic work.

The process of mythicization of calligraphy by media is closely linked to the adaptability of this art, which has made it possible to constantly evolve over the years, while keeping the essence intact. Even though it has survived, *shodō* has undergone a change in popularity or demand. If in the Heian era (794 - 1185) the practice of calligraphy was as important as learning how to write, nowadays *shodō* has become more of an art form appreciated by the general public, yet practiced less compared to *shūji.* Many *shodō* masters have started by practicing *shūji,* but due to its restrictive nature, *shūji* cannot be considered an art. Because practicing *shodō* calls for discipline and implies studying the classics and their works before finding one's own style, it has become less popular compared to the practical and straightforward *shūji*. However, the highly underlined expressive function of *shodō* differentiates it from *shūji* and opens up limitless possibilities for the calligrapher to create unique works.

In his essays, Barthes states that history evaporates in myth (Barthes 1997, 283), phenomenon which can be observed in the case of *shodō* as well, as it does not provide an extremely faithful and relevant context of the period in which a work was written. *Shodō* is closely linked to subjectivity and the inner self. Although the calligrapher can be influenced by the society in which they live, in order to achieve a high level of skill and mastery in this art, it is necessary to reach the state of *mushin*, a state in which the mind is free from any thought that might interrupt the calligrapher's focus. Any disturbance in the artist's mood will be immortalized on paper. Because myths are the "demand that all men recognize themselves in this image" (Barthes 1991, 156), the calligrapher is reflected in the image, in the calligraphic work. Given the fact that in *shodō* the brush acts as a reflection of one's mental movement (Davey 1999, 48), every hesitation, every disturbance of the *mushin* state of mind will be visible in the traces of the brush, in their thickness and in their harmony with the final result. A calligraphic work can be proof of the calligrapher's inner thoughts and vision at a certain point in time. Therefore, although *shodō* can be influenced by socio-cultural changes, its biggest influences remain the innovations created by different *shodō* schools or styles and the state of mind of the calligrapher.

In order to preserve its role in Japanese society and culture, calligraphy reflected changes in the Japanese mentality, as signs cannot be considered to have a stable or eternal meaning (Kalyva 2016, 28) and are in a continuous

process of transformation. Although calligraphy can reflect to a small extent the needs of society at a certain time – for example, the need for modernization by incorporating *rōmaji* in works – it is important to note that these artistic currents do not replace the old, but rather complement it by concomitant use of the ancient teachings of the masters and of modern techniques that reflect the values of the calligrapher. In this way, new currents and directions coexist at any point in the history of *shodō*, the calligrapher having at their disposal a series of styles that they can apply in order to evoke as faithfully as possible what they feel towards the logogram, word, sentence or poem showcased by their work.

History and the social context are for calligraphy tools that can reveal certain aspects such as explaining the preference for a certain style in favour of another, but they are not fundamental for the receptor in accessing the immanent meaning – and sometimes the transcendent meaning – of a calligraphic work. What facilitates access to the meaning of a *shodō* work is not necessarily the historical and social context, but understanding myths on which the work was founded: understanding the *shodō* myth, the fragment of the poem, the *sutra*, the words or logograms written, understanding the role of calligraphy in the context of Japanese culture's semiotic systems. Because it is not strictly subject to current changes and it does not have the need to render the outside world as it is at a certain point in history, *shodō* remains predominantly influenced by two major factors: the state of mind of the calligrapher and the interpretative process of the receptor.

The myth on the right's ability to constantly reinvent itself is not only visible on a macro level, within *shodō* as a semiotic system, but also on a micro level, within individual calligraphic works. Each calligraphic work paves the way for a multitude of interpretations at the same level of transcendent meaning, depending on the receptor. The myths that coexist within each work ensure that the interpretation of the audience will not be significantly different from what the calligrapher intended to convey, a calligraphic work accepting at the same time a wide variety of interpretative courses. In terms of the transcendent meaning, a series of possibilities of analysis opens up. Although different interpretations have essentially the same mythological core, they can acquire various connotations depending on the personal experience and on the mindset of the one who contemplates a calligraphic work. The personal experience of the receptor is closely linked to their knowledge of not only particularities of *shodō* as an art, but also of the Japanese language and spirituality.

Depending on the viewer, the meaning of calligraphy becomes fluid, taking the form of the receptor's experience. In semiotic terms, there is no a priori meaning (Lorenz 2016, 136), therefore calligraphic works do not have a

pre-existing meaning either. Similar to the *haiku* poem that by its very nature can accept a wide range of interpretations (Ikegami 1989, 389), a calligraphic work is open to the receptors' different interpretations, depending on their experience and vision. The process, the path followed, the methods used and the myths of each work become an object of interest for the semiologist, the calligrapher and the viewer altogether, allowing the work to acquire new meanings depending on the experience of the receptor.

Since the mythical concept has at its disposal an unlimited number of signifiers (Barthes 1997, 248), there are multiple calligraphic works that can reproduce an idea. As an example, the myth of ephemerality is illustrated by different *haiku* poems or sometimes by words or even by a single logogram. However, depending on the writing method, the type of brush, ink or paper used, each work reveals a different facet of the above-mentioned myth. What differentiates many calligraphic works circumscribed within the same myth is represented by details, by elements observable only after the deeper layers of meaning have been revealed. This difference will be made by the receptor, through what they perceive when the transcendent meaning has been reached.

In understanding the process of revealing the transcendent meaning of a calligraphic work, it is important to note that meaning is "motivated" (Kalyva 2016, 25) and there is always a cause that determines the choice of the signifier. In calligraphy, the artist has a reason behind opting for one type of paper over another, a reason for choosing a rather thin, almost transparent grey ink over a black, opaque ink. In the mythological understanding of calligraphy, one must try to find and justify the motivation behind the signifier in the context imposed by the work, as this motivation is one of the first tools that can provide clarity for the viewer. It can be, therefore, said that the set of motivations underlying the creation of a calligraphic work provides the first key to its reception.

Moreover, the reason for certain choices made by the calligrapher can be anchored in myth itself. The calligrapher is highly aware of the ritual of writing, the rules passed from master to disciple over the years. The motivation for choosing a thin brush that creates delicate strokes over a thick one that traces well-defined strokes can be given by the content expressed through the calligraphic work: when writing *haiku* poems, a thin brush will be used to create elegant writing, while when writing a logogram, a word, or a short piece of Buddhist wisdom a thick brush will be used. Thus, *kanji* logograms are written with ample, strong movements, while the *hiragana* syllabary is contoured delicately, in the form of a single uninterrupted line of text known as *renmentai* (Suzuki 2016, 44). Because the process of writing is a central element in the experience of practicing *shodō*, when analysing a work, the receptor identifies the motivation contained in myth itself and differentiates it from the motivation of the calligrapher.

4. Case Study

In order to illustrate how identifying myths helps receptors understand calligraphic works and access the transcendent meaning, we aim to analyse the calligraphic work *Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void* by Rodica Frențiu. The work has been chosen because it simultaneously incorporates elements of Japanese spirituality as well as the author's spontaneous state of mind, through its innovative manner creating a unique result that challenges traditional norms.

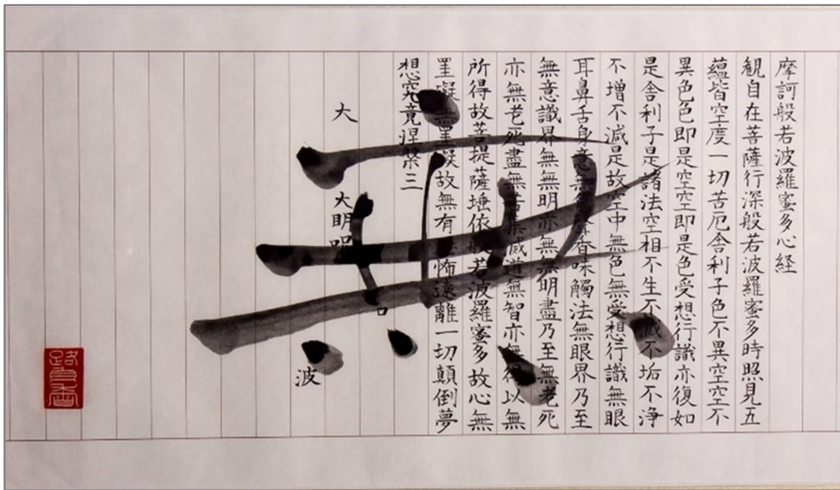

Figure 1. Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void
Source: Frențiu (2012, 61)

At a first glance, two layers of visual representation come to the receptor's attention: the *sutra* fragment and the 無 logogram. The background consists of a fragment of the *Heart Sutra*, created with black, opaque ink and a thin brush, with firm and clearly defined features specific to the *kaisho* calligraphic style, in which each logogram is easy to identify and read. The fragment in the first layer of representation follows the rules of *shakyō*, the act of *sutra*-copying, using the *kaisho* style and paper specifically designed for *sutra*-copying, writing each logogram clearly and following the correct order of each brushstroke.

The second layer and the focal point that draws the viewer's attention is the centrally placed logogram 無, written on top of the fragmentary *Heart Sutra*. The 無 logogram was written with a thicker brush, a technique specific to works that contain a single logogram, thus being able to highlight each feature

and ensure a harmonious balance between the dark shades of the ink and the white of the paper. The ink of the logogram 無 is slightly diluted in a shade of grey that contrasts with the opaque black of the *sutra*.

An element that catches the viewer's attention is the style in which the logogram was written. Difficult to define precisely, the calligraphy of the character 無 is located at the intersection of the semi-cursive *gyōsho* style with the precise *kaisho* style. Just as the language of the writer does not have to illustrate reality, but rather to signify it (Barthes 1997, 267), the calligrapher does not have to represent the logogram rigorously in the cursive and semi-cursive styles, but rather to imbue it with their vision. The calligraphy style of the central logogram 無 cannot be easily anchored in one of the five classical styles of calligraphy (*tensho, reisho, kaisho, gyōsho* and *sōsho*). Initially, the calligraphy style seems to resemble the "correct writing" *kaisho*, however retaining specific *gyōsho* elements of semi-cursivity. The lack of a classical style denotes what Alexander Bain called the flow of consciousness (Bain 1855, 359), showing the inner world of the master calligrapher and its intensity in the purest possible form. This technique reveals a deep dynamism, providing a new perspective on the custom according to which each element of a calligraphic work should fit into one of the five main writing styles.

Creating more visual layers of representation can be challenging in *shodō,* as traditionally the only colour used is the red ink of the calligrapher's stamp, which in this case can be observed in the lower left side of the work. The act of juxtaposing two layers of writing can impact the reading of the first layer and can create imbalance in the work. In *shodō,* the calligrapher gives special attention to the way in which the black of the ink and the white of the paper are harmonized, the white space being equally important as the written characters, as this is what allows the individual written lines to be perceived (Flint Sato 1999, 58). The white space, called *yohaku*, does not indicate an absence in *shodō*, it is an integrated part of the calligraphic work, becoming a sign that will be interpreted together with the written characters. The two layers of visual representation in *Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void* do not alter the balance of black and white, as the *Heart Sutra* is a fragment that occupies only the first half of the layer, thus allowing the 無 logogram from the second layer to be visible without altering its visual impact. By being placed in the middle of the work, 無 harmonizes the fragment from the first part of the *Heart Sutra* with the *yohaku* from the second part. The white space that remains as a result of not fully writing the *Heart Sutra* is balanced by placing the calligrapher's seal in the lower left side of the work, the calligrapher managing to harmonise all the different visual and semantic elements of the work.

At a first glance, an experienced viewer can be surprised by the author's choice of creating a calligraphic work which contains multiple layers of representation, because layering ink can make certain aspects of the work difficult to read and because the act of writing a *sutra* is seen as a purification exercise that cannot be left unfinished. The decision to create a work which contains only a fragment of the *sutra* can be surprising and difficult to understand using traditional tools for analysis. Shifting towards the understanding of myths within the work can help the viewer understand and connect the meanings of the signs. What makes the use of myth become an important tool in perceiving the meaning of the current calligraphic work is the way in which identifying the myth of the *Heart Sutra* and of the logogram 無 help the viewer understand the connection between the two layers of representation.

Due to the abundance of meanings and uses of the *Heart Sutra*, it has been used as a meditative exercise in Zen practices and arts, including in *shodō*. *Shakyō* is seen as a complex act that becomes simultaneously an act of worship, a prayer and a form of meditation (Stevens 2013, 113-114). Copying *sutras* was one of the main ways in which they were passed down from generation to generation, along with reciting, translating, and practicing *zazen* meditation (Deshimaru 2012, 41). Thanks to the strong link between the practice of calligraphy and the practice of meditation, the writing of the *Heart Sutra* is currently seen as a purifying exercise and as a way to connect with the outer and inner world of the calligrapher.

For this reason, writing the *sutra* must be done in a single session: if the calligrapher starts to write, they will stop only when the last logogram has been finished and the calligrapher's seal has been placed. Interrupting this exercise implies a disturbance of the *mushin* state of mind, which is why a fragment left unfinished will not be continued on another day. In such cases, the calligrapher will rewrite the entire *sutra*, resuming the full exercise of concentration and writing. However, in this particular case, the calligrapher has chosen to enhance the fragmentary character of the unfinished *sutra* and balance it out with a second layer of representation: the 無 logogram.

For many practitioners of calligraphy and Zen Buddhism, 無, which in this work illustrates the myth of the void, of nothingness, becomes synonymous with the fundamental ideology of Zen Buddhism (Sato 2013, 38), encompassing the Zen philosophy in one logogram.

The logogram 無 has always played a central role in the spirituality of Zen, as proven by its consistent presence in the *kōan* riddles passed down from generation to generation. Fragments of wisdom and anecdotes that have no predefined understanding, *kōan* are used to show that logic and thinking are not the path to enlightenment, because absolute knowledge can be obtained through the absence of excessive reason and mundane thoughts. *Kōan* anecdotes

become psychological tools that convey a philosophical message about what enlightenment (*satori*) means (Heine 2002, 1). The best-known *kōan*, also called the *kōan* of the *kōans* (Heine 2014, 1), is the *Mu Kōan* (無公案), which illustrates the importance of the 無 logogram and its meaning for the Buddhist wisdom. Asked by a monk if a dog has Buddha nature, Zen master Jōshū Jūshin answered simply: "mu" ("no"). Over the years, this simple *kōan* has caught the attention of both Zen practitioners and researchers, being offered as an example of the central role that the state of nothingness, the void, plays in Zen teachings. The ultimate goal is not to solve the *Mu Kōan* enigma, but rather to realize that the rational interpretation of reality drives man away from enlightenment, the *kōan* itself becoming a myth of reason that blocks the path to spiritual awakening. Intellectual exercises cannot lead to answers in Zen, because the more one analyses, the more confused their mind becomes.

In the fragment of the *Heart Sutra*, thanks to the clear characteristics of the *kaisho* style, the abundant use of the logogram 無 stands out even for a viewer who is unfamiliar with *shodō*. Together with the logogram 空 (*kū*, "empty, free"), 無 indicates the central point of this *sutra*, namely that everything is empty, void. It is important to note, however, that the Buddhist perception of nothingness is considerably different from how the West grasps this concept. In a translation of the *Heart Sutra* it is mentioned that "nothing" does not differentiate between eyes, ears or nose: "in emptiness there are no eyes, no ears, no nose". This verse does not deny the existence of eyes, ears and nose, but reveals that in the void, in nothingness, the difference between eyes, ears and nose is dispelled, illustrating the idea of infinity, rather than a nihilistic view of life (Tanahashi 2014, 15). In Buddhist spirituality and, implicitly, in the *Heart Sutra*, emptiness, the void and nothingness define an extremely deep reality and become the key to understanding the outer and inner world, opening the way to *satori*.

Particularly important to understanding the use of 無 in the work *Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void* is the way in which the idea of nothing, of void becomes a necessary aspect in achieving enlightenment. A famous verse of the *sutra* – and possibly its best-known verse – notes: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (色即是空空即是色, *shikisokuzeku ku sokuzeshiki*), highlighting the fact that the void is in itself the foundation of all existence (Sato 2013, 38). The idea of nothingness, void, in the Buddhist tradition is called *śūnyatā* and was first indicated by the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (Abe 1985, 126). In the *Heart Sutra*, the significant of the *śūnyatā* myth is represented by logograms such as 無 or 空. In Buddhist philosophy and, implicitly, in the *Heart Sutra*, this vision of emptiness is not a nihilistic one, on the contrary, it incorporates existence in all its complexity, without denying it of any aspect.

> Therefore, his idea of Emptiness is not a mere emptiness as opposed to fullness. Emptiness as *Śūnyatā* transcends and embraces both emptiness and fullness. It is really formless in the sense that it is liberated from both 'form' and 'formlessness'. (Abe 1985, 126-127)

Through its composition, the calligraphic work *Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void* is characterised by two techniques unusual to *shodō*: juxtaposing two visual layers of writing and leaving the *sutra* unfinished. These two surprising elements can be explained by taking into account the myths present within *shodō* as a semiotic system and the myths evoked by the act of writing the logogram 無 over the fragmentary *Heart Sutra*. An analysis of the無 myth indicates the central role that this logogram plays in the *Heart Sutra*. The character is used numerous times in every sentence written, as the *Heart Sutra* indicates nothingness, the void, 無, as the essence of all things and the starting point of all that is known to man: „mu represents the elementary state preceding the application of any human agency, it is a natural state – a state in which things naturally assume" (Ikegami 1998, 1903).

Although the *Heart Sutra* has been left unfinished, the calligrapher writing only half of it, the calligraphic work has been completed through the second layer of representation, by overlapping the 無 logogram over the fragment of the *sutra*. The empty space created on a both visual and semantic level by using only half of the *sutra* has been used as a means of showcasing the very essence of the *Heart Sutra* by writing 無 in a clear, bold style, with diluted ink that allows the viewer to read most of the *sutra* in the first layer. This creates both visual balance and builds a framework that allows the receptor to understand the importance of 無 in the context of the *Heart Sutra*, even in the absence of the second part of the text.

5. Conclusions

We conclude that the use of Barthes' concept of myth can be a valuable asset in *shodō* in the process of perceiving what Wunenburger calls transcendent meaning, as myths help the receptor understand calligraphy both as a semiotic system (on a macro level) and as individual works (on a micro level). Uncovering the layers of meaning relies on the receptor and their experience, who perceives all the signs present in a calligraphic work and then interprets them as a whole.

In the case of the calligraphic work analysed in this study, identifying the myths present within the work and the calligraphic practices used explains the surprising element of publishing an unfinished *sutra*. Although the text of the *sutra* is fragmentary, *Heart Sutra (fragment) / 無 Nothing, void* is a completed

work, as the logogram 無 revitalizes the *yohaku* and highlights one of the most important textual elements of the *Heart Sutra*: the relevance of the void, of nothingness.

In the interpretative process of *shodō*, the transcendent meaning of a work can be perceived by analysing the signs that construct the final piece. When observing the ways in which these signs relate to each other and to the work as a whole, myths can be a useful tool for understanding and revealing deeper meanings of calligraphy. Myths, portrayed by Barthes as universal, can be studied within the complex field of Japanese calligraphy, helping the viewers perceive subtle connections between signs and their role within the calligraphic work. The study of myths can thus become a differentiating factor that helps the viewer understand the various complex signs that make up the calligraphic work and ultimately reach the transcendent meaning.

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