

# STAGING ZEN BUDDHISM: IMAGE CREATION IN CONTEMPORARY FILMS

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*In this paper, I analyse the image creation of Zen Buddhism as emerges from films produced in Europe and North America. In particular, I explore Marc Rosenbush's Zen Noir (2004), Zen & Zero by Michael Ginthör (2006), and Erleuchtung Garantiert (1999) by Doris Dörrie. Comparatively, I examine a recent Japanese production on the life and teachings of the Sōtō Zen master Dōgen titled Zen and directed by Takahashi Banmei (2009). The aim of this analysis is to explore if and how depictions of Zen in western movies mirror representations of this religious tradition made ad hoc for the 'West' and, conversely, what is the image of Zen Buddhism as appears in Japanese productions. This will be considered in a comparative perspective in order to identify differences, possible common patterns and mutual influences which may have shaped the cinematic perception of this form of Japanese Buddhism in Europe and North America.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

An increasing amount of scholarship in the last two decades has shown that the perception of Japanese Buddhism in Europe and America has been undoubtedly influenced by a form of Zen Buddhism that was tailored by a certain intellectual elite, both Japanese and non-Japanese, to be appealing for the 'West'.<sup>2</sup> This popular image derives from a form of de-contextualized and de-institutionalized Zen, which has been reduced to the 'essence' of Japanese Buddhism, claimed to be 'unique' and removed from its political, social and historical context. As is well known, this form of Zen has been labelled also as 'free-floating Zen' (Faure 1993, 65; Sharf 1994, 43) or 'Suzuki's brand of Zen' (Sharf 1995, 139), or, again 'Suzuki's Zen' (Faure 1993, 53) to highlight the role of D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966)—probably the most influential Japanese intellectual in the East-West exchange—in the creation of Zen for the 'West'.

Thus, in the course of history of East-West cultural and religious exchanges, Zen has acquired a privileged and superior position over other mainstream Buddhist denominations. Moreover, Japanese culture has been extensively promoted in several artistic and cultural fields as an exclusive product of Zen Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> This Zen image is characterized by mystical and ungraspable traits,

with Zen itself being depicted as a form of Buddhism exclusively dedicated to meditation and confined within the cloistered walls of monasteries. Other well-known aspects of such a form of 'Zen for the West' include its indissoluble link with the samurai coupled with the warrior's 'wisdom/spirit' (which in war-time Japan has served to justify imperialism and violence), as well as its 'crazy', ironic and unconventional traits, such as shouts, laughs and irreverence attributed to famous Zen monks.

Against this backdrop, I will analyse the image creations of Zen that are promoted by the following European and North American productions: *Zen Noir* (2004) by Marc Rosenbush; *Zen & Zero* (2006) by Michael Ginthör; and *Erleuchtung garantiert* (1999) by Doris Dörrie. We will see that a red thread winds throughout these movies, and that this may be defined as a stereotypical 'Western' view of Zen Buddhism. Through this analysis I will attempt to shed light on how the cinematic perception of Zen has been shaped outside Japan, and see if and how it can be considered a mirror of representations of this form of Buddhism made for the 'West', as those mentioned before. Comparatively, I will analyse a film on the life and teachings of the Sōtō Zen master Dōgen titled *Zen* (2009) and directed by Takahashi Banmei in order to see what image of Zen Buddhism appears in a recent Japanese production.

### Cinematic visions of *Zen and* . . .

As is well known, books as well as other cultural and commercial products titled *Zen and* . . . are innumerable. Starting from the renowned book *Zen in der Kunst des Bogenschießens* (*Zen and the Art of Archery* 1948) by the German intellectual Eugen Herrigel, hundreds of books and films have used the word Zen as a catchword for anything connected with things thought to be Japanese. More often than not this word has been misused and has become a term completely disconnected from its original setting, that is, an institutionalized religious tradition—Zen Buddhism—linked to a socio-economic sphere and historically characterized by a long series of changes and developments. Bearing that in mind, I called this first section 'Cinematic Visions of *Zen and* . . .' to indicate such a use of the word Zen. In the following, I will analyse two, very different, independent productions that have Zen as their leitmotiv: Marc Rosenbush's *Zen Noir* (2004) and Michael Ginthör's *Zen & Zero* (2006).

#### *Zen Noir*

*Zen Noir* is an independent, multiple award-winning movie produced, written and directed by Marc Rosenbush in 2004. It is a low-budget movie that was shot in 12 days (Corder 2006).

On the DVD (and on the website of the movie) this production is described as such:

A unique and original blend of Buddhist philosophy, vaudevillian comedy and surrealist art film . . . , **Zen Noir** follows a nameless detective as he investigates a mysterious death in a Buddhist temple. But his logical, left-brained crime-solving skills are useless in the *intuitive, non-linear world of Zen*, and he finds himself drawn into a deeper, stranger, more personal mystery . . . the mystery of death itself.<sup>5</sup>

When asked about the concept behind his movie, Rosenbush answered in these terms:

*Zen Noir* is a strange, dark, funny Buddhist murder mystery. At first it seems to be a parody of hard-boiled film noir detective movies, but eventually it evolves into a dark, surreal exploration of some pretty heavy Buddhist ideas, in particular the question of how we deal with death and the fact that the only constant in the universe is change. That's my pretentious answer. My other answer is: if David Lynch, the Buddha and the Marx Brothers all took acid and made a low-budget movie together, this would be it. (<http://blogcritics.org/video/article/an-interview-with-zen-noir-director>)

Four main characters play in this movie: the Detective, the Master (who remain nameless in the film), and two lay practitioners, Jane and Ed. Besides, there are two additional characters, the Detective's dead wife, Nora, and the dead monk. The film starts with a typical old detective story scene: an undershirt-wearing detective with a hat sits alone in a semi-dark room and drinks whiskey; his gun is placed on a small table together with a picture of his dead wife, which is close to an old-style black telephone. In this scene, he receives an anonymous phone call from 'a guy with an accent—Japanese maybe' telling him to 'haul ass to the temple because someone's about to die'. Here the scene moves into a Zen meditation hall where there are four practitioners, and one of them suddenly dies. The Detective finds himself on this stage and starts interrogating the practitioners. He asks questions, but no one is answering in a clear way. Rather, the practitioners and the master use riddles and incomprehensible sentences that should indicate *the* Zen way of approaching things. Here are two examples of such dialogues:

Detective: 'Where were you at the time of the murder?'

Ed: 'What exactly do you mean by "time"?''

Or:

Detective: 'What's your name?'

Ed: 'Why?'

Detective: 'What do you mean why?'

Ed: 'Why do you want to know my name? . . . My name isn't me'

A crucial turning point occurs at 20 minutes into the movie. The 'Western-minded' Detective starts to become less confident in himself leading him to

question existential issues: life and death, loss, and even his own identity. During this phase of the movie he is constantly assaulted by his own doubts, such as 'What the hell kind of detective am I?' or 'Why am I even here?' or, again, 'Who am I?' and 'Which me is me?' At this point, the Master—who is played by the Chinese-American actor Kim Chan—reveals to him the mystery of life and death. The Detective starts meditating and abandons his 'logic-minded' perspective.

The film is characterized by jokes and humour, which, according to the author—a Buddhist practitioner himself—are typical of Zen. In an interview Rosenbush declared: 'Zen can be very funny! That was one of the things that drew me to it in the first place; it has this sly, almost absurdist sense of humour, but is full of wisdom'. He further claims that he was inspired by traditional Chinese dialogues (he is referring here to *mondō* 問答) between master and disciples, where the master's answer is formulated in a way that creates a great deal of doubt and confusion in the students, so that, Rosenbush continues, they can 'see the world from a new, non-dualistic perspective'.<sup>5</sup> Along this line of thought, when commenting upon the general idea of the movie, the director claimed that

the murder is the *kōan* for the detective, he can't solve it using his traditional means and the movie itself is a sort of *kōan* for the audience and does not work in the same logical fashion that traditional movies work. (Rosenbush 2004)

With reference to his Buddhist sources of inspiration, Rosenbush mentioned the Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh; a famous Chan master, Jōshū (Chinese: Zhàozhōu Cóngshěn 趙州從諗, 778–897); and 'a bunch of guys I used to practice aikido with'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, answering the question whether this film production and other of his works were an obstacle to his Buddhist practice, he declared: 'Ironic that the biggest challenge to my Buddhist practice is getting my Buddhist film out into the world'.<sup>7</sup>

The movie is indeed visionary. It is filmed exclusively in interiors, in a theatrical setting characterized by strong colours, with a predominance of black and vivid red tones. The only scenes shot outside, on a beach, are flashbacks regarding Nora, the Detective's dead wife. The focus on theatricality is the outcome of Rosenbush's long-standing activity as a theatre director in Chicago and the choice of filming everything in interiors underlines the inner, spiritual quest of the characters.

Interestingly enough, the image of such a 'constructed' Zen, as manifested in the film, goes beyond the set itself and is to be found in the comments made following its release. In this regard, two divergent comments, which are themselves characterized by a certain stereotypical view of Zen, appeared on the website of the film review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*. The first one propounds a 'typical' aesthetic sense marked by allegedly Zen minimalist and essential traits: 'The acting is stylized, the sets are stylized, the editing is stylized, all toward a Zen-like minimalist aesthetic' (Les Wright, [cultureculture.net](http://cultureculture.net)). The second comment, on the other hand, makes reference to scriptural sources and alludes to the famous *kōan* 'What is the sound of one hand clapping' when it states:

'Rosenbush's cinematic experiment generates so little excitement I doubt whether you'll hear even the sound of one hand clapping' (Robert Denerstein, Denver Rocky Mountain News).<sup>8</sup>

### *Zen & Zero: An Austrian surfextravaganza*

While *Zen Noir* focuses on Zen, whichever form is considered here, and is set in a undefined Zen meditation hall filled with an 'Eastern' feeling, the Austrian production *Zen & Zero* is a road movie focused on surfing and set in 'Western' locations that are geographically recognizable. While *Zen Noir* is filmed exclusively within an artificial and theatrical setting and is centred on the dialogue between the characters, conversely *Zen & Zero* is filmed almost exclusively in exteriors and the dialogues, almost completely lacking, leave space for a voiceover narration in a style that resembles a stream of consciousness technique.<sup>9</sup> A common element in the two movies—apart from the presence of the word Zen in their titles—may be identified in the alleged Zen Buddhist 'philosophy' that underlies their stories.

*Zen & Zero* is the story of five Austrian surfers who embark on a 'pilgrimage' trip from Los Angeles to Costa Rica ('The promised Land' for surfers since the 1960s) through Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua following on the footsteps of one of the first and most famous hippy surfers, Allan 'Captain Zero' Weisbecker, the author of *In Search of Captain Zero*.<sup>10</sup> The title of the movie stemmed from Weisbecker's surf lifestyle,<sup>11</sup> and he appears in the last scenes, which are relevant to the overall analysis of the film. As in the case of *Zen Noir*, *Zen & Zero* is an independent film that has received awards at various festivals, such as the X-Dance Festival and Santa Cruz Film Festival. The movie is a low-budget production that was filmed with a Super 8 camera and its aim is expressed in this statement: 'The Road: a 7000 miles surfing-pilgrimage through Central America looking for answers we didn't even know the questions for'.<sup>12</sup>

Zen is portrayed here as a philosophical concept and a symbol of the surfers' quest for 'enlightenment' and waves to ride. However, the word Zen is only mentioned at the end of the movie during an explanation of the real essence of surfing, that is, the moment when surfers do not act, but just find the exact point on the wave and leave themselves to the wave itself. This is what Weisbecker, in the movie, defined as a 'Zen moment'. In his words: 'It is a sort of Zen moment . . . When your mind is really blank. You don't have the sense of time . . . a magic moment . . . Something really amazing happens that you can't describe. It is a kind of bliss'.

Other Buddhist elements are mentioned in this movie, in particular concepts like karma and nothingness/emptiness. It is interesting to briefly provide some quotations since they exemplify a de-contextualized vision of Buddhism as described at the beginning of this paper. These concepts are expressed as follows: 'Surfing is a matter of balance: East, West, North, South . . . high tide low tide—Cosmos, *Cash* and Karma'; 'Buddhism speaks of a fifth element beside earth, water, fire and air: Nothing, the Void, the origin of the other four'; and 'For surfers,

emptiness is nothing scary, process and result are equivalent: the zero and the balance is the goal'. Likewise, with reference to the title and to Zen, the co-producer Jakob Polacek stated:

the void stands for zero and Zen has to do also with meditation. Zen derives from the Asian religion, Zen Buddhism, that is famous for peacefulness and harmony and for its unity with the world and nature, that is Zen.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to point out that also in this case, comparably to the comments made concerning *Zen Noir*, there appeared articles that use the word Zen in their titles in the fashion of *Zen and . . .* One example is 'Zen & the Art of Musical Composition Maintenance: Zen & Zero', clearly referring to the famous on-the-road and philosophical book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig (1974). Accordingly, in this review the movie has been described as a 'metaphysical road picture' (Coker 2006).

As we can see from these few examples, all elements that are typical of a 'Western' vision of Zen are at work here: harmony and unity of human beings with the world and nature, the void (Jpn. *mu*), meditation, inner calm, and non-dualism. They have been selected and highlighted by a certain circle of people in their efforts to propagate this religious tradition to Europe and North America—and adapt it to the needs of the hosting countries—as being representative of Zen Buddhism, while they constitute a part of a much wider and more complex spectrum within the multifaceted Zen Buddhist teaching and practice.

### **Enlightening Zen and meditation in Dorries Dörrie's film *Erleuchtung garantiert***

The same patterns emerge in Doris Dörrie's movie *Erleuchtung garantiert* (Enlightenment Guaranteed, 1999), which plays out in a very different geographical and thematic setting.

The director is a Japan enthusiast and Buddhist practitioner. However, she does not consider herself to be a Buddhist since 'Buddhism tries to stay away from concepts' and she does not want to put herself 'into a category' (quoted in 'Talking Germany'). Her view of Buddhism, which revolves around concepts, such as non-dualism; not relying on words and concepts—taken from the famous saying ascribed to the legendary Indian monk Bodhidharma that states, 'transmission outside the teachings, not based upon words or letters'—being here and now; being in harmony and connected with all the creatures in the world; absence of dogmas in Zen Buddhism; and Zen nothingness, shows a considerable dependence on stereotyped images of Zen available in the 'West'.<sup>14</sup>

Before analysing the movie itself and in order to better understand her cinematic view of Zen, let us briefly consider Dörrie's stance on Buddhism:

Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a religion, rather something like a sheet for life, a set of instructions. It does not appeal to faith—it is not at all about what one believes, but about what one does. And what one has to do sounds very simple: breathing in, breathing out; if you eat, then eat, if you walk, then walk, if you stand, then stand and so on.<sup>15</sup>

In Dörrie's outlook, as in many other 'Western' cases, Buddhism is highly idealized and considered a 'way of life' and not a religion. Here, the dichotomy East/spirituality versus West/materialism is proposed as well. For example, in one of her interviews, when asked why she chose to stage her film in a Zen temple, she answered:

It is the Buddhist admonition to live in the now, to be indeed present. It is extremely difficult, but I think this is part of the incredible appeal of Buddhism. *In our western culture* it usually happens that we completely lose our way by controlling and planning our lives, and we just waste our own life in the present.<sup>16</sup>

In the same interview, talking about Japan—in a quite stereotypical way—she went on further claiming:

On the other side, what had fascinated me at that time about Japan, was the crazy contradiction between a 'quintessence of hustle and bustle' in Tokyo and *the philosophy of emptiness and the calmness of temples and monasteries*.<sup>17</sup>

Here the contradiction—allegedly exclusive to Japan—between tradition-temple-spirituality on the one hand and innovation-technology-alienation on the other is apparent and propounded as a 'fascinating' aspect of Japanese society. Needless to say, such a depiction of Zen Buddhism, and Buddhism more in general, is far away from Japanese reality. To remove Zen Buddhism from its less captivating aspects—such as institutions; complexity, which is mirrored in its many schools; historical developments and its socioeconomic environment—has been a well-known and long-standing undertaking from the Meiji period onwards. After more than a century of representations of this form of Buddhist tradition in the 'West', we are witnessing the same kind of patterns, constantly reshaped to suit the changes in society, but basically identical to their past portrayals. As illustrated above, the responses of a twenty-first century German director are in many ways similar to the writings by D.T. Suzuki and his followers. It seems that the endeavours made by Japanese and non-Japanese apologists to highlight and promote only a few appealing aspects of Zen Buddhism and to elevate Zen as an essentialized 'way of life', a 'philosophy', and an 'inner experience' have worked perfectly. This can be seen in the similar and repeated statements and ideas that are continued to be used today.

At this point, let us turn our attention back to the contents of the movie *Erleuchtung garantiert*. The story is about two German brothers who, urged by an

existential crisis and some changes in their lives, travel together to Tokyo. One of them is determined to join a meditation retreat at a Zen temple and the other brother decides to follow. Before entering the temple they spend some time in Tokyo. There is a clear cut between their actions in the city and their temple life. While in Tokyo their behaviour is eccentric; acting in unconventional ways, breaking rules (as when they steal a tent in a department store), living as if they were homeless, and getting drunk. However, once they enter the temple, the focus shifts abruptly to their inner thoughts and their personal and spiritual development, resulting in the film becoming much more serious. On the one hand, Tokyo, which symbolizes craziness and oddities, is a place where everything is permitted. On the other hand, the temples, which are closely linked to Japanese tradition, are tokens of austerity, meditation, mysticism and spirituality. Here people can discover their 'real' self. While the Zen monks embody wisdom, the 'secular' dwellers of Japan stand for eccentricity. Such misrepresentations can be seen at work also in other renowned and highly praised movies, like *Lost in Translation* (2003) by Sophia Coppola. Here, the message that Japan is, in the end, a strange and weird land is conveyed. *Lost in Translation* promotes strong stereotypes and proposes a two-block contrast between urban-hectic and modernity versus tradition and tranquil spiritual life. This is all the more evident in the opposing sequences set in Tokyo and Kyoto, which are chosen as tokens of these two blocks. In the latter city, the main character, Charlotte (played by Scarlett Johansson), finds herself in another dimension when compared with Tokyo's feverish and ultra-modern lifestyle. In the scenes in Kyoto, she visits a Zen temple (Nanzenji) and a Shintō Shrine (Heian Jingū), and she finds herself in a peaceful and empty garden as well as happens to see a bride and a groom wearing traditional kimono. In this instance Japan acquires the status of a superior, 'civilized' and 'respectable' country, as it is linked to a spiritual and traditional world.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly to Coppola, in *Erleuchtung garantiert*, Dörrie highlights the eccentric and odd traits 'typical' of modern Japanese society, and, at the same time, elevates Zen temples and their spirituality to a higher and almost intangible level.<sup>19</sup> The movie is filmed with a digital video camera and the staff is composed of a very small troupe: apart from the director herself, there is one cameraman, three other staff members and the two main actors (Uwe Ochsenknecht and Gustav-Peter Wöhler). The focus of the movie is strongly placed on introspection and it oscillates between a semi-documentary and fiction, thus creating a hybrid where the border between reality and imagination seems to vanish. Apart from the film itself, this last aspect clearly emerges from the interviews with the authors and director featured on the DVD.

While the movies analysed so far are mostly concerned with a form of Zen as it has been exported to and adapted in the 'West', in the following section I will briefly explore a recent Japanese movie on Dōgen's life and teachings. This example is significant for our discourse in a comparative perspective as it shows how a popular image of Zen Buddhism has been created within Japan itself and



how (also in this case) emphasis has been placed on meditation and on an idealized image of a Zen master. At the non-fictional level, however, Zen Buddhist institutions and temples—as other religious institutions in Japan—are struggling to survive within an even more secularized society and most of their activities revolve around funerary services and the everyday administration of temples, which does not necessarily (if at all) imply the promotion and undertaking of *zazen*.

### Staging Dōgen's life and teaching in the Japanese movie *Zen*

*Zen* 禅 is a 2009 Japanese movie directed by Takahashi Banmei 高橋伴明, starring the kabuki actor Nakamura Kantarō 中村勘太郎 as Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253). The movie is a fictional biography of the Sōtō Zen master ranging from his travel to China (1223–1227) to his death, and is presented as a '*kandō no rekishi roman* 感動の歴史ロマン', a moving historical fiction.<sup>20</sup> The first scene depicts Dōgen as a child (the 7-year-old Monju) talking to his mother, who is going to die soon after. In this sequence, she pleads with him to find the 'true' Buddhism and Dōgen/Monju promises to commit himself to this task. This is a motif that can be found in other hagiographies of Japanese religious leaders, such as Rennyo's, the eighth successor of Shinran.<sup>21</sup>

The story covers some relevant stages in Dōgen's life and his path to establish Sōtō Zen in Japan, among which are his practice at Kenninji 建仁寺 in Kyoto; his travel to China where he studied under Rujing 如淨 (1163–1228), the head priest of Mt. Tiantong (Jpn. Tendō); the emphasis on sitting meditation (*zazen* and *shikan taza*, or just sitting) as the only practice toward religious liberation; the establishment of two temples, Kōshōji 興聖寺 in Uji and Eiheiji 永平寺 in Echizen prefecture (present-day Fukui prefecture), the latter being one of the two head temples of this denomination;<sup>22</sup> and the spread of Sōtō Zen especially as a monastic tradition. In this last regard, one of the last scenes of the movie where emphasis is placed on monks exiting Eiheiji's gate is significant.

The movie presents some controversies and historical flaws. For instance, there is Dōgen's meeting with a cook master (*tenzo* 典座) of Mt. Ayu wang on the Chinese mountains, which, according to traditional sources, seems to have occurred on a ship at Mingzhou port (*Tenzokyōkun*) (Heine 2003, 38–39). In this context, we should notice that there are relevant inconsistencies regarding dates and locations of Dōgen's travel in China, as Steven Heine (2003) has illustrated in his article 'Did Dōgen Go to China?' Just to cite a few examples, controversies concern the modalities of Dōgen's itinerant travels and the dates of his stays at various temples in China; his qualifications for being admitted to the summer retreat or his challenges to the Chan monastic system; his encounter with several masters and monks; a series of prophetic dreams that led him to his master Rujing; and the circumstances of his departure from China linked to the death of Rujing (Heine 2003, 32–33).

Due to space constraints, I cannot delve into the details of the historical accuracy of these events. What is interesting to explore, though, is how the Sōtō Zen master and his biography are portrayed in the movie. What emerges is a quite idealized image aiming at touching people's feelings, especially in regard with themes related to life and death, which are recurrent throughout the film. The movie starts, as mentioned before, with the death of Dōgen's mother (1207), an important event in his life. This was also the spark for Dōgen's decision to find 'true Buddhism' (*shin no buppō* 真の仏法, or *shōbō* 正法) in order to save others. Other deaths are relevant in shaping Dōgen's image in this film: those of his *shogun* friend; his Chinese master Rujing; and Orin's small child (Orin was a prostitute who in the end becomes a Sōtō Zen nun). It is also through these deaths that the director has been able to portray a particularly compassionate view of the Zen master as a man deeply concerned with human suffering.

Another relevant theme is Dōgen's relationship with his master Rujing. For Dōgen he was the most remarkable teacher. However, Heine notes that he is 'generally considered somewhat less than that by the standards for evaluating the merit of the teachings of Sung masters, which is generally based on their recorded-sayings collections' (Heine 2003, 42). Dōgen claimed a direct, face-to-face transmission (*menju* 面授) with his master, which constitutes a central theme in the movie. This is a turning point in his life and is considered to be the beginning of the exclusive *zazen* practice that led him to enlightenment (*satori*). According to the sources, Dōgen attained enlightenment after his master Rujing hit and reprimanded one of the practitioners for falling asleep during a *zazen* session (Dumoulin 2005, 56). This scene is essential to the movie with Dōgen's enlightenment being symbolized through the appearance of a huge floating lotus flower, the master arising within a ray of light and then disappearing into the sky on a lotus pedestal resembling the Buddha iconography.<sup>23</sup>

Dōgen's view of women is also among the main themes in this movie. However, in this case a controversial element comes to the fore. In one of the last scenes there is reference to the fact that just before his death Dōgen instructed his successor, Ejō, to allow Orin to be ordained (*tokudo* 得度). While Dōgen was willing to open the Zen path to anyone, and had a non-discriminatory attitude towards women,<sup>24</sup> it is commonly acknowledged that in his later years, after he moved to Echizen, his view became more narrow and he came to consider the monastic life as necessary to enlightenment (Dumoulin 2005, 61). In this context, he became more supportive of the practice of women being excluded from temples (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 1995, 22), and seemingly repudiated the idea that laymen and women could attain enlightenment. His outlook focused on an elitist group of monks and his goal became 'to educate one, or even a portion of one follower' perfectly, rather than having a large number of disciples (Matsunaga and Matsunaga 1976, 241).<sup>25</sup> This aspect is not at all mentioned in the movie that ends with Orin following in the footsteps of Dōgen in undertaking a journey to China as an itinerant nun.

Aesthetically this movie presents sophisticated photographic techniques with impressive sceneries in both China and Japan as well as typical Japanese elements related to nature, such as the depiction of the four seasons, the inevitable Mt. Fuji, *sakura* (cherry blossoms), and beautiful views of the moon. All this contributes to create a patinated image of the Zen master also by emphasizing his association and the close relationship of Zen with Japanese traditional patterns.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to take into account some similarities and differences related to the films analysed in this paper. The movie *Zen* differs in a variety of ways from the others and not only because it is a Japanese production. First, the focus is on Zen Buddhism, more precisely on the Sōtō Zen denomination, in a strict sense, and the word in the title corresponds to the contents of the movie, which is not quite so obvious in the case of *Zen & Zero*. Second, it is a historical fiction set in medieval Japan and China, while the others are all set in the contemporary period and employ a form of essentialized Zen to express ways of life, philosophical thoughts, and inner developments. Third, Japan and Zen Buddhism do not constitute the 'exotic' part of the movie as occurs in the other movies, in particular in *Erleuchtung garantiert* and *Zen Noir*. Moreover, unlike the others, *Zen* is a big-budget production and is in no way an experimental movie. This is also reflected in the cinematic techniques and the camera used.

A common thread in all these movies, with the exception of *Zen & Zero*, is the relevance attributed to *zazen*, sitting meditation, as exemplified by Dōgen's life and teachings; by the practice of the two German brothers in a Zen temple in Dörrie's movie; and the practice of the temple residents in the theatrical meditation hall in *Zen Noir*. We have observed that Zen is portrayed in these movies in an acritical way and by highlighting its positive and emancipative aspects. In this regard, we have seen the 'beneficial' role of Zen in redeeming a detective from his too logical 'Western' mind; the idealization of temple life as opposite to its 'secular' counterpart in the German production; and the romanticized depiction of Dōgen that follows his hagiography in the film *Zen*. The master-disciple relationship can be detected as a common motif in all the movies analysed above, including the 'surf-extravaganza' of *Zen & Zero*, since the five surfers are following the path of whom they consider a 'master'. Concepts such as 'non-dualism' and to live in the 'here and now' unfold throughout these productions, as well as the theme of death, which is particularly strong in *Zen Noir* and *Zen*. Another element that can be identified in these productions is introspection—in its several nuances—and all characters are joined by their quest for different kinds of 'enlightenment', which ranges from its strict religious meaning, such as in Dōgen's case, to its quite loose interpretation, such as in the surfers' perspective.

To reiterate, we can argue that the perception of Japanese Zen Buddhism in the Western movies we have explored in this paper mirrors what has been transmitted to Europe and North America for over one century: a de-contextualized and essentialized view of Zen suited to be adopted and accommodated in a variety of environments and times. Here, we have seen this phenomenon at work in the most diverse settings. Be it on the beaches of the North American West Coast and Costa Rica, on a theatrical stage transformed into a meditation hall, in Japan through the lenses of a German director in search for enlightenment, and even in a contemporary Japanese version of the life and teachings of the Zen master Dōgen, the image of Zen as an ‘inner experience’ continues to exercise a subtle but nonetheless decisive influence on popular perceptions of things Japanese.

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### NOTES

1. The topic of this paper is part of my ongoing book project *Japanese Religions, Popular Culture and the Media*. When not otherwise indicated all translations into English are my own.
2. In this regard, see, for example, Faure 1991, 1993; Sharf 1994, 1995; Amstutz 1997a, 1997b; Borup 2004, and Porcu 2008.
3. For a critique of the promotion of Japanese culture as an exclusive product of Zen Buddhism, see Porcu 2008.
4. Italics added. See *Zen Noir* DVD (2006). See also <http://www.zenmovie.com/>
5. Quotations from “Woody, meet Buddha—An investigation of the new comic mystery, *Zen Noir*, including a Q&A with filmmaker Marc Rosenbush” <http://theworsthorse.com/zennoir.html> (accessed May 2011). In the *kōan* tradition, the question which is posed by the master is not to cause a rational answer, but serves ‘as a focal point for a dynamic form of contemplation, which results in a nondualistic experience’ (Muller 2011a).
6. Zhàozhōu Cóngshěn was one of the most well-known Chinese Chan masters of the Tang dynasty, whose teachings are frequently cited in *gong’an* [kōan] 公案 collections. The most often-cited of his attributed teachings is the *kōan* of the dog and the Buddha-nature 狗子佛性, or *wu* (*mu*) 無 *gong’an*, as well as the teaching ‘the great way is not difficult’ 至道無難. He was posthumously named Zhenji dashi 真際大師 (Muller 2011b). As for Rosenbush’s influences as a

filmmaker, he said: 'As a filmmaker, I'd have to say David Lynch, Jim Jarmusch and Woody Allen loom pretty large, though there are dozens of other great directors whose work has inspired me. Comically, I'm a huge fan of Jacques Tati and Monty Python, among others.' From: 'Woody, meet Buddha. See also the director's commentary on the DVD *Zen Noir*.

7. From 'Woody, meet Buddha'.
8. Accessed June 2011. On *Rotten Tomatoes* the movie received quite a bad score from the critics, 29%.
9. This can be viewed as an homage to *gonzo* journalism, a genre of journalism that was established by Hunter S. Thompson. It has no claims of objectivity, and is written in first-person narrative. It 'consists of the fusion of reality and stark fantasy in a way that amuses the author and outrages his audience' (John Filiatreau, quoted in Hirst 2004, 4). The movie itself is presented as an example of 'gonzo filmmaking' (see also the DVD cover).
10. See <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/portraet-des-aelteren-lebens-surfer-all-an-weisbecker-sie-hat-mich-verlassen-1.434698> (accessed May 2011).
11. Co-producer Jakob Polacsek, at <http://fm4v2.orf.at/zita/213266/main.html> (accessed May 20, 2011).
12. Presentation of the film during the European Film Premier in München (13 May 2006). See Michael Ginthör's homepage <http://www.ginthor.com/> (accessed May 2011).
13. '... leer steht für zero und das zen hat auch mit dem Meditativen zu tun. Zen leitet sich aus der asiatischen Religion ab, Zenbuddhismus, auch für Ruhe bekannt und Ausgeglichenheit und eins mit der Welt und der Natur, das ist Zen', <http://fm4v2.orf.at/zita/213266/main.html> (accessed May 2011).
14. See, for example, Dörrie's interview on the DVD *How to cook your life*. I am not arguing here that these elements are alien to Zen Buddhism. However, as is well known, Zen Buddhism in such an adaptation to the 'West' has been reduced exclusively to these elements, while overlooking several others. Thus, such a form of Zen cannot be but biased and partial, while not reflecting, or reflecting only partially, Zen Buddhism as a complex religious system.
15. "Interview mit Doris Dörrie: Erleuchtung garantiert", digitaldvd.de. Accessed May 2011. <http://www.digitalvd.de/interviews/Doris-Doerrie-Erleuchtung-garantiert.html>: 'Buddhismus ist im strengsten Sinne keine Religion, sondern so etwas wie ein Waschzettel zum Leben, eine Arbeitsanleitung. Es wird nicht an den Glauben appelliert - es geht überhaupt nicht darum, dass man etwas glaubt, sondern dass man etwas tut. Und das, was man zu tun hat, klingt ganz simpel: Einatmen, ausatmen, wenn man isst, dann isst man, wenn man geht, dann geht man, wenn man steht, dann steht man, usw.'
16. Ibid. 'Es ist die buddhistische Aufforderung, in der Gegenwart zu leben, tatsächlich anwesend, präsent zu sein. Das ist wahnsinnig schwer, aber ich glaube, es ist Teil der unglaublichen Attraktivität des Buddhismus. *Bei uns im westlichen Kulturkreis* ist es doch meist so, dass wir uns vollkommen verlieren in

der Möglichkeit, unser Leben zu kontrollieren und zu planen, und darüber aber unser Leben jetzt verpassen.'

17. Ibid. 'Und die andere Seite, die mich schon damals sehr an Japan fasziniert hatte, ist der irrsinnige Widerspruch zwischen einer "Quintessenz von Hektik" in Tokio und dieser *Philosophie der Leere und der Stille in den Tempeln und Klöstern*' (italics added). In the same interview, with regard to Buddhist (Zen) monks, Dörrie said: 'Moreover, Buddhists, the masters, are also very unpredictable in their answers, because they do not grab them in a dogmatic way—which is what I particularly like.' 'Außerdem sind die Buddhisten, die Meister, auch sehr unberechenbar in ihren Antworten, weil sie nichts dogmatisch fassen—was mir besonders gut gefällt.'
18. I must admit that during my six-year-long residence in Kyoto, and in my many visits to temples and shrines there, I hardly saw any top favourite sightseeing spots, such as Nanzenji and the Heian Jingū, as being empty and 'peaceful'.
19. As for these images in the movie, see, for example, the chapters 'Verlaufen in Tokyo' and the scenes related to rituals in the temple. A trailer of the movie with English subtitles can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fXi4lOJe1I&feature=related> (retrieved May 2011).
20. The word *kandō* (deep emotion), with its derivatives, is often used in Japan for advertising movies, books, dramas and so on. In this regard, see Porcu 2010.
21. For an analysis of this aspect in Shin Buddhism in connection with popular culture, see Porcu 2010. Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) is considered the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, Shin Buddhism, a mainstream Buddhist denomination in Japan, and Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499) its 'second founder' due to his efforts and success in reorganizing the Honganji 本願寺 into a powerful religious institution.
22. The other head temple is Sōjiji 總持寺, established by Dōgen's fourth successor, Keizan Zenji (1264–1325) in the fourteenth century. This temple was originally in Ishikawa prefecture and was moved to its present location in Yokohama prefecture during the Meiji period.
23. Another main sequence in the movie is when Dōgen received *shisho* 嗣書 (transmission) document from Rujing in 1227.
24. See Dōgen's *Raihai tokuzui* 礼拝得髓 (Attaining the Marrow through Worship, 1240), where it is stated: 'We must all, male and female alike, profoundly respect Buddhist teachings and practice. We must not argue over male or femaleness' (trans. from Arai 1999). See also Dōgen's *Bendōwa* 弁道話 (On the Endeavor of the Way), where it is clearly stated that there is no discrimination between men and women: 'In understanding the buddhadharma, men and women, noble and common people, are not distinguished' (trans. from Tanahashi 1985, 155).
25. For a more positive view of Dōgen's consideration of women in his later years, see Arai 1999, 36–43.

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