

neige

feature-length film

*adapted from the novel by Maxence Ferminé
(Ed. Arléa)*

development

april 2007

Outline

Turn of the XIXth century, Japan. The young emperor Meiji, presiding over the grandstand, is about to witness an extraordinary performance : in the heart of the Japanese Alps, Neige, a famous French tightrope walker, is preparing to cross two snow-capped mountains tops poised on a thin steel rope. With the fire from her balancing pole, lit up like a torch, she scrawls an incandescent haiku on the dark page of the twilight sky... just before disappearing forever.

On this cable linking Europe with Japan, destiny reunites Neige with Kano, a samurai who becomes a great artist out of love for her, their daughter, Yukiko, and with Kyo, a young poet at odds with tradition.

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Summary

One winter in Paris, a long, long time ago...

A young girl falls in love with tightrope walking during a visit to the circus. The next night, under a soft dusting of snow, she decides to leave everything behind and live as a bohemian.

She becomes a fantastic high-wire artiste -- Neige-- who performs all throughout Europe... and even all the way to Japan, where she wins the heart of a great samurai-- Kano-- who, to prove his love for her, puts down his sword and takes up painting.

Neige gives birth to a daughter. But soon, she feels the same calling to perform her singular art-- the combination of agility, balance, precision, and danger.

During the cherry blossom celebration, a performance is scheduled in honor of the young Emperor of Japan. A steel rope is extended between two snow-capped summits in the heart of the Alps, and the magic begins...

Neige emerges as light as a snowflake, and with stupefying gracefulness takes the fiery point of her balancing pole and scrawls a magnificent haiku-- a Zen poem whose brevity is rivaled only by its precision-- before the spectators, who watch with bated breath. Suddenly, there is a snap, a glint of fire from the bottom of the pit, and then silence.... bearing into the hearts of the astounded audience.

Kano goes after Neige in vain, and, after scanning the endless reaches of blinding snow for three days, loses his sight.

Northern Japan, twenty years later: a young man, against the wishes of his father, a Shintoist priest, decides to become a poet. Alone, he instills the quintessence of his feelings in an outpouring of pure verse. His father, who has been reading his work in private, recognizes its potential and sends a selection of poems to the emperor's court.

An emissary arrives, accompanied by a young woman whose beauty and allure instantly charm the poet. The emperor's emissary advises the young man to seek out the instruction of grand master Kano. The poet agrees.

Crossing the Alps will prove to be a terrible ordeal-- and the chance for a miracle to occur. Having been pushed up by a steady advance of snow, Neige appears through the ice, dazzling the young man who, stiff with cold, has been driven by the storm to the edge of a cliff.

When he meets Kano, he doesn't yet know that this old blind man is the husband of the beauty encased in ice, and the father of the young woman whom he has fallen in love with. He has trouble accepting the teachings of an artist who has not even been able to see beauty in years... until a real relationship blossoms between them... and radically changes the course of their lives.

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Synopsis

Paris. One night, a young girl flees the comforts of her family to join a tight-rope walker she had admired during a performance the night before: she longs to become a high-wire artiste, living the life of a bohemian across Europe, and throughout the whole world.

She draws invisible poems in the air. She is so agile, and her sense of balance so extraordinary, that her stage name-- Neige-- precedes her everywhere she goes with a blaze of fireworks. Her luminous journey takes her to Japan, where she meets the love of her life, Kano, who lays his samurai sword down at her feet and becomes a great artist.

Time goes by. On the surface, all is well. But one day the young woman looks beyond her garden, beyond the face of her daughter Yukiko, and out towards the distance... She misses performing... And so she begins training again, and once again experiences the intoxicating pleasure of her body in balance, her foot, light as a feather, grazing the wire rope, her hands twirling the balancing pole...

In honor of the emperor, a performance is organized with Neige as star. The preparations are as impressive as the feat: she must walk the mile covering the two highest summits of the Japanese Alps.

Festivities are underway until nightfall. The guests, the young emperor among them, watch for Neige. Finally she appears, up in the air, one end of her balancing pole on fire: she scrawls, piece by piece, a sublime fiery haiku on the black page of sky.

She steps onto the rope as delicately as a beam of light... but halfway through, there is a sudden snap: Kano, Yukiko, and the emperor of Japan are all witness to the vertiginous drop that follows-- a flicker of light swallowed up by the mountain.

Kano sets out at once to find her, but he is no match for the mountain. After scanning the merciless stretches of snow for days and days in hopes of holding his wife again, Kano loses his vision without ever finding a trace of her.

Northern Japan, twenty years later. Kyo is seventeen years old. Against the wishes of his father, he has decided to be neither priest nor warrior. He will be a poet of whiteness, a poet of the snow.

His father, a Shintoist priest, does not take kindly to his son's rebellion, yet after reading his poems is forced to recognize the talent of the young poet. In secret, he sends several of them to the emperor's court.

They soon send an emissary, a court poet, accompanied by a young woman impassioned by poetry, who is none other than... Yukiko, daughter of the beautiful tight-rope walker and the former samouri.

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Kyo barely listens to a word the imperial emissary says-- he remarks upon the absence of color in his artwork, and advises him to seek out the teachings of the grand master Kano-- so drawn is he to the beauty and grace of the young woman.

As they take their leave, his clumsiness make his feelings obvious, and she laughs at him. This laugh wounds Kyo's ego, and makes the clutch of his nascent passion all the more painful.

He avenges his heartache that very night by violently seducing a young woman he first encountered close to the village fountain, and whom, over the winter, he had instructed in the art of lovemaking.

Seeking the teachings of the grand master Kano, Kyo embarks on a journey across Japan: scaling mountaintops through a storm, he uncovers the preserved body of the young French woman, still dazzlingly beautiful after having been frozen in ice for the past twenty years.

Kyo spends the entire night admiring her, and finally leaves the recumbent figure with much regret to continue on towards Kano, who, he is woefully unaware, is Neige's husband, and the father of Yukiko.

Kyo is in store for a great surprise when he meets Kano: the great master, brilliant painter and poet, is... blind. How will a blindman be able to teach the art of color ?

The relationship between the young man and the old blind master is rocky, and Kyo's bad attitude will lead to a confrontation between the two men, involving the most sophisticated martial arts, which allows the young poet to finally appreciate the range and finesse of Kano's art...

It is not until a conversation with the faithful Tetsuo, who served as Kano's aide-de-camp during his time as samouri, that Kyo learns his old master is the husband of the young woman imprisoned in a case of ice.

This discovery marks a turning point in their relationship. The master gives his student one of his most beautiful metaphors on art and writing. Their destinies come together in a surprising and unhoped-for harmony.

Kyo leads Kano to Neige, so that he can be close to her one last time. Kano gives one last teaching to the young man, which contains the keys to the mystery of artistic creation. He also informs him of his decision: he will not go back. His path ends there where Neige lies.

Clutching the scroll bearing the great Kano's final masterpiece, Kyo goes down the mountaintop by the opposite side. His life as a man, and as an artist, lies before him.

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All that remains for him to do is reconcile with his father-- who, he must admit, recognized his talent before anyone else-- and summon the woman that he loves: Yukiko. A selection of poetry is sent off to the court... Kyo waits.

As soon as the young woman appears, they both know. An invisible weaving of magic circumstances and fortunate coincidences has already joined the lives of these two beings, one to the other.

The harmony that they have willfully instilled in their bodies and souls can be heard, vibrating in the air and throughout time, like the snow, like a single snowflake which contains the world and yet is still not enough...

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Preliminary notes/ screenplay

Neige is a love film. Here, the "essential is invisible" and serves as the thread with which we weave connections that go beyond appearances, beyond distances, beyond time.

It is a film wherein the most potent desire can give birth to the subtlest, most precise art, as well as to a blinding pride. A film where the protagonists willingly undergo major changes-- and can thus really meet, get to know each other, and love one another.

Neige is a film about the power of intuition, about those who vigorously pursue the paths that have been shown to them. It is a film about the power of love, about the generosity and fidelity that we owe above all to ourselves. We must all face our own desires and demons, and attempt to understand, each in our own unique way, what makes our hearts beat.

It is a film about agility, precision, balance and desire-- the forces that push us towards the unknown, that make us courageous enough to willingly abandon our comfortable lives and leap into nothingness, an unexplored land, by accepting the risk of defeat.

All of these challenges and battles took place during an era that was at once open to the future and cut off from the past, in countries defined by their exceptional artists and age-old traditions, and in the hearts of those men and women who refused to follow the easy path through life, at the foothills of those nature-made cathedrals-- mountains of eternal snow.

Differences aggravate the tensions between parents and teenagers, between duties and ethics, between love and desire, between language and meaning, between codes of conduct and authentic behavior, but are eventually overcome through the personal development of the protagonists, which paves their way to real encounters.

These personal developments lead them to confront the obstacles in their lives, to live intense moments of discovery, and to seek out moments of harmony which reverberate through the years-- for their callings are formed and fulfilled through private and painstaking self-reflection, thus transforming one's relationship with the world, and with others.

No one can possibly know beforehand what his or her life will be like, if it will be beautiful or simply happy. But embarking on a voyage without first attempting to know oneself is perhaps tantamount to going on a trip with one's worst enemy. To miss an opportunity to be attentive to one another's feelings is to forget that "I is an other," and is perhaps to forget oneself.

Destiny will bring the protagonists together in so natural a manner that their confrontations, tensions, and estrangements will prove to be the inescapable ingredients of the richness of existence, so that each moment they spend on the invisible rope of life may be one of balance.

In *Neige*, the imaginary plays an authorial role, beginning during childhood of the young girl

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who becomes a tight-rope walker, and for Kyo, who is to become a poet. It can be anything-- a ray of sunlight reflected on a crystal of snow, a dragonfly's wing trembling at the edge of a brook, a bubble of soap soaring towards the sky, a scene embroidered on the side of a kimono-- that frees their spirits from the present moment, transforming reality into a line of a poem, into a story, a daydream. The image transforms, frees itself, comes alive...

The ecstasy of difference, the richness of the other... In opening the hearts of these headstrong and sensual protagonists to us, *Neige* instills us with power and pain, the blood and marrow of self-awareness, and with the capacity to truly love.

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Production Guidelines

Light... fleeting... an extravaganza of snowflakes whirling with wild abandonment... Neige is draped upon the world like a coat made of silk and diamonds, effacing what we know and changing it into something new, transformed by the billions of miniscule crystals, each unique and ephemeral... The landscape again becomes a silent, virgin territory, upon which the footsteps of our protagonists tread like a timeless poem upon a page of light...

Through its interposed characters, this film is a reflection on balance. It is an ode to the harmony and agility that govern our relationships, achieved through and despite the tensions that live within us, and which, once transcended, become our strongest impetus. Once this internal battle is resolved, we move into action with a nimble heart.

The protagonists act after intense reflection, which often takes place unperceived among them. They might seem insane, irresponsible, or unreasonable... but this is opposite from the truth.

The costumes, ever attentive to the overall image, reveal the characters' relationships with legerity. They are at once current and timeless; the silhouette, the cut, the fabric-- be it silk from Japan or Lyon, a cotton veil or a cotton jersey, a wool or cashmere alpaca--, and their embroideries are works of art on their own. Draped upon the wearer, the costumes become moving paintings, alive and in color, responsive to a touch of wind or to a certain kind of lighting. They highlight the psychology of each character, and amplify each person's individual way of moving.

The mountain landscapes play an essential part in the film, for they are the imposing frame in which several particularly dramatic moments are contained: Neige's vertiginous drop and subsequent disappearance; Kyo's solitary meditation, once he must make a definitive choice of career against the wishes of his father; Kyo's discovery of Neige frozen in a block of ice during a storm; Kano's final decision to die beside the recovered body of his beloved. Conducive to contemplation, and to humility, these tall mountains petrify the souls of their inhabitants-- whether they be Japanese or European-- and forge a unique harmony among them.

These backdrops echo the evanescent splendors of the world of performance, the brilliance of cities and their beautiful dwellings. They also share the pure and austere simplicity of Japanese houses-- the house of Kyo's parents, and of Kano-- recalling Zen gardens... some rocks rising up from the ground, the charred brushwood and the ice clinging to the branches of cherry trees...

This film explores the singular relationship that exists between Europe and Japan, through the pictorial arts as well as poetry and literature (Hiroshige, Utamaro, Basho, Ryokan, Issa, Muju, Ryunosuke, Kawabata, Mishima... but also Balzac, Verlaine, Whistler, Van Gogh, and Baudelaire).

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The natural décor, the architecture, and the interiors chosen will all be conceived of with the following idea in mind: *Neige* is a story outside of time. Like one of Hosukai's paintings, a haiku from Ryokan, a poem by Baudelaire, the architectural designs of Katsura, a Parisian *hôtel particulier*... or like a circus performance.

The rope leading the young French woman and the great samurai to love will be suspended from the peaks of these different artistic expressions. These same sources of inspiration-- for the writing of the screenplay as well as for the production of the film-- mark the development of Kano's outlook and sensitivity, that of his daughter, and that of the young poet.

Fundamental transformations took place at the end of the nineteenth century, in Europe as well as in Japan, as technical advancements transformed the landscape (the invention of reinforced concrete by a Frenchman, the railroad tracks and telegraph between Tokyo and Yokohama...).

These transformations were revolutionary, modifying one's perception of time, of space, of his or her contact with nature and with the world beyond that which can be seen. The artistic gaze, key to countless mysteries within the domain of artistic creation, encompasses the very essence of these transformations.

This is how a path forms beneath the protagonists' footsteps. Their feet, while light, are firm: however they do not form their goals beforehand-- they are guided by intuition, which they have learned to listen for in the murmuring of the wind, in the scent of a flower, in the acrobat's smile, or in an old man's footprints in the snow.

This film gives us the opportunity to refine our outlook on the invisible, through both action and contemplation: in the décor, which favors this approach, and with the positioning of the camera-- at once active and introspective-- and smitten with the beauty of each instant.

The camera will often film at the level of the heart. Gestures, words, and actions will reveal the characters' feelings and motivations to the audience-- they go beyond fear, excitement, or amorous passion, which are only fleeting sensations to be transformed, as in alchemy, to whatever it is that gives life an element of the secretly grandiose.

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... on the characters

Kano's destiny, which revolves between Kyo, Neige, and Yukiko, is emblematic.

His destiny as samurai-- a great samurai, according to the emperor-- seems to have been plotted out from childhood to old age, and yet he lives in total horror of his final battle. Kano's encounter with the young tight-rope walker-- despite his maturity-- will completely and instantaneously revolutionize him.

His romantic union with Neige leads to this schism with what was thought to be his destiny, and Kano blossoms in pursuit of another activity: art, both pictorial and poetic, and the sublimation of martial arts, of which he is grand master. He personifies the transformations which will completely reform Japanese society (abolition of castes, the banning of former samurais from carrying swords in 1876, the dissolution of all orders expelling Christians...).

Yukiko is born from the love between Neige and Kano. When her path-- she has become arts advisor in emperor's Meiji's court-- crosses that of the young poet Kyo, she openly mocks his blunderings, yet secretly already loves him, for she is capable of recognizing a man who has surely endured a difficult journey in order to find balance. This provocation comes as a challenge, as an invitation to travel down the demanding path that defines all artistic calling.

Neige lives in inner conflict for as long as she submits to a strict education, before liberating the will of her instinct and of her heart. Kano, in irreversibly deciding to put down his weapons, conquers an enemy far more powerful than those he encountered out on the battle fields. Faithfully committed to his poetry, Kyo estranges himself from the wishes of his father, and rises above his adolescent pride after a confrontation with Kano. Finding an inner balance before wholly exceptional parents, without becoming estranged from them, is also a subtle fight, sometimes even more difficult... which Yukiko realizes.

The samurai, like the tight-rope walker and the poet, lives every movement in advance during an inner journey before performing it within a moment in time. His inner experience both precedes and accompanies an irreversible act which engages his whole being, confronted with its own existential dilemma.

The poet seeks a balance between the present instant-- being here now-- and an eternal elsewhere, an instant whose duration expands throughout the entire universe, which he expresses in a burst of language. When Kyo meets young Komako, he is deeply touched by her character, her immediate presence, alive, full, and complete, while he himself lives in tension, like a rope joining together the present and the eternal absolute. She appears to him as the threshold to the present, a luminous body savoring each instant, a caress of instantaneity.

The risk that Neige undertakes reminds one of Icarus: to caress the clouds and embrace the sun. Higher, futher, longer... the danger of forever separating oneself from others. This

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discovery of another level of balance, like the light bearing into Kano's eyes, will end up melting her. Softly, trustingly, she lands again on earth.

Yukiko is a point of balance between two different tendencies, a snowflake stroking a rope in an instant of eternal pleasure, who thrives on being open to the multiplicity of all outside influence. As a Japanese woman introduced to the subtleties of Occidental culture, Yukiko drinks from the lips of exterior forces and quenches her sweet craving. Her own feelings emerge by attentively listening to those feelings expressed by others.

But the call of Icarus stirs within Neige's heart, and the happiness she shared with Kano and their daughter Yukiko over the course of the seasons is no longer enough for her. Pushed by the desire to be once again up in the air, a mere movement of balance and agility, she will disappear... swallowed by the open chasm beneath her feet.

Kano, who trusted Neige and her art, and who told the young emperor Meiji of his support, will rebel against the mountain's unfathomable power, and return defeated: the mountain took his love from him, as well as his sight. The faithful Tetsuo-- his righthand man throughout every battle-- is the one who saves his life and brings him back, blind, to the house.

Many years before, while battling a mutinous faction opposed to the emperor, Kano had saved Tetsuo's life, and for this he will continue to be grateful to him until his death. He knows Kano's worth both as a man and as a samurai, as he knows the pain in his heart.

Thanks to Tetsuo, whose destiny is definitively fused to his own-- and who tactfully reminds him of his fatherly duties towards Yukiko-- Kano will not be reduced to a man broken by pain. And, although now blind, he is born once again out of the ashes of his art.

Kano's vital energy is the dynamic that Kyo sought outside of his home. He will then be able to meet again with his father, the Shintoist priest, because in spite of his son's rebellion he showed himself to be awake to his son's art, and was capable before anyone else of appreciating its true value. It is Kyo's turn to recognize his father's calibre, as well as his mother's subtle influence. He will then be ready to embark on a savorous and harmonious adventure with Yukiko.

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Haiku

Considered the quintessential Zen literary form, the **haiku**, a poem composed of 17 syllables distributed throughout three verses (5-7-5) is derived from the *waka* or *taka*, a poem of 31 syllables and 5 verses (5-7-5-7-7). We accredit Basho (1644-1694) with reinventing the haiku as a noble form of literature, and even as one of the greatest of all Japanese arts.

The haiku does not give place to reflection or abstraction; rather, it is very concrete: the material is already there, nature is already there, and it is by contemplation of the infinite attention that the haiku brings to the least perceptible relationships that govern life and nature that the poet reaches the state of *satori* (illumination, awakesness) of which the haiku is the expression.

This great sensitivity to nature is one of the timeless qualities of the Japanese spirit: the *shinto* ("voice of gods"), which is the oldest and widest reaching religion in Japan, involves, among its various rites, the sacralization and sometimes even the deification of natural objects.

The use, in shinto ritual, of sacred ropes (shime or shinawa)-- for example, the joining of two rocks, between which the presence of a god (kami) has been found, is a spiritual form of appropriating nature.

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development team

2007

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