

Bounded Rationality in the Japanese Cinema: Director Miwa Nishikawa's *Yureru* revisits the “*Rashōmon* Effect”

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Introduction

This article discusses how the question of bounded rationality is exploited in the Japanese cinema, by means of an analysis of two films: (i) *Rashōmon*, a 1950 production directed by Akira Kurosawa¹; and (ii) *Yureru*, a 2006 production directed by Miwa Nishikawa². Additional Japanese films are also discussed throughout the paper as a way of presenting more evidences of the issues being raised. Moreover, this study will examine some features of Japanese aesthetics which have favored a clear presentation of the problem of bounded rationality in these two motion pictures.

Recent literature on organizational theory has emphasized the impact of emotional factors in bounded rationality³. Roberta Muramatsu and Yaniv Hanoch argue that emotions “play a central role in guiding and regulating choice behavior, by virtue of their capacity to modulate numerous cognitive and physiological activities”⁴. Emotions also have a substantial impact on the processes of “encoding, storing, and retrieving information about important events” and therefore they influence individuals’

¹ Akira Kurosawa and Shinobu Hashimoto, *Rashōmon*, DVD. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Japan: Daiei Motion Picture Company, 1950.

² Miwa Nishikawa, *Yureru*, DVD. Directed by Miwa Nishikawa (Japan: TV Man Union, Engine Film, Bandai Visual Company and Eisei Gekijo Company, 2006).

³ Bruce E. Kaufman, “Emotional arousal as a source of bounded rationality,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 38, no 2 (1999); Nicolai J. Foss “Bounded rationality in the economics of organization: ‘Much cited and little used’,” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 24, no 2 (2003), p. 258.

⁴ Roberta Muramatsu and Yaniv Hanoch “Emotions as a mechanism for boundedly rational agents: The fast and frugal way”, *Journal of Economic Psychology* 26, no. 2 (2005), p. 202.

memories⁵. In *Yureru*, emotional factors have a central impact on the characters' memory recollections and on their ability to analyze and understand events. Although *Yureru* and *Rashōmon* deal with issues related to subjectivity of perception and bounded rationality, the latter is more focused on illustrating how emotions can constrain individuals' cognitive abilities and influence their rational capacity to evaluate events.

This paper is divided into five sections, including this introduction. The next section will present a literature review on rationality and a definition for bounded rationality. Section three will discuss some features of Japanese aesthetics which are relevant for the present study. Section four will be devoted to the analysis of the Japanese films *Rashōmon* and *Yureru*, followed by the conclusion.

Rationality and its limitations

Rationality has been a recurrent theme in the writings of Max Weber⁶. Although a number of authors have asserted that the different definitions of the term presented by Weber are conflicting and have caused confusion and obscurity⁷, rationality has been a central theme and one of the most important topics in his studies⁸. Moreover, scholars such as Arnold Eisen⁹, Mahmoud

⁵ Robert W. Levenson, "The interpersonal functions of emotion", *Cognition and Emotion* 13, No. 5 (1999); Muramatsu and Hanoach, 205.

⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁷ Steven Lukes, "Some Problems about Rationality", in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 207; Tenbruck, Friedrich, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber", *British Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (1980), p. 323.

⁸ Stephen Kalberg "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History", *The American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 5 (1980), p. 1145.

⁹ Arnold Eisen, "The Meanings and Confusions of Weberian 'Rationality'," *The British Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 1 (1978).

Sadri¹⁰ and Jukka Gronow¹¹ have tried to compare and classify those definitions in an attempt to harmonize them within Weber's broader sociological works. Among these classifications, the distinction between formal and substantive rationality tends to be of pivotal importance and is presented by Weber as follows:

A system of economic activity will be called 'formally' rational according to the degree in which the provision for needs, which is essential to every rational economy, is capable of being expressed in numerical, calculable terms (...). The concept of 'substantive rationality,' on the other hand, is full of ambiguities. It conveys only one element common to all 'substantive' analyses: namely, that they do not restrict themselves to note the purely formal and (relatively) unambiguous fact that action is based on 'goal-oriented' rational calculation with the technically most adequate available methods, but apply certain criteria of ultimate ends, whether they be ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, feudal (*ständisch*), egalitarian, or whatever, and measure the results of the economic action, however formally 'rational' in the sense of correct calculation they may be, against these scales of 'value rationality' or 'substantive goal rationality.'¹²

In general terms, the main difference between formal and substantive rationality is that, while in the former individuals' actions are directed by objective, calculable and universal rules and laws, in the latter individuals' actions are oriented by values or beliefs¹³. Nonetheless, in both cases the actions of individuals are

¹⁰ Mahmoud Sadri, "Reconstruction of Max Weber's Notion of Rationality: An Immanent Model," *Social Research* 49, no. 3 (1982).

¹¹ Jukka Gronow, "The Element of Irrationality: Max Weber's Diagnosis of Modern Culture," *Acta Sociologica* 31, no. 4 (1988).

¹² Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 85-86.

¹³ Sadri, *Reconstruction of Max Weber's Notion of Rationality*, p. 623); Kalberg, *Max Weber's Types of Rationality*, pp. 1155-1159. In fact, based on

focused on the achievement of a certain objective, which may be a quantifiable outcome or an ethical value, political ideology or religious belief. The core element of rationality is thus the fact that it is goal-oriented. Arnold Eisen argues that, “underlying all rationality is *purpose*: the conscious intent of the actor to achieve a given end”¹⁴. In fact, rational actions are based on the “denial of arbitrariness” and individual acts for a known purpose, in an attempt to extend its control over the world, diminishing the sway of unpredictable events. As Mary Gibson puts it, “the criterion for rationality is simply that ends be coherently structured and effectively pursued, and adjusted where feasible to maximize satisfactions”¹⁵.

Therefore, the main elements of a rational action are: (1) the definition of an objective (which may be a quantifiable outcome or an absolute value); (2) the knowledge of the different means to maximize the achievement of such an objective; (3) the understanding of the impact of each of these alternatives; and (4)

the different usages of the term rationality in two of Weber’s works, *Economy and Society* and *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*, Kalberg identifies four types of rationality: (i) practical rationality, which is the most pragmatic and empirical type of rationality, characterized by the acceptance of given realities and the calculation of ‘the most expedient means of dealing with the difficulties they present’; (ii) theoretical rationality, referring to an attempt towards ‘a conscious mastery of reality through the construction of increasingly precise abstract concepts rather than through action’; (iii) substantive rationality, that ‘exists as a manifestation of man’s inherent capacity for value-rational action’ and is the type of rationality that directs individuals’ actions according to ‘a past, present, or potential value postulate’, resulting in a ‘valid canon’ or ‘unique standard’ to which reality and empirical events ‘may be selected, measured, and judged’; and (iv) formal rationality, that is intrinsically connected to the foundations of the modern bureaucratic state and the legal-rational type of domination and thus legitimizes ‘means-end rational calculation by reference back to universally applied rules, laws, or regulations’ (Kalberg, Max Weber’s Types of Rationality, pp 1151-1159). The discussion raised in this present paper, however, is centered on formal and substantive rationality.

¹⁴ Eisen, The Meanings and Confusions of Weberian “Rationality”, p. 58.

¹⁵ Mary Gibson, “Rationality”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6, no. 3 (1977), p. 195.

the choice of the optimum alternative. Rationality is thus capable of identifying optimal means for achieving goals, a characteristic which was greatly welcomed by capitalism and became one of the bases for the modern bureaucratic state.

According to Weber, the Western modern society is based on the rational-legal type of domination. He defines domination as “the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons”¹⁶. There are three pure types of legitimate domination: (1) traditional, that is based on customs or tradition, and in which the subordinates obey the orders of their masters because of traditional mores; (2) charismatic, in which the followers obey the leader due to the belief in his especial powers or qualities; and (3) rational-legal, that represents the modern bureaucratic state, in which the subordinates obey their superiors because of the coercive character of the rational norms.

The modern bureaucratic state is based on rational rules, which are described in an objective and impersonal way to achieve predetermined goals. As the rational-legal domination is goal-oriented and focuses on identifying optimal means for achieving goals, it resulted in better outcomes than previous forms of legitimate domination, favoring the fast proliferation of the bureaucratic organization throughout the world:

Since bureaucracy has a ‘rational’ character, with rules, means-ends calculus, and matter-of-factness predominating, its rise and expansion has everywhere had ‘revolutionary’ results, in a special sense still to be discussed, as had the advance of rationalism in general.¹⁷

The bureaucratic organization, in its ideal type, tries to maximize the calculable and goal-oriented elements of rationality,

¹⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 212-215.

¹⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 1002.

defining objectives in the most effective way, searching exhaustively for the most efficient alternative to achieve such objectives and defining rules and norms in an impersonal and objective fashion. Bureaucracy is arguably the most rational – at least formal rational – form of organization to date, as it focuses on predictable and quantifiable variables that maximize the achievement of optimal outcomes, ignoring emotional or non-quantifiable elements:

When fully developed, bureaucracy also stands, in a specific sense, under the principle of *sine ira ac studio*. Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism¹⁸.

Nonetheless, although rationality has allowed the great technical and economic progress of modern society, it has a number of limitations. The process of rationalization, itself, presupposes an abstraction of reality in order to make events simpler and understandable by the human mind. Since human beings are incapable of analyzing reality in its entirety, they try to create models in order to simplify the problem at hand to its most important elements. Rationalization is, therefore, a process of reducing reality to its most relevant events in order to grasp phenomena and make them comprehensible¹⁹.

Moreover, Thomas Kuhn has identified a significant constraint to the process of rationalization by pointing out the existing of paradigms, i.e., “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and

¹⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 975.

¹⁹ David Wheeler, “The Limits of Rationality”, *For the Learning of Mathematics* 8, no. 1 (1988), p. 16.

solutions to a community of practitioners”²⁰. Although paradigms simplify scientific research by providing models, assumptions and theories, enabling researchers to conduct experiments and boosting scientific discoveries, they hinder a comprehensive analysis of the entirety of events. As researchers use paradigms to comprehend reality, their interpretation of events is limited to the boundaries set by such paradigms.

Another pitfall of rational action tends to be inherent to its aforementioned main elements. A rational action presupposes that the individual has the capacity to objectively define the optimal objective, evaluate all the possible alternatives to achieve it, assess the impact of these alternatives and chose the most efficient and effective one. Nonetheless, Herbert A. Simon has drawn attention to the fact that individuals are limited in their capability to fully apprehend and objectively understand reality²¹. He developed the concept of bounded rationality, which refers to the “limits upon the ability of human beings to adapt optimally, or even satisfactorily, to complex environments”²². Rational action is, therefore, bounded or limited by individual abilities, social or cultural variables, emotional factors and a number of other elements, and it is therefore impossible for human beings to fully comprehend all the forces at play in the world and to anticipate the effects of the interaction of such forces²³.

²⁰ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. viii.

²¹ Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

²² Herbert A. Simon, “Bounded rationality and organizational learning”, *Organizational Science* Special Issue 2, no.1 (1991), p. 132.

²³ Kathleen R. Conner and C. K. Prahalad, “A resource-based theory of the firm: knowledge versus opportunism”, *Organizational science* 7, no. 5 (1996).

Bertrand Munier et al. affirm that the essence of bounded rationality is “to be a ‘process of thought’ rather than a ‘product of thought’”, in the sense that “individuals have recourse to reasonable procedures rather than to sophisticated computations which are beyond their cognitive capacities”²⁴. In this manner, rational action is not a process of exhaustively assessing all the available alternatives in order to maximize the achievement of an optimal outcome, but rather a process of evaluation of options known to the individual and biased by his own modes of thought. Rationality is therefore limited by a number of factors, such as time and information available, cognitive constraints and emotional reactions.

Japanese aesthetics: a brief discussion on some of its features

Japanese art has been greatly influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintō beliefs and practices. From the early years of the consolidation of the Japanese state and imperial court, the importation of Chinese culture, as well as the indirect contact with Indian and other cultures brought to China through the Silk Road have played a pivotal role in the development of the Japanese sense of art²⁵. Buddhism, in particular its doctrine of impermanence expressed by “the conviction that the things of this world are evanescent and are not to be relied on” and by the idea that everything in the world is in a constant state of change,

²⁴ Bertrand Munier et al., “Bounded Rationality Modeling”, *Marketing Letters* 10, no. 3 (1999), p. 234.

²⁵ Andrew A. Tsubaki, “Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of Yugen: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30, no. 1, (1971), p. 62; Makoto Ueda, “Zeami on Art: A Chapter for the History of Japanese Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 1 (1961), p. 79; George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334*, 9th ed. (Tokyo: Tuttle publishing, 2000); Kazuo Kasahara, *A History of Japanese Religion* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, Co., 2001), p. 50; Subhakanta Behera, “India's Encounter with the Silk Road”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 51 (2002).

has a strong presence in Japanese culture and art. Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea around the sixth century A.D. and it has had such a strong influence on Japanese literature, coloring every form of expression, that it is virtually “impossible to understand the literature of premodern Japan without at least a modicum of knowledge of Buddhism”²⁶.

The Buddhist ideas of impermanence and the transient nature of life can be observed in the themes of *Nō* plays, which are mainly focused on otherworldly encounters with ghosts grieving their past, and in Japanese traditional poetry, which deals with issues such as the evanescent quality of nature and regret over the loss of beauty, the latter being a recurrent theme in the celebrated *waka* poems of Ono no Komachi (825-900), a ninth-century woman poet. The simplicity of traditional garden arrangement in Japan, which tries to capture the beauty of nature in its wild form, the contemplation of nature in a state of “eternal loneliness” that characterizes Matsuo Bashō’s (1644-1694) *haikai* poetry, the appreciation for objects which are old and worn out by long years of use in the Tea Ceremony are all clear examples of the influence of Buddhism in Japanese arts²⁷.

Early scholars in Japan absorbed Chinese literary influences and relied on the Chinese language to produce their works. As a result, Confucian principles, as part of Chinese culture, also had a significant impact on the attitudes of the Japanese society, especially from the seventeenth century onwards, and “they provided the scale by which people and their deeds are

²⁶ Donald Keene, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1993), 14.

²⁷ D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 279-294; Laurence Bresler, “Chōboku Soga. A Noh Play by Miyamasu,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 29, no. 1, (1974); Jun’ichiro Tanizaki, *In praise of Shadows* (New Haven, Leete’s Island Books, 1977); Donald Keene, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 36.

judged”. Moreover, Confucian ethics “deeply affected the writing of literature, sometimes in the form of rather heavy-handed sermons that interrupt the narration of a historical tale, sometimes in dramas that depict the extraordinary lengths to which men and women go to display their filial piety or some other Confucian virtue”²⁸. In addition, Paul Reasoner contends that the aesthetic value of sincerity (*makoto*) in Japanese literature, referring to the absence of lies and all things false, was greatly influenced by Confucian ethics, which hold that outward good deeds should be motivated by an internal state of truthfulness to oneself²⁹.

Shintō beliefs have also been constantly present in the Japanese society can be seen in the relationship between Japanese people and nature. The Japanese inclination to view human beings as part of nature in opposition to the Western mentality, which sees humanity and nature as two distinct entities, is a legacy of the Buddhist philosophy³⁰. Nonetheless, the idea that nature is sacred and that mankind should not try to control or destroy the environment, as man itself is part of it, is intrinsically connected to the Shintō philosophy. In many ways, under Shintō philosophy nature is seen as something close to the divine and this mentality has largely influenced Japanese arts. According to Donald Keene, “the nature worship that is so conspicuous a feature of Shintō probably accounts for the attention paid in all forms of literature to the seasons and their flowers and animals”. In fact, “a haiku without a seasonal word is not considered to be a haiku but merely a ‘miscellaneous verse’.”³¹ Shintō elements are evident not only in literature, but also in Japanese theater. They are present in many aspects of the *Nō* theater, such as in the backdrop of stages,

²⁸ Keene, *Seeds in the Heart*, p. 14.

²⁹ Paul Reasoner, “Sincerity and Japanese Values,” *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 4, (1990), p. 476.

³⁰ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, pp. 233-236.

³¹ Keene, *Seeds in the Heart*, p. 14.

which are always decorated with an *Yōgō* Pine, “where the Deity of Kasuga is said to have appeared as an old man and danced”³².

Throughout its history, Japan has developed a number of peculiar forms of theater, such as the *Nō*, *Kyōgen*, *Bunraku* and *Kabuki*, particular literary genres, such as the I-Novels (*Shishōsetsu*), and extremely short and succinct types of poetry, such as the *waka* and *haiku*. The vocabulary used to denote the different forms of Japanese aesthetics include expressions such as *mono no aware*, *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi*.

Mono no aware is an aesthetic principle that developed mainly during the *Heian* period (794-1185) and is related to a state of contemplation that attempts to grasp the essence or “unique inner charm of every existing phenomenon or thing”, and in which “the emotional attitude (*aware*) of the subject fuses with the object (*mono*) being contemplated”³³.

Yūgen expresses the idea of profoundness or mystery and has been defined as the “aesthetic value content intrinsic to all phenomena due to their hidden depths”, in the sense that beauty lies on that which is subtle and not easily expressed in words³⁴. For the Zen monk Shōtetsu (1381-1459), *yūgen* is the “graceful beauty which is implied by the nuance of a subtle yet profound expression”³⁵.

³² Arthur H. Thornhill III, “The Goddess Emerges: Shinto Paradigms in the Aesthetics of Zeami and Zenchiku”, *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 24, no. 1 (1990), p. 50.

³³ Antanas Andrijauskas, “Specific Features of Traditional Japanese Medieval Aesthetics,” *Dialogue and Universalism* 13, Issue 1-2, (2003): pp. 205-206.

³⁴ Steve Odin, “The Penumbra Shadow: A Whiteheadian Perspective on the Yūgen Style of Art and Literature in Japanese Aesthetics,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12, no. 1 (1985), p. 74.

³⁵ Andrew A. Tsubaki, “Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of Yugen: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30, no. 1 (1971): p. 59.

Wabi reflects the ideal of the Tea Ceremony as embraced by Sen no Rikyu (1520-1591) and may be defined as “the beauty of simplicity and poverty”³⁶. The essence of *wabi* may be better expressed in the following passage of *The Book of Tea* by Kazuko Okakura:

The simplicity of the tea-room and its freedom from vulgarity make it truly a sanctuary from the vexations of the outer world. There and there alone can one consecrate himself to undisturbed adoration of the beautiful.³⁷

Sabi characterizes an appreciation for the old and imperfect³⁸. It may be seen as an aesthetic value in opposition to the classical beauty, as it celebrates the old, rusty and faded. *Sabi* is “the beauty of the imperfect, the old, the lonely”³⁹, but in a mood of tranquility and simplicity rather than lamentation or longing for the past.

Despite the richness of Japanese art expressions, idiosyncratic types of theater and diversity of genres in literature and poetry, it is possible to identify key general characteristics which are common to most Japanese works of art. Donald Keene summarizes the main characteristics of Japanese aesthetics in the following four features: suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability⁴⁰.

³⁶ Dorinne Kondo, “The Way of Tea: A Symbolic Analysis”, *Man, New Series* 20, no. 2, (1985): p. 292.

³⁷ Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea* (Tokyo, Kodansha International, 2005), p. 86.

³⁸ Theodore. M. Ludwig, “The Way of Tea: A Religio-Aesthetic Mode of Life”, *History of Religions* 14, no. 1, (1974): p. 47.

³⁹ Kondo, “The Way of Tea”, p. 292.

⁴⁰ Donald Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics”, *Philosophy East and West* 19, no. 3, (1969).

According to Donald Keene⁴¹, Japanese poems and literature relies on ambiguity and vagueness in an attempt to convey more meanings than the words alone can express. Japanese poetry often emphasizes the beauty of the hidden moon in a cloudy sky, or of cherry blossom trees barren of their colorful leaves. *Haiku* poems are extremely concise, having 17 syllables arranged in lines of 5,7,5 syllables, and they attempt to express profound feelings with a very limited use of words. They naturally have to rely more on suggestion than on words to transmit messages or sentiments. Suggestion is also a fundamental aesthetic principle in the *Nō* theater, being expressed by the concept of *yūgen*, which was adopted by Zeami Motokiyo (1364-1444), a prominent *Nō* actor and playwright, as the core element for establishing aesthetic values for this type of drama⁴². In fact, *Nō* uses a number of techniques, such as “spotlights on empty chairs, voices from behind black curtains, masked actors whose true selves are concealed from view”⁴³, which are clearly meant to suggest rather than transmit an explicit message.

The importance of suggestion as an aesthetic value can also be observed in Japanese painting. Sumiye, for instance, is a type of brush ink painting that only uses black ink. The final composition of this painting technique is a kind of sketch in black and white, which does not try to carefully reproduce real objects, but just to present insights, leaving plenty of room for the viewer’s imagination. According to D. T. Suzuki, Sumiye “avoids colouring of any kind, for it reminds us of an object of nature and Sumiye makes no claim to be a reproduction, perfect or imperfect”⁴⁴. A dot may represent a bird, while a line may stand

⁴¹ Donald Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics”, pp. 295-296.

⁴² Tsubaki, “Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of Yugen”, p. 55.

⁴³ Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, “Inugami: A Play for Masks in One Act,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 11, no. 2, (1994), p. 166.

⁴⁴ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, pp. 282.

for a mountain, but this type of painting clearly relies more on suggestion to convey the original image envisioned by the painter than on objective resemblance to real objects. In this sense, D. T. Suzuki argues that Sumiye is similar to Calligraphy:

In calligraphy each character, composed of strokes horizontal, vertical, slanting, flowing, turning upward and downward, does not necessarily indicate any definite idea, though it does not altogether ignore it, for a character is primarily supposed to mean something. But as an art peculiar to the Far East where a long, pointed, soft hair-brush is used for writing, each stroke made with it has a meaning apart from its functioning as a composite element of a character symbolizing an idea.⁴⁵

Another main feature of Japanese aesthetics is irregularity, which corresponds to the appreciation for asymmetrical and imperfect forms. Donald Keene presents the lack of uniformity and the asymmetrical disposition of rocks in the *Ryōanji* stone and sand garden as an example for the Japanese admiration for irregularity⁴⁶. Yuriko Saito also acknowledges the Japanese celebration of the “aged, the obscured, the impoverished and the defective”, and she refers to it as “the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency”⁴⁷. This aesthetic principle is more clearly observed in the Tea Ceremony, which is characterized by the aforementioned *sabi* form of beauty. The setting of this Ceremony is in fact entirely permeated with *sabi*: “an uneven cracked tea bowl, an ancient rusty kettle, a solitary flower, a 10-foot-square room”⁴⁸. The utensils used in the Tea Ceremony are

⁴⁵ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 282.

⁴⁶ Donald Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics”, pp. 300-301.

⁴⁷ Yuriko Saito, “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4, (1997), p. 377.

⁴⁸ Ludwig, “The Way of Tea”, p. 48.

mostly admired for their impoverished look, ageing effects, or even defects due to long years of use⁴⁹.

Donald Keene defines simplicity from a Buddhist perspective, as the “use of the most economical means to obtain the desired effect”⁵⁰, and he presents as examples the Buddhist temples in Japan, that lack painted decorations and whose external structure is often left as natural wood. Also the Tea Ceremony, marked by the *wabi* aesthetic as above stated, is conducted in a small and simple hut, often decorated with a single flower and a painting, in an attempt to develop in the participants an inner state of humility and detachment from the influence and complexities of mundane objects⁵¹. The use of economical means to achieve an effect can also be observed in the design of Japanese traditional houses, in which simple elements such as the color of the walls and sliding doors are utilized to increase the subtle effect of light and shadow within the rooms. According to Jun’ichiro Tanizaki: “The light from the garden steals in but dimly through paper-paneled doors, and it is precisely this indirect light that makes for us the charm of a room. We do our walls in neutral colors so that the sad, fragile, dying rays can sink into absolute repose.”⁵²

Donald Keene also considers perishability as a fundamental aesthetic value in Japan, arguing that, albeit the “frailty of human existence [is] a common theme in literature throughout the world”, Japan is unique in seeing perishability “as a necessary element in beauty”⁵³. The appreciation for *sabi* can be

⁴⁹ Kondo, “The Way of Tea”, p. 301; Saito, “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection”, pp. 378.

⁵⁰ Donald Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics”, pp. 301-302.

⁵¹ Kondo, “The Way of Tea”, pp. 295-296; Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, p. 86.

⁵² Tanizaki, *In praise of Shadows*, p. 30.

⁵³ Donald Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics”, p. 305.

viewed as an example of such perishability to the extent that a cracked or damaged bowl conveys the image that objects and men are equally destined to fade away and eventually vanish from this world.

In this context, it is interesting to note that the notion of *Mono no aware* has changed through time and came to be more connected to the frailty of things, to “melancholic moods” and to the awareness of the transience of existence. According to Andrijauskas⁵⁴, *mono no aware* stands for a powerful emotional experience, which can only be felt in the brevity of a moment, through the empathy of the subject towards the object. In this manner, “the beauty lies not in object itself, but in the whole experience, transformation, and span of time in which the object is present and changing”⁵⁵. Steven Heine goes further in saying that *mono no aware* stands for the “poignant sadness at the passing of things” and that the “refined sentiment of *aware* evokes a melancholy appreciation of the ‘beauty in death’ symbolized by the withering and fading away of autumn hues.”⁵⁶

Poems by authors such as Ono no Komachi and the appreciation for old, rusty and faded objects demonstrate that perishability is seen as a form of beauty in Japanese arts. However, the most appropriate term for such an aesthetic value may not be perishability, but the more general notion of impermanence, as Japanese art does not only see beauty in the natural course of life, leading men and things to their ending, but also in the unfettered process of constant change suffered by individuals, objects and

⁵⁴ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features of Traditional Japanese Medieval Aesthetics”, p. 206.

⁵⁵ Lauren Prusinski, “Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics through Japanese History,” *Studies on Asia: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Asian Studies* 2, no. 1, (2012), p. 28.

⁵⁶ Heine, Steven, “From Rice Cultivation to Mind Contemplation: The Meaning of Impermanence in Japanese Religion”, *History of Religions* 30, no. 4 (1991): p. 374.

nature through time. The Sumiye is an example of an attempt to represent the impermanence of life in art:

[In Sumiye, the] ink is made of soot and glue, and the brush of sheep's or badger's hair, and the latter is so made as to absorb or contain much of the fluid. The paper used is rather thin (...). The reason why such a frail material has been chosen for the vehicle of transferring an artistic inspiration is that the inspiration is to be transferred on to it in the quickest possible time. If the brush lingers too long, the paper will be torn through (...). No deliberation is allowed, no erasing, no repetition, no retouching, no remodeling, no 'doctoring', no building-up. Once executed, the strokes are indelible, irrevocable, not subject to future corrections or improvements. Anything done afterwards is plainly and painfully visible in the result, as the paper is of such a nature. The artist must follow his inspiration as spontaneously and absolutely and instantly as it moves; he just lets his arm, his fingers, his brush be guided by it as if they were all mere instruments, together with his whole being, in the hands of somebody else who has temporarily taken possession of him (...) [Sumiye attempts] to catch spirit as it moves. Everything becomes, nothing is stationary in nature; when you think you have safely taken hold of it, it slips off your hands. Because the moment you have it is no more alive; it is dead. But Sumiye tries to catch things alive, which seems to be something impossible to achieve⁵⁷.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that Japanese arts in general are characterized by the accumulation rather than exclusion of aesthetic forms. In this manner, past aesthetic traditions are embraced instead of rejected when newer forms of art expression emerges and Japanese aesthetic principles tend to evolve in a cumulative manner.

Bounded rationality in Japanese cinema

⁵⁷ Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, pp. 279-282.

Akira Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* was based on two stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, 'Rashōmon' and 'In a Grove', and it tells the story of an incident involving a samurai, his wife and a bandit, which occurred in a forest and was witnessed by a woodcutter. The characters recall the same set of events in strikingly different terms⁵⁸. This film is of particular interest to this discussion, as it shows that different people may present contradicting but equally plausible versions of the same events they have witnessed or taken part in. The so-called "Rashōmon effect" described by Karl G. Heider is a reference to this film and alludes to the problem of subjectivity of perception:

The film is set in 12th-century Japan and concerns the encounter in the forest between a bandit and a samurai and his wife. The mystery of the film comes from four quite different accounts of the same event (a sexual encounter that may be rape, and a death that is either murder or suicide). Each account is clearly self-serving, intended to enhance the nobility of the teller. Each account is presented as a truth at a trial by the bandit, the samurai's wife, the samurai (who, having died, testifies through a spirit medium), and a passing woodcutter who may have been an onlooker. As each of the four testifies, we see that particular version of the events on film, so that the apparent truthfulness of the visual image supports each testimony in turn. But unlike the familiar detective story on film, where accounts that are later impeached are given only verbally, *Rashōmon* commits itself to, and convinces us of, the truth of each version in turn. And unlike the detective story, we are not given an explanation wrapped up nicely in truth at the end.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ George W. Linden, "Five Views of 'Rashōmon,'" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 56, no. 4, (1973), p. 395; Stephen Prince, *The warrior's camera: the cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 127-128.

⁵⁹ Karl G. Heider, "The Rashōmon Effect: When Ethnographers Disagree", *American Anthropologist* 90, no. 1 (1988): p. 74.

The aesthetic principle of simplicity in *Rashōmon* is used to convince the audience that the memory recollections of the four characters all correspond to the true account of past events. In this manner, after the characters present their versions, supported by vivid and clear visual images, the audience feels puzzled and unable to identify which corresponds to the accurate description of what really happened. Some films often use a number of techniques such as blurred or faded images to differentiate true events from memory recollections or versions of past events. Distorted or faded images are thus used to explicitly signal to the audience that the coming events are memory recollections, rather than real events. By avoiding such visual effects and presenting all the testimonies in the same manner, as actual events, *Rashōmon* successfully conveys the message that all versions are equally plausible. To the audience, they all appear as the narration of nothing but real facts.

Simplicity, represented here by the absence of visual effects, has also been effectively used in other Japanese films such as director Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari*⁶⁰. In this film, the lack of any kind of visual effect such as blurry images to separate the real world from otherworldly experiences of the main character facilitates the process of amalgamation of the two different realities depicted in the film. The audience only views one linear reality and wonders which is the real and which is the fantasy or ghostly world.

The scene of the trial in *Rashōmon* is characterized by recurrent asymmetrical images. A number of takes display one character in the middle, several on the left side and none on the right side of the screen. The camera sometimes even fails to present the whole body of characters on the right side (Figure 1). The decision to present the trial scene in an irregular,

⁶⁰ Kawaguchi, Matsutarō, Kyūchi Tsuji and Yoshikata Yoda. DVD. *Ugetsu Monogatari*. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi (Japan: Daiei Studios, 1953).

asymmetrical and imbalanced manner seems to be a way to allude to the difficulty of grasping the absolute truthfulness of events.

Figure 1. *Rashōmon*'s trial



In addition, the trial scene is shot from the viewpoint of the judge⁶¹, which seems to reveal an effort from the director to invite the audience to take over the task of solving the mystery that took place in the forest and decide which version is the true

⁶¹ This is in line with the type of narrative used by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa in the tale “In a Grove”. Although it is clear to the reader that the characters in this tale are being questioned by the High Police Commissioner, the Commissioner does not appear in the tale as a character and never asks questions directly to the other characters. Rather, the reader can only infer what was the question raised by the Commissioner by the answers provided by the character. For instance, the testimony of the Woodcutter starts as follows:

“Yes, sir. Certainly, it was I who found the body. This morning, as usual, I went to cut my daily quota of cedars, when I found the body in a grove in a hollow in the mountains . The exact location? About 150 meters off the Yamashina stage road. It’s an out-of-the way grove of bamboos and cedars” (Ryunosuke, Akutagawa, “In a Grove”, translated by Takashi Kojima, in Goossen, Theodore William, (Ed) *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): p. 95).

one. The sense of puzzlement and uneasiness that the audience feels by the end of the film further strengthens the message regarding the impossibility of understanding an event in its totality. In this manner, *Rashōmon* effectively illustrates the problem of bounded rationality, demonstrating that rationality is limited by information availability and cognitive constraints. The process of understanding reality is severely constrained not only by intentional attempts to conceal the truth, but by the different cognitive abilities and viewpoints of those who witness an event.

A more recent Japanese film that also deals with the subjectivity of perception is *Yureru*, directed by Miwa Nishikawa. *Yureru* revolves around the story of two brothers: Takeru, a successful big city photographer for trendy magazines, and Minoru, the older brother who decided to stay in his hometown in the countryside to run the family business, an old gas station, along with his father. Takeru has to return to his hometown due to a sudden call announcing the death of his mother. During the funeral, the tension between Takeru and his father becomes evident, mainly because of Takeru's past decision to leave the countryside to lead a new life in Tokyo. However, despite Minoru's recurrent attempts to play the role of the older and devoted brother, it is his discontent with his present life and jealousy over the success of this younger brother that becomes increasingly apparent throughout the film. In the days that follow the funeral, Takeru ends up seducing Chieku, a girl who Minoru is in love with. Takeru, Minoru and Chieku go out on a trip to a nearby river and, while Minoru and Chieku are crossing a dangling rope bridge, she falls to her death into the river. Minoru is the primary suspect in Chieku's death and Takeru is an eyewitness⁶². The film, however, does not clearly reveal whether Chieku has fallen or has been pushed from the bridge and whether Takeru has really seen the incident or not.

⁶² Mes, Tom, "Sway", *Midnight Eye*, September 13, 2006, <http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/sway.shtml> (accessed July 8, 2012)

Yureru deals with a number of interesting issues such as the opposing urban and countryside lifestyles in contemporary Japan, family values, the roles of older and younger brothers, and tensions between in-group and outside-group⁶³. Nonetheless, in this article, *Yureru* is explored for its rich and vivid illustration of the effects of emotional factors on individuals' ability to understand reality.

In many aspects, the central argument of *Yureru* is similar to the main motif of *Rashomon*. Nonetheless, *Yureru* tends to focus on a different factor constraining human's cognitive abilities: the emotions. As in *Rashomon*, *Yureru* presents the different versions of the incident without relying on any type of visual effects. In this manner, all the memory recollections of the incident seem equally plausible and truthful. However, these recollections clearly change according to the emotional state of the characters. For instance, Minoru's decision to turn himself in to the police, confessing a crime that he may not have taken a direct part in, seems to be more related to his emotional state of mind, including his envy towards the life style of his younger brother and his sadness and anger over the rejection by Chieko, than to his capacity to objectively and rationally examine the events. In the closing scene, Takeru has a final memory recollection of the incident and decides to confront his older brother on his release from prison. The emotional state in which Takeru encounters his older brother tends to show that this last memory recollection was highly influenced by Takeru's feelings over his older brother. In fact, in this last scene, Takeru was crying while watching old footage of a trip he made with his older brother when they were kids to that same bridge and therefore it is reasonable to infer that his last memory recollection of the incident may have also been

⁶³ For a comprehensive discussion of these topics on Japanese society see, for instance, Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989); Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Massachusetts: The Belknap press of Harvard university Press, 1985), pp. 68-69; and Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society*, 11 ed. (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1997).

influenced by the emotional impact of his childhood experiences with his older brother. This tends to indicate that this final memory recollection was what Takeru wanted to believe rather than what he really witnessed on the day of the incident at the bridge.

Like *Rashōmon*, *Yureru* ends without revealing whether Chieko had fallen or had been pushed from the bridge on the day of her tragic death. However, the answer to this mystery does not seem to be the central question in *Yureru*. By presenting so many versions of the incident which are clearly influenced by emotional aspects, *Yureru* is asking whether individuals are really capable of understanding reality in its wholeness. If even an eyewitness to an incident cannot tell for sure what he has seen, how can anyone be certain that one's opinion is the most accurate?

The title of the film, *Yureru* (“sway” in English), initially seems to refer to the unstable condition of the bridge in which the unfortunate incident takes place. However, it also alludes to the uncertainty of the characters' versions of the incident, which are constantly wavering from one emotional extreme to the other throughout the film.

Yureru also has several elements which are common to Japanese cinema in general and which are worth mentioning, as they create an atmosphere of mystery and suspense in an *yūgen* fashion. *Yureru* tries to focus on very straightforward shots without visual effects. Even in Chieko's death, the camera avoids presenting a body falling from the bridge and the shot only alludes to the incident. The film also greatly relies on silence. In fact, one may go as far as to consider silence as a *mise-en-scène* in Japanese films in general. Director Hirokazu Koreeda's *Disutansu*⁶⁴ relies on silence to such a degree that the film makes very limited use of non-diegetic sounds – for instance, the film does not have actual songs in its soundtrack. This extensive use of silence favors

⁶⁴ Hirokazu Koreeda. DVD. *Disutansu*. Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda. (Japan: Bandai Visual Co., 2001).

a tone of mystery and creates an ambience propitious for a process of empathy between the audience and the film, which is the ultimate objective of *Mono no aware*.

Conclusion

This paper discusses two Japanese films which illustrate the problem of bounded rationality in the cinema. Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* and Nishikawa's *Yureru* show that subjectivity of perception is a major obstacle to grasp the true version of events. The fact that both films are centered on legal trials of alleged criminals tends to emphasize the perils of ignoring the limitations of rationality. The films present crucial constraints to an individual's abilities to evaluate the truth in the account of incidents, and are powerful analogies to the problem of bounded rationality.

The objective and scientific evaluation of an individual's version of events is therefore limited by a number of factors, such as information availability, cognitive constraints and emotional reactions. In these two films, *Rashōmon* and *Yureru*, Japanese directors have illustrated a problem that haunts managers in their decision-making processes. Bounded rationality is a problem inherent to human nature, and individuals should learn to understand how to better cope with such constraints rather than try to avoid them.

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