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## Japanese Art in the Contact Zone: Between Orientalism and 'Japansplaining'

### Abstract

*After WWII, Japan came to be economically and politically at eye level with its former enemy nations. Therefore, one cannot say that the Western reception of Japanese artworks takes place within an actual context of an asymmetrical power relation. Yet, European and American audiences often approach Japanese art from a position of perceived superiority. Overt and subtle traces of this attitude can be detected in reviews and other texts on Japanese artworks ranging from the films of Akira Kurosawa to the photographs of Nobuyoshi Araki.*

**Keywords:** Araki, Nobuyoshi; contact zone; film; Japan; Kurosawa, Akira; Orientalism; photography; post-WWII; reception history; transculturation

Traditionally, the word 'migration' is used to denote the cross-cultural movement of people. When, however, the meaning of this term is extended to include also the movement of "ideas, knowledge, artefacts, art works and symbols",<sup>1</sup> it is of interest to evaluate whether certain theoretical concepts that have been developed with regard to the migration of people can be meaningfully applied to the migration of artworks too. In this paper, this applicability is tested on two examples of artworks that migrated from Japan to the Western world in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, namely Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashōmon* and the photographs of Nobuyoshi Araki.<sup>2</sup>

The theories in question will first be briefly introduced, beginning with Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone. 'Contact zone' is a term coined relatively recently in Pratt's conference paper "Arts of the Contact Zone" from 1990, published in 1991,<sup>3</sup> as well as in the introduction to her book *Imperial Eyes* from 1992.<sup>4</sup> Her main example in these texts is a literary work, so she

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1 CFP: Migrations in Visual Culture (Belgrade, 8-10 Sep 16), *H-ArtHist*, February 16, 2016, <<http://arthist.net/archive/12236>>.

2 In this text, Japanese names are given in the Western order of given name - family name, as opposed to the Japanese order.

3 M. L. Pratt, Arts of the Contact Zone, in: *Professing in the Contact Zone. Bringing Theory and Practice Together*, ed. J. M. Wolff, Urbana 2002, 1-18.

4 M. L. Pratt, Introduction. Criticism in the Contact Zone, in: *Postcolonialism. Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, vol. V, ed. D. Brydon, London 2000, 1920-1928.

speaks of “writing” when she defines contact zones: “[...] writing in what I like to call ‘contact zones,’ social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other”.<sup>5</sup> Later in the same text, Pratt says, “‘contact zone’ is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect”.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, a ‘contact zone’ is a hybrid culture comprised of natives and immigrants, and the art works produced in such a contact zone presumably have specific qualities that other art works produced in different, ethnically homogeneous cultures do not have. Pratt hints at these qualities only with regard to a specific kind of contact zone with which she is primarily concerned: the aforementioned quotation continues, „social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, *often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today*“ (my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> These asymmetrical relations are believed to somehow inform the art works produced in the contact zone.

Mary Louise Pratt acknowledges that her concept of the contact zone is based on a much older one: transculturation, a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940. Transculturation is defined as the cultural transformation process that occurs when different cultures meet as the result of migration.<sup>8</sup> Ortiz emphasises that this process is not about simply adopting a foreign culture, but rather a mutual process in which both parties, the immigrants and the natives alike, abandon some of their old cultural phenomena (‘deculturation’), adopt some phenomena of the other party (‘acculturation’), and even create entirely new phenomena (‘neoculturation’).

The concept of transculturation appears to be very similar to Pratt’s contact zone. The main difference is Pratt’s emphasis on asymmetrical power relations and subordinated or marginal groups, which she ironically attributes to Ortiz himself<sup>9</sup> even though asymmetrical power relations are not part of his definition of transculturation.<sup>10</sup> Recently, an update to the

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5 Ibid., 1922.

6 Ibid., 1925.

7 Ibid., 1922.

8 F. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar*, Durham 1995, 97-103.

9 M. L. Pratt, Introduction, 1924.

10 M. Millington, Transculturation. Taking Stock, in: *Transculturation. Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America* (Critical Studies 27), ed. F. Hernández, M. Millington and I. Borden, Amsterdam 2005, 204-233.

concept of transculturation was proposed by Elizabeth Kath: “in a global era it no longer makes sense to focus only on the cultural transformations that occur in borderlands (the embodied places where different cultures meet). In a world where images, ideas, sounds and other abstracted cultural forms fly around the globe faster than people ever could, we can no longer consider transculturation only in the context of face-to-face encounters and mutual influences between different cultures.”<sup>11</sup>

From an art historical perspective, this idea implies that transculturation can also be based on something in between human individuals and abstracted cultural forms, namely, on objects or artifacts that are ‘flown around the globe’ from one culture to another, and more specifically, on works of art. When this reasoning is applied to Pratt’s concept of the contact zone, works of art can be regarded not only as products of the contact zone, but also as agents or media that enable the formation of contact zones, and which may substitute for the migration of people. Thus, when there is a cross-cultural migration of artworks, their reception, i. e. the discourse around these art works, should show signs of asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination. It is discussed below whether this is actually the case.

However, when considering reception in asymmetrical power relations, the question arises whether this very issue has been conceptualised already before Mary Louise Pratt namely by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* from 1978. Said defines Orientalism as a mode of discourse that the Western world has established for dealing with the Orient.<sup>12</sup> In his book, Said deals primarily with European and North American discourse about the Middle East, but Said’s concept of Orientalism allows for the whole Orient, including the Far East, to become the object of Orientalism as well,<sup>13</sup> and even the entire Third World, that is, the former European colonies in Africa and Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

Characteristically, Orientalism is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”.<sup>15</sup> This attitude of domination might be based on actual economic, political, and military superiority

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11 E. Kath, On Transculturation. Re-enacting and Remaking Latin American Dance and Music in Foreign Lands, in: *Narratives of Globalization. Reflections on the Global Condition*, ed. J. C. H. Lee, London 2016, 21-35.

12 E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1978, 3.

13 *Ibid.*, 17, 120, 285.

14 *Ibid.*, 25.

15 *Ibid.*, 3.

at some time in history,<sup>16</sup> but one of Said's points is that, once Orientalism had been established, it created a persistent tradition of thinking and writing about the Orient that is hard to escape from, even in the contemporary, post-colonial world.<sup>17</sup> Both Said's Orientalism and Pratt's contact zone share an emphasis on asymmetrical power relations, but a major difference between these two concepts is that Orientalism looks at only one side of the discourse – the Western or dominant side – whereas for the contact zone, the mutual influence of dominant and subordinate culture and the possible hybridization of the two are of greater importance.

These concepts are applied below to two examples of works of art that have migrated from the Orient to the Occident, the first one being the film *Rashōmon* from 1950, directed and co-written by Akira Kurosawa. *Rashōmon* was not the first Japanese film to be shown abroad,<sup>18</sup> but it was the first to receive widespread success and critical acclaim as evidenced by winning a Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice Film Festival and an Academy Honorary Foreign Language Film Award in 1952.<sup>19</sup> For many people in the Western world, it was the first Japanese film they had ever seen, so reactions towards it are of particular interest here.

The film is set in medieval Japan<sup>20</sup> and opens with a framing narrative in which three people seek shelter from the rain at a ruined city gatehouse, the eponymous Rashōmon.<sup>21</sup> They talk about a recent crime and its court hearing, which some of them attended. Four different eye-witness accounts of the crime are then shown in the film mainly as flashback sequences one after another.

The incident in question is a rape and possible murder that happened in a nearby forest. However, all four testimonies contradict each other, so only one witness tells the truth and the others must be lying, but we do not know which. The film ends at the gatehouse again when the three men find an abandoned baby, and one of them decides to adopt it.

An early review of *Rashōmon* was published in the New York Times from December 1951, written by Bosley Crowther, which concludes with the

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16 Ibid., 4-6.

17 Ibid., 11, 20-21.

18 D. Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film. A Concise History*, Tokyo 2001, 61-62.

19 Id., *The films of Akira Kurosawa*, Berkeley 1984, 79-80.

20 Different authors interpret the setting as either late Classical Japan (6<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> c.) or early Feudal Japan (12<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> c.).

21 See also *Rashomon. A film by Akira Kurosawa*, ed. D. Richie, New York 1969.

following words: “Whether this picture has pertinence to the present day – whether its dismal cynicism and its ultimate grasp at hope reflect a current disposition of people in Japan – is something we cannot tell you. But, without reservation, we can say that it is an artful and fascinating presentation of a slice of life on the screen.”<sup>22</sup>

The ‘current disposition of people in Japan’, or more precisely, Western ideas about what this disposition might be, are highly interesting here. In 1951, when the review was written, Japan was officially still under Allied Occupation,<sup>23</sup> and memories of the Japanese as defeated enemies in World War II were still fresh. With its ‘ruined gatehouse’, ‘desolate country’ and ‘disillusioned people’,<sup>24</sup> the medieval Japan presented in *Rashōmon* was probably not much different from how Westerners in 1951 imagined contemporary Japan.

To see *Rashōmon* as a reflection of postwar Japan is an interpretation that other critics have expressed too, most extensively James F. Davidson in an essay in *The Antioch Review* from 1954 entitled “Memory of Defeat in Japan. A Reappraisal of ‘Rashomon’”. In this text, Davidson describes the beginning of the film like this: “the picture opens on the ruined Rashomon: once the great architectural symbol of the capital of Japan, now the crumbling reflection of a devastated city whence the seat of power has moved. It is deluged by a relentless, windless rain. Under the gate sit the priest and the woodcutter, exchanging mute glances and headshakes. The priest slowly recites the kinds of disaster that have befallen. ‘And now this. I may lose my faith.’ [...] It is hard to believe that a Japanese audience was not being led to refer to their own experience and to see the events of the story accordingly.”<sup>25</sup>

About the ending of the film, Davidson says, “Surely the epilogue of ‘Rashomon’ points, after the unanswerable questions raised in the story, to a basic belief and duty for Japanese to hold to. The old vision of a hopeful future springing from a glorious past is lost, and the way to its recovery lies through a maze of doubtful thoughts about misfortune, guilt and shame. Yet there is a new Japan, which demands love and care, like the abandoned child, not because of its auspicious or legitimate beginnings, but because it is alive and will perish without them.”

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22 B. Crowther, Movie Review. *Rashomon*, *The New York Times*, December 27, 1951. <https://www.nytimes.com/1951/12/27/archives/the-screen-in-review-intriguing-japanese-picture-rashomon-first.html>

23 D. Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film. A Concise History*, Tokyo 2001, 115.

24 Crowther, *Rashomon*.

25 J. F. Davidson, Memory of Defeat in Japan. A Reappraisal of “Rashomon”, *The Antioch Review* 14 (1954), 492-501.

The most explicit connection to postwar Japan is Davidson's commentary on one particular scene in the film: "Even small touches may strike a chord. For example, when the bandit pleads with the woman to go with him and then, impatient at getting no reply shakes her roughly and shouts, 'Say yes, will you!' some might see something of the ambivalent attitude of SCAP [Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, i.e. General Douglas MacArthur]."

Another ideological interpretation that makes a connection to the Japanese postwar era is offered by Donald Richie in his book on Kurosawa, first published in 1965: "It is interesting that *Rashomon* should have been an historical film [...] because this limitation of spirit, this tacit agreement (social in its scope) that one *is* and cannot *become*, is one feudalistic precept which plagues the country to this day. This was as useful to the [12<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> c.] Kamakura Government as it proved to the administration during the last war. In *Rashomon*, [...] Kurosawa is presenting an indictment of feudal remains. That he sets the scene in the [8<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> c.] Heian-period [sic] is merely due to [author of the source texts Ryunosuke] Akutagawa's having used it, and where the director follows the author in this film, he does so literally. The people, and their way of thinking, are - twelfth century or present day - completely feudal. It is as though in this film he is holding up a mirror" (Richie's italics).<sup>26</sup>

In this American tendency to see *Rashomon* as a reflection of a defeated postwar Japan, it is easy to recognise the asymmetrical power relations of both Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone and Edward Said's Orientalism, with the United States or the Western world as the dominant and Japan as the subordinate culture.

This perception of Japan as a subordinate culture was about to change in the decades after *Rashōmon*, when the industry and economy of Japan not only recovered but eventually for some time even outmatched those of most Western countries. We shall see if this changed perception of Japan is reflected in the Western reception of more recent works of art using the example of Nobuyoshi Araki's photography.

Since the 1960s, Araki had numerous solo exhibitions in Japan, and since the early 1990s also in Europe and America.<sup>27</sup> His motifs include still lifes, street scenes, landscapes and portraits, but he is best known for his nude

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<sup>26</sup> D. Richie, *The films of Akira Kurosawa*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> T. Sato, Chronology, in: *Nobuyoshi Araki. Self, Life, Death*, exh. cat., ed. A. Miki, Y. Isshiki and T. Sato, London 2005, 711-716.

photography, and particularly for his nudes bound in ropes. In the catalog of an Araki exhibition in Wolfsburg, Germany, in 1995, Gijs van Tuyl says:

Photography is a kind of handwriting [for Araki], enabling the photographer to give women individuality and expression, to free them from the rigid patterns of a life which offers few prospects for the future other than travelling, shopping, watching tv and marriage. A session with Araki is a special event in a woman's life, with a concrete souvenir in the form of a photograph to boot. For a few hours a woman forgets her humdrum existence; she is a star.<sup>28</sup>

Another quote in a similar vein often repeated in reviews of Araki's exhibitions is Jean-Christophe Ammann stating that Araki's bondage photographs are "metaphors for the restricting code of conduct of the Japanese in general and women in particular" (my translation).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, several authors on Araki have traced his binding practice back to the Japanese tradition of erotic bondage, *kinbaku* or *shibari*, and the martial art of tying-up prisoners, *hojōjutsu*, e.g. Veit Görner in the catalog for Araki's exhibition in Hannover in 2008:

[...] the bindings which are professionally photographed in lavish sets with numerous personnel and are supervised by a recognized binding-master. *Shibari* is the erotic art of binding, which developed out of the traditional military art of typing-up [sic] known as *Hoj jutsu* [i.e. Hojōjutsu]. There are dozens of Shibari techniques ranging from simple knots to complicated bindings of the entire body. Many serve simply for rendering a person incapable of movement, while others are intended to emphasized [sic] the beauty of most often the feminine body. Those who are not familiar with the traditional Japanese background of bindings often criticize Araki's photographs as purely pornographic. The works depicting binding are so complex because of the ambiguity of the metaphor of tying-up, the imprisonment in conventions, the connections to the artistic traditions of both *Shibari* and calligraphy [...].<sup>30</sup>

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28 G. van Tuyl, *Life and Death Photography. Nobuyoshi Araki - Tokyo Novelle*, in: *Nobuyoshi Araki - Tokyo Novelle*, exh. cat., trans. R. Koenig Wolfsburg 1995, x-xiv. Araki has worked with both professional and amateur models; see e.g. G. Weisenfeld, *Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World*, *Transcultural Studies* (2010), 78-99, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.11588/ts.2010.1.6175>>.

29 Quoted in *Die Frau als Mobile*, *Der Spiegel* no. 9, 1998, 210-211, and A. Searle, *Nobuyoshi Araki. The Erotic and the Everyday*, *The Guardian*, June 5, 2001, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/jun/05/artsfeatures.arts>>.

30 V. Görner, *Hajime*, in: *Nobuyoshi Araki*, exh. cat., ed. V. Görner and F.-T. Moll, Heidelberg 2008, 7-12.

The rhetorical device used in such statements has recently been termed 'japansplaining'.<sup>31</sup> 'Japansplaining', a term not yet theorised, derives from 'mansplaining', which denotes a man explaining something to a woman in a condescending manner.<sup>32</sup> 'Japansplaining' means to explain a specific aspect of something from Japan by Japanese culture in general, thus asserting a greater knowledge about Japan, in an equally patronising way. In this case, van Tuyl, Ammann and Görner, as well as some other authors on Araki, 'japansplain' Araki's bondage pictures when they imply, those who, unlike them, are not familiar with the role of the woman in Japanese society or the Japanese tradition of bindings may misunderstand Araki's photographs and possibly mistake them for pornography or expressions of misogyny.

This rhetorical mode of 'japansplaining', which can be found in many Western texts about Japanese art,<sup>33</sup> has the effect of rendering Japanese art more foreign and esoteric: ostensibly, it cannot be understood on its own, but needs experts – 'japansplainers' – who can make it palatable to the majority of purportedly ignorant Westerners. Such interpretations of Araki's bondage photographs as metaphors for women restricted by a Japanese code of conduct are once again typical of a contact zone or Orientalist<sup>34</sup> discourse in that they contain an assessment of an asymmetrical power relation between Japan and the West (or more precisely, an attitude of superiority rather than actual domination). This time, however, it is not about military or economic power, but the presumed moral inferiority or backwardness of the Japanese society in which women are oppressed, and the supposed superiority of Western society in which women are liberated and, therefore, do not require to be photographed in bondage.

To conclude, the point of this paper is not to claim that the Western authors on Japanese art cited above have completely wrong ideas about Japan. Certainly works of art do correspond in some way, however vaguely, to the culture within which they were made, so a cultural perspective on art is as legitimate as other perspectives. For instance, more universal approaches

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31 N. A. Theisen, 'Of Ghosts and their Shells, or When "Whitewashing" Arguments Fall Flat', in: *What Is Manga?*, April 17, 2016, <<https://whatismanga.wordpress.com/2016/04/17/39-of-ghosts-and-their-shells-or-when-whitewashing-arguments-fall-flat/>>.

32 M. Peters, "Mansplaining" Spawns a New Suffix, in: *Visual Thesaurus*, October 29, 2013, <<https://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/dictionary/mansplaining-spawns-a-new-suffix/>>.

33 Examples also include texts on *Rashōmon*, such as in this quotation by Richard Rowland: „This is a device, of course, familiar enough to those who have seen or read a Noh play [...]” (R. Rowland, *Films from Overseas, The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 7 (1952), 48-57, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209757>>).

34 Orientalism in connection with Araki has also been mentioned in Weisenfeld, *Reinscribing Tradition in a Transnational Art World*.



have identified qualities in both Akira Kurosawa and Nobuyoshi Araki that Westerners and Japanese alike can identify with,<sup>35</sup> while other, more specific approaches insist on the uniqueness and cultural independence of these two individuals.<sup>36</sup> However, as Edward Said reminds us, we must be aware that our encounters with foreign art are always tinted by a tradition of discourse that was motivated by the desire to dominate the foreign culture, and that it is hard to break free from this tradition.

To end on a positive note, Mary Louise Pratt's insistence on the asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination in the contact zone might serve as a helpful reminder of a fact that is often overlooked, namely that works of art are neither produced nor perceived in a cultural void, but always under specific circumstances, which are shaped by, among other factors, power relations between cultures.



Fig. 1: Still from *Rashōmon*



Fig. 2: Still from *Rashōmon*

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35 See e.g. H. R. Haller, *Rashomon* (Berühmte Filme 5), Zürich 1959, and D. Richie, *The films of Akira Kurosawa*, 80.

36 See e.g. F.-T. Moll, *Arakis I-Photography*, in: *Nobuyoshi Araki*, exh. cat., ed. V. Görner and F.-T. Moll, Heidelberg 2008, 115-133.



*Fig. 3: Nobuyoshi Araki, untitled photograph from the Wolfsburg exhibition*



*Fig. 4: Nobuyoshi Araki, installation view from the Hannover exhibition*