

DOING BUSINESS WITH THE JAPANESE: A STUDY OF ALAIN CORNEAU'S FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Abstract

*This paper aims to illustrate the manner in which French director Alain Corneau's film *Fear and Trembling* (originally titled *Stupeur et tremblements*, released in 2003) provides a cross-cultural examination of the world of Japanese office politics and canvasses the peculiarities of the Japanese corporate culture as seen through the eyes of a European. I will demonstrate that at once a story of bold ambition and masochism, the film explores and exploits – sometimes resorting to stereotyping – both the fascination of the Western world with the Japanese culture and the failure to adapt to the requirements of a mighty different cultural environment.*

Keywords: cultural dissonance, Japanese corporate culture, business etiquette, individuality versus community

Introduction

Based on the eponymous memoirs of French author Amélie Nothomb and set in the 1990s, French director Alain Corneau's *Fear and Trembling* (2003) represents “a study of human behavior in captivity” (Scott, 2004) which offers an insight into Japanese office etiquette and business practices from the perspective of a young Belgian woman who chooses to return to Japan, the fascinating country of her childhood, in order to become no less than a “real Japanese”. For this, the heroine Amélie (played by French actress Sylvie Testud, who received the César Award for her performance) lands an entry-level temporary position as interpreter with the Yumimoto Corporation, a large company (*kaisha*) which manufactures, imports and exports practically everything. Ambitious, imaginative, eager to please and to prove herself, the young woman soon finds herself at odds with her immediate supervisors, being perceived as an anomaly within the corporation's clearly established hierarchical system. Consequently, she undergoes a succession of demotions and is assigned a series of tasks meant to humiliate her and shatter her

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individuality, which eventually leads to her determination not to request the continuation of her one-year employment contract with the Yumimoto Corporation. Amélie does not start off as a stranger to the Japanese culture. Born and raised until the age of five in Japan, she masters the language and is familiar to most Japanese customs and behavior norms. Although the young heroine is aware that her position in the company renders her at “everyone’s beck and call”, she fails to anticipate the challenges and later on to adapt to the demands of the Japanese corporate environment.

All “Families” are Dysfunctional: A Story of a Cultural Clash

In comparison with the “me first”-ism of the Western world, Japanese culture de-emphasizes the individual, while emphasizing the importance of conformity to the group (Alston and Takei, 2005: xiii). While personal promotion is “always the best” in the West, it is not advisable in Japan (Rice, 2004: 112). Consequently, formal ways of behaving (*kata*) were developed which forced conformity of behavior on everyone. Moreover, there is a great pressure to think collectively, to behave collectively and to work collectively (Alston and Takei, 2005: xvii), hence the major clash at the heart of the book-turned-movie between Western individualism and Japanese communalism.

The Japanese have developed many strategies and forms of behavior through which they manage to keep individuals connected with one another and also linked to the group. When doing business, the Japanese expect foreigners to observe the same etiquette. Those who do not manage to behave in the same way are seen as immature and ridiculous. In return, the Japanese acknowledge the importance of their own adaptation to the culture of the foreign country they conduct business with. They are more than willing to learn the culture-specific practices of their customers or business partners (Alston and Takei, 2005: xvi). However, nowadays younger Japanese consider the traditional levels of conformity uncomfortable and inhibiting and the Japanese society is not as group-oriented as in the past. Nevertheless, the “Japanese way of doing business” is still preserved (Alston and Takei, 2005: xv).

From this perspective, even though steeped in Japanese culture, Amélie does not manage to adapt as her personal ambitions and initiatives are incompatible with the loyalty and subservience demanded of each of the company’s employees. For instance, after Amélie manages to anger an entire business delegation from a sister company by speaking perfect Japanese while serving coffee, her boss commands that she forget the Japanese language and never speak it again. When Amélie tries to argue that her knowledge of Japanese actually landed her the job and that no one could obey such an order, Mr. Saito (played by Japanese actor Taro Suwa) interjects that “There’s always a way to obey! Western brains must learn that”.

Again acknowledging the absurdity of Mr. Saito's demand, Amèlie responds that "Maybe a Japanese brain can force itself to forget a language. A Western brain can't do it". Her desire to put her abilities in the service of the office, her beginner's enthusiasm and later on her acts of kindness are perpetually misinterpreted and consequently punished through a series of demotions she undergoes throughout her one-year employment with the Yumimoto Corporation.

With respect to the defining characteristics of the Japanese business culture, the movie opens with a very significant scene: the listing of the pecking order. As narrator of the movie, Amèlie presents from the start the distribution of the hierarchical roles in the company: "Mr. Haneda was Mr. Omochi's boss, who was Mr. Saito's boss, who was Miss Mori's boss, who was my boss. I was nobody's boss". This introductory scene points to the importance of hierarchy in the Japanese culture and to how thoroughly the hierarchical roles are assigned in Japanese business companies. When first presented to one of the bosses, not her immediate superior, there are awkward moments of silence. She is not even properly introduced, as no one utters a word. Not to mention the fact that she is not even allowed to speak with or to approach the boss's boss (the president of the company). Alston and Takei argue that in the Japanese business culture employees and colleagues need very few words to communicate, and that there is no need for extensive verbalization (an illustration of the Japanese motto of "hear one, understand ten"). Only forms of minimal communication are employed. By the same token, the Japanese are even under the impression that Westerners talk too much (Alston and Takei, 2005: 4). Throughout the movie, Amèlie's verbosity (despite her disheveled and clueless appearance, her verbal intelligence is unquestionable) manages at once to annoy her superiors and endear her to her colleagues. That words constitute her most valuable possession becomes even more obvious at the end of the movie, when the now-author Amèlie enjoys the success of her best-selling memoirs based on her short employment with the Yumimoto Corporation.

The manner in which Amèlie's first task is assessed by her superior is illustrative for another specific trait of the Japanese businessman. When asked to write a letter to a certain Mr. Johnson in which to express her boss's acceptance of the former's invitation to play golf on Sunday, Amèlie has to write the letter several times as her boss is never satisfied. Moreover, in rejecting her version of the letter he only groans and offers no arguments as to what it is that she is doing wrong. The same boss asks her to photocopy an entire lengthy book and manifests the same discontent with her solving the task, so much so that Amèlie has to copy the whole book again and again, while deploring the condition of Japanese forests, sacrificed for her inability to perform the hyper-accurate work that is expected of her. While arguably demonstrating her boss's intention to test Amèlie's compliance and commitment, both examples may as well point to the "zero defect" policy of

Japanese style of doing business, through which the Japanese are permanently motivated to achieve perfection (Alston and Takei, 2005: 13).

Even though the Japanese are very keen about not wasting time, the situation is different when tasks need to be fulfilled properly. Japanese people are willing to take all their time when it comes to preparing properly for doing business and this is closely related to their perception of time. Japanese businessmen have no problem in meeting deadlines and they are extremely punctual, but at the same time they are very slow in making decisions, because of their concern for details, of their wanting to take into consideration all possibilities and combinations (Alston and Takei, 2005: 9). The Japanese plan extensively, in order to avoid any surprises. Any crisis triggered by lack of planning is seen as a result of personal weakness and incompetence (Alston and Takei, 2005: 10). Anthropologists Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall argue that cultures can be divided into monochronic and polychronic. Individuals in monochronic cultures feel that they never have enough time to achieve what needs to be done. These societies move fast, are speed-oriented, and highly efficient (for example, the United States). For people in polychronic cultures (such as the Japanese) it is very important to work slowly and carefully. They reserve a lot of time for planning and decision-making (Alston and Takei, 2005: 10).

Having come as an interpreter – who is nevertheless demanded to stop speaking Japanese – but being assigned tasks such as serving coffee, updating everyone's calendars in the office, mindlessly photocopying books, Amèlie is still not sure about her role in the company, as nobody told her what is expected of her or gave her a specific task fitted for her expertise. This may be related to the fact that Japanese companies are organized as large or extended families (clans), where all members share a common identity (Alston and Takei, 2005: 1):

The typical ranking Japanese businessman tends to believe with religious zeal that a company should be run as a huge family, with the president as both mother and father of the employees. Workers should be bound to the firm by a filial type of love, respect, and loyalty that transcend all desire for material gain. Everyone is expected to be perfectly selfless and labor in happy unison for the mutual benefit of themselves, the company, and Japan. (De Mente, 1993: 50)

Moreover, recruits are not hired for a specific set of responsibilities, but they join the company as a whole and are “adopted” rather than distributed in a specific position. Only after several years of employment the “new” recruit is found a proper place in the system. Therefore, the employee is expected to grow in the family and adjust his behavior to the group (Alston and Takei, 2005: 1).

In his *Inside the Kaisha: Demystifying Japanese Business Behavior*, Noboru Yoshimura addresses the meaning of “family” with respect both to Western and

Japanese business behavior and corporate politics. He states that while for Westerners a family atmosphere inside a company “means that the individual is cared for, that people can be relied on to look out for one another, and that it is less necessary to guard against being taken advantage of by one’s kin”, to a Japanese employee (*sarariman*) “the company feels like a family because it provides strong membership, which confers identity and keeps him from being an outsider”. As long as s/he behaves appropriately, the *sarariman* relies on “remaining a member in good standing”. However, adds Yoshimura, in Japan “caring for the individual is not a central value of the ‘company family,’ adhered to through thick and thin. When a company does look out for its members, it does so to follow a model of employer-employee conduct, which can change when the environment shifts” (Yoshimura, 1997: 100).

Because she is not assigned to a specific job and driven by enthusiasm to find her place within the office, Amèlie decides to take the matter into her own hands and she voluntarily assumes other roles in the company when she starts delivering the mail, for instance. But because Japanese companies value loyalty and obedience over individual initiative, Amèlie finds herself subjected to harsh criticism again. Not even her initiative to apologize is accepted. By taking on another man’s task without approval by her direct management, Amèlie managed once again to transgress the code of behavior:

In a vertically structured, group-oriented business system that is operated under a pattern of inferior-superior relations with no individual responsibility, it is obvious that individual members within the system cannot make decisions on their own, except in matters of no consequence. There are exceptions, particularly in so-called one-man companies and in quite small firms. But, in general, decision making in Japan is a communal affair requiring unanimous approval by management. (De Mente, 1993: 57)

Unfortunately, her apparent transgressions do not stop here and trouble only seems to add up when Amèlie helps a colleague with a report, the first and ultimately single meaningful task performed in the service of the company. Nevertheless, her involvement with the project is regarded as a very serious offence and perceived as sabotage, while both Amèlie and her Japanese colleague are considered traitors. For a Japanese, this can indeed be seen as the ultimate reprimand. Rejection by the group is perceived as a punishment for one’s lack of conformity and people who have made mistakes or displayed lack of loyalty are avoided by their peers because they are perceived as “immature”, as not knowing proper etiquette (Alston and Takei, 2005: 5).

Nonetheless, the dynamics of the relationship between the group and the individual is more complex and not one-sided. In the Japanese business culture it is not individuals who are liable for the mistakes of the group, but the entire team. That is why both Amèlie and her colleague were punished for having worked together

without the management's approval and that is why when Amèlie failed to fill the books of the company before the deadline, her immediate superior took on the task and managed to "save face" at the last minute.

(Female) Rivalry at the Office

The dissonance between the two cultures is similarly evident in the relationship between Amèlie and her immediate superior, Miss Fubuki Mori (played by Japanese actress Kaori Tsuji). Musing that "all beauty is moving, but Japanese beauty is even more moving", Amèlie is throughout the movie fascinated by her female hierarchical superior and tries her best for the two of them – apparently the only women in the office – to get along. Mesmerized by Fubuki's "lily-white complexion, soft eyes, nose with inimitable nostrils, lips so perfectly drawn" and struck by the "complex sweetness of her features and her manners" which made Miss Mori "a work of art that defied understanding", Amèlie fails to comprehend how her ambitions and initiative are perceived as threatening by the very object of her adulation.

Whereas from Amèlie's perspective a noble beauty such as Fubuki's was "destined to rule the world", in reality the Japanese female employee had been striving for years to secure a career within the company. Having sacrificed her personal life in order to have a decent job, at twenty-nine and still not married Miss Mori exposes herself to many critiques in the paternalistic Japanese society. At the same time, her condition as a young female employee within the company's all-male environment is similarly difficult.

Japan is said to be the most sexist industrial society in the world. Women have arguably little chance in getting lifetime employment and in being distributed in positions that offer authority or decision-making possibilities. The corollary is that they are also more likely to be employed part time (Alston and Takei, 2005: 24). Japanese men are not accustomed to women occupying leader positions as they believe women less able to handle business problems. Consequently, they consider that their female counterparts need more guidance and supervision than male employees (Brannen et al, 1993: 12). Christalyn Brannen et al. argue that until recently, Japanese men have had little or no experience at all about working with women. The traditional picture of the Japanese workplace with few women has started to change only recently and therefore male employees have been caught unprepared to deal with the issue of having more and more female colleagues (Brannen et al, 1993: 10). The movie is set in the 1990s, when supposedly the Japanese society was indeed less open to having many women employees who were not "office-ladies" (female office-workers in low-level administrative positions) and whose positions only allowed for slow advancement.

Under these circumstances, the perceived rivalry between the two women, especially generated by Amèlie's unchecked initiative, ambition and disregard of formal hierarchical norms, secure the European woman's downfall with the company. Amèlie's ultimate transgression of such cultural norms is her running after Fubuki in the bathroom after the latter was publicly humiliated by her direct superior. Without realizing that by refraining from crying in public Fubuki had preserved her dignity and that by witnessing the tears falling down the Asian beauty's marble face she makes Fubuki "drink the drags of her shame", Amèlie is never forgiven for her major offence.

Together with the imperatives to always be on time for a meeting and to carry plenty of business cards, the Japanese business etiquette demands that no one should be made to lose face. As honor is a very important cultural aspect of the Japanese society, causing somebody to lose face – and hence be dishonored – would be perceived as highly offensive and would invariably generate hostility: "The Japanese idea of the mask, and the real truth behind the mask, is so important that to have the mask damaged or stripped away – to lose face – is a great dishonor which can seriously compromise a person's effectiveness at work" (Rice, 2004: 128). The avoidance of social embarrassment appears as the primary motive behind much Japanese behavior. Usually, the Japanese feel socially embarrassed when they appear inferior to other and consequently they strive hard not to seem inferior (Yoshimura, 1997: 187).

Alston and Takei similarly note that making an enemy might result in working side by side with a hostile colleague for years (Alston and Takei, 2005: 3). Fubuki becomes not only hostile toward her European colleague, but tries to break and humiliate her by assigning her a succession of tasks that Amèlie fails at one after another. As narrator of the movie, the Belgian protagonist even hints at the voluptuousness and sexual pleasure which Fubuki derives from Amèlie's humiliation. Herself trapped in the power struggle within the company, Fubuki may only exercise her authority over the foreign newcomer, who represents the ideal scapegoat because of her naivety and vocation as a martyr. Like Fubuki, Amèlie appears herself to derive masochistic pleasure from being permanently pushed around and found incompatible. So much so, that one may argue that if there is sexual tension in this movie, it certainly is nowhere else to be found but in the relationship between the two young, ambitious women.

Despite her transgressions, her repeated failures to comply with the internal rules and her being assigned menial jobs (Fubuki names Amèlie in charge with the female and male bathrooms), the European novice is never fired. Punished, yes, and given the lowliest of jobs, but her contract is never terminated. In the end, it is her own decision not to renew the employment contract and the company's president even guarantees her a position within the Yumimoto Corporation should she ever change her mind. By not giving up, Amèlie manages to save face and

when she saves face, her employer and all her hierarchical superiors similarly save face. Moreover, even though an “untouchable”, she is nonetheless part of the family, as according to the Japanese business culture nobody enters just a job within a company, but they become part of a family and are, so to speak, adopted.

In the encounter between the two cultures, the book-turned-movie resorts to stereotyping or to caricatures and mostly one-dimensional characters. For instance, the violent and rude Mr. Omochi (played by Bison Katayama) not only physically resembles a Sumo wrestler, but constantly acts and groans like one – so much so that he is on the brink of forcing a green chocolate ball down reluctant Amèlie’s throat. When Amèlie, who served everyone in the office tea and coffee, accompanied by a joke or a pleasant remark, is demanded to stop speaking Japanese and she conforms, disgruntled, her colleagues would wonder how “the white geisha became a coarse Yankee”. Throughout the movie, the European Amèlie is criticized for her “odious pragmatism” and is believed to embody the typical Westerner when she places her “personal vanity above the company’s interests”. What is more, she is permanently reminded of the inferiority of her Western brain in comparison with the Japanese brain and at one moment Fubuki even wonders whether all Belgians are as “mentally disabled” as Amèlie appears to be.

Conclusions

With (dark) humor and satire, the movie is yet another story about the cultural collision between the West and the East and offers an insight into the office politics of a large Japanese corporation from the perspective of a young, European woman, at the beginning of her career, who is therefore at a double – even triple – disadvantage: she is at once young, female and a foreigner. The humorous aspects of the movie are unquestionably intended exaggerations of the Japanese corporate rules and cultural stereotypes of both the Western and the Japanese worlds. But one can argue that despite the obvious overstatements, the movie based on Amèlie Nothomb’s best-selling memoirs is nevertheless an attempt at canvassing an accurate account of the by now proverbial dissonance between the two business cultures.

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