



ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE

# Interview with Ryusuke Hamaguchi on *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*

by Lorenzo Esposito

## RELEASES

Title:

偶然と想像 / *Guzen to Sozo*

Director:

Ryusuke Hamaguchi

Runtime:

121 min

Country:

Japan

Language:

Japanese with  
English subtitles

### AWARDS

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Lorenzo Esposito: The opening credits of *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* (2021) state that these are 'Hamaguchi's short stories'. Have you actually written short stories for the movie?

Ryusuke Hamaguchi: In the beginning I had several drafts of short stories. I put them in a sequence starting with the one I deemed more suitable to open the film, and finally I turned them into the actual screenplay. I recall that Éric Rohmer's *Six Contes Moraux* were novels before becoming the actual screenplay. I didn't think about doing something similar, though, as I wasn't very attracted to the idea of writing actual short stories.

**When in the process of writing a film, do you think about it more as a literary work or, rather, in terms of the relationship between word and image?**

When I write a screenplay, I don't think about it as a literary work at all. Rather, it's about setting 'guidelines' to be used on set. Since the actors have to give shape to the dialogue, it's a very straightforward instruction booklet, words are very simple. I always take a lot of leeway to be able to adapt the script to the circumstances. Even if I write something in detail, often times we do not have the financial strength to achieve everything.

The only thing I am concerned about in relation to the quality of the text is the impact it may have on the performers. Reading the script, will they find the key to understanding their characters? Will the dialogues convince them? Will this be enough to provoke a "chemical reaction" on their personality?

**What is your relationship with writing? Do you consider yourself more of a writer or a filmmaker?**

I am a director, basically the reason I write screenplays is to direct films. Sure, I wrote the screenplay for Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Wife of a Spy* (2020), but I never considered myself as a professional screenwriter. That was just an exception because of the relationship between Kurosawa and me.

I am convinced that words are a useful tool for the mise-en-scene. At the



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moment, I try to reserve myself the right to change the script during the production because, as I said before, I consider it as a sort of a guideline, the dialogues giving direct instructions to the actors. For me it is key to maintain the freedom to make adjustments based on my intentions.

I don't expect the actors to repeat every single word as it is written. I'd rather give them the freedom to repeat the lines the way it sounds easier for them. That often matches with the written text, as we repeat the reading of the script dozens of times. I believe that it is important for the actors to agree with the text. When this happens, I think we could say that in a certain way I am rewriting the script on the set together with the actors.

***Door Wide Open*, the second episode of *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, seems to be primarily a reflection on the power of the word. Do you think there is a specific power of the word? Or does it all lie in the image?**

I do think there is something we can call "the power of the word". It lies, more than anything else, within the power to influence both the performer who repeats a line and the listener. This force that influences them makes something happen to their bodies. When this happens, the power of the word gets to be received, intact, also by the audience through the trembling of the performers' bodies.

In the second episode the possibility of using a language that differs from plain spoken language is sought. However, Segawa's character himself, who is a writer and a teacher, is portrayed as a man who "speaks as he writes". This is to show how the written and spoken word cannot be clearly divided.

Instead, it is much more interesting that the two are connected by ambiguity. The interpreter is a being who "gives voice to the written word". I don't think this belongs merely to the second episode, because when you give voice to a very refined text you generate something. From this point of view, the most striking example is Chekhov.

**In your films there is an incredible degree of naturalness both in the dialogue and in the way things happen. How do you work with actors? Do you rehearse a lot before filming?**

I'm really honored that you feel this way. For me, the most important thing is casting. It's vital to find the best performer to express the potential of a particular line.

As I mentioned earlier, as far as rehearsals go I have all the sequences in the script read dozens of times without any expressiveness. This type of reading is my version of what Jean Renoir learned from Michel Simon and called

“Italian reading”. During these rehearsals I rewrite or eliminate lines that the performers seem to have difficulty with, or that make them feel uncomfortable in some way. I also think about adjusting the length of the sentences in the dialogues based on pauses to catch their breath.

I understand this process as a way to help the actors remove the “obstacle” of acting out a script. For them, not having obstacles in articulating words means making them flow naturally from their bodies. Especially in recent times, I feel that this method allows them to bring out their humanity as well. Most likely, all these processes contribute to the making of that “naturalness” that you felt.

**When you are filming, how do you find the right distance? Is there a precise spot where you put the camera?**

I rarely give detailed directions on location, but I usually give general guidelines to try to use all the available space. I believe the correct thing to do is to choose the distance between the actors based on what they themselves perceive to be the right distance.

The principles for positioning the camera are simple, and yet putting them into practice is complicated. You have to understand the position from which a face is visible by placing yourself in such a way that you are not too far away, without being too close at the same time. Once you have decided on the movements and placement on set, the main camera position gets to be chosen almost naturally. I have the actors repeat the takes from the beginning to the end several times, and it often happens that they are so free to move that the camera cannot follow them. If it happens I repeat the take without changing the camera position. I understand that it’s not easy for the actors and cinematographer, but so far I haven’t found a better way. I need a certain level of performances and I need a certain number of camera positions for editing.

I do, however, find that unrepeatable spark created with each and every take extraordinary. I find that the actors have a part inside them that gets more and more tired by repeating a sequence, while another part, on the contrary, shines. I think the reason for which they don’t lose that spark until the end might be because they have internalized the reading. Then, with the final cut, I try to put those sparks together.

**All your films seem to carry a specific reference: Ozu in *Happy Hour*, Hitchcock in *Asako I & II*, Hong and Rohmer (and maybe Kiyoshi Kurosawa) in *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*... Are these intentional? Or is it just a matter of works that are always with you, unconsciously, when you film?**

I don’t think I specifically refer to Ozu in *Happy Hour*, or to Hitchcock in *Asako I & II*. But while, in a way, Ozu’s influence runs throughout my work, I hardly ever

think of Hitchcock when I make a film. For *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, however, I referred to Eric Rohmer. This was surely because I needed a basis to work on a different approach to shoot short stories. The main source of inspiration came from the interview I did with Mary Stephen, who's the editor of the work related to the second part of Rohmer's career. Rohmer's influence on my film is therefore inevitable and substantial. On the contrary, Hong Sang-soo is a director I respect, but if there are any similarities between us, they mostly come from our common love for Rohmer.

For me, watching and making films is a continuous cycle, so in addition to the names mentioned, I always have many directors on my mind. However, I think that at the moment I would not be able to create a film from another film. Even the great filmmakers who came before us made their works from reality, not from a film, and that is what I would like to do.

**The Japanese title of *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* is *Coincidence and Imagination*... Chance is a very important element in your cinema. Is this a literary aspect, or is it something you see deeply connected to life?**

I don't know to what extent the literary component is linked to my work, since I don't consider myself an avid reader. But I feel that using the "power of words" in films, especially in today's Japan, is important.

The fundamental power of words is to "separate". There are words used to temporarily define (or end up defining) vague feelings of the individual, or our relationship with others. Generally speaking, for the Japanese individual it is preferable not to put one's feelings into words as, in doing so, one might end up defining the "self" in a way, thus separating from others. In Japanese society the fact of making otherness explicit beyond necessity (i.e. underlining that you and I are different) leads to a certain "difficulty in living". However, I think that in each individual's own life such moments should exist. A society that is founded on the repression of individuality will continue to require the same behavior from everyone. In this, however, there is an even more substantial "difficulty of living". Thus, expressing oneself in words becomes a way for the individual to remain within society while at the same time manifesting one's "otherness". I believe that this could be the starting point to get society moving again. I'm afraid this might be the reason why Japanese cinema makes very few films when people talk a lot.

**Coincidence is always a matter of time. I believe that time—the passing of time—is a very important element in your cinema...**

I don't know if what I'm going to say will answer the question, however what we call "chance" denotes an unusual situation. Unusual means that it will happen at most once in a long period of time. The two hour duration of a

movie is certainly too short of a time to allow this to happen.

However, if you insert a caption that reads, for example, “5 years later”, it becomes easier to introduce randomness, because it will appear in the story as something acceptable to the viewers.

And, yet, it cannot be said that this is enough to represent chance, as our lives actually abound with random events and the reason they do not have enough influence on us—the reason we ignore chance—is that these coincidences are often completely irrelevant. If we can keep the influence of these random events at a sufficiently low level we can accomplish something following our intentions and plans. The things we do this way, however, become “routine”, which can lead to turning our existences into a closed space. We end up shaping our social lives by letting chance pass us by.

Randomness is fundamental to escape the daily routine—the time that always recurs the same—and to make the only life that we have truly unique. This is not easy, however, because social life is made up by the synthesis of routines.

Eric Rohmer once spoke of “becoming accustomed to chance”. This is an expression I love. Coincidences can happen many times, they are not rare, because each of us lives within a recurring routine. We can appear to others in the form of chance and become ‘chance’ ourselves. Sometimes, our routines come into contact and at that very moment, if we try to open our routine to the other’s, we will observe a small renewal in our lives.

Chance is unusual not because it happens occasionally, but because it is rare to have the courage to accept it by undoing our routines. Answering your question I realized that *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* could be read just like a movie that shows the (thin) courage of the characters who accept, love and want to renew their lives.

As a closing remark, I would like to add that it was the reality I saw through the camera during filming that made me process this way of understanding chance.

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Translation from Japanese to Italian: Eugenio De Angelis

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**Lorenzo Esposito** is a programmer and curator and is currently a member of the selection committee of the Berlinale.

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\*This version has been edited for length