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The herbivore and the salaryman
New and old masculinities in Japanese idol productions

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Abstract:

In this study I have examined the representation of masculinity in several recent Japanese media productions through a qualitative content analysis with a focus on discursive practices and the hegemonic and subordinate masculinity theories established by R.W. Connell. The focus of the study is Ninomiya Kazunari, an established Japanese actor and member of the five man idol group Arashi, produced by the large Japanese idol production company *Johnny's Entertainment*.

Four main productions with Ninomiya in a main role have been studied: *The Inner Chambers*, *GANTZ*, *A part-timer buys a house (for his family)* and *I will fly to the sky in my wheel chair* (English translations). Additionally, comments and opinions on various 2-channel forums in regards to Ninomiya's perceived masculinity, or lack of same, have been studied and interpreted through a reception analysis in the cultural studies tradition.

The goal has been to identify resistance and/or re-enforcement of traditional Japanese masculinities through recent depictions of a popular Japanese male idol in the media, especially in relation to hegemonic Japanese masculinity constructions like the samurai warrior and modern day *salaryman*. Ninomiya has played several seemingly masculine stereotypic roles, and the study attempts to identify resistance within his presentations of dominant-hegemonic masculinity, as well as his portrayals of alternative masculinities and how they risk getting incorporated into the hegemonic structures.

The study shows that the soft values of Ninomiya Kazunari's persona largely translate into all the Japanese productions he features in. Messages and values presented by Arashi and *Johnny's Entertainment* get intertextually transferred to his story productions, attaching certain values of gentleness, sincerity and vulnerability to the face of Ninomiya regardless of which role he plays. The audience reception showed that Ninomiya as an idol and as a man is important to the way the audience perceives him in various roles. Fans and anti-fans love and hate him for the same features, showing a strong disagreement of what a "real man" is and should be. This relates to various researchers' conclusion that contemporary Japanese hegemonic masculinity is changing and unstable, the hegemony and dominance of the modern day *salaryman* lifestyle called into question.

Title: The herbivore and the salaryman – new and old masculinities in Japanese idol production

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Key words: masculinity, gender, hegemony, subordination, Japan, pop culture, celebrity, j-pop, *Johnny's Entertainment*, Ninomiya Kazunari, Arashi

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1. Introduction

Japanese dominant masculinity has undoubtedly changed. From the age of the samurai to the loyal soldiers of the Second World War. From the hard-working corporate warrior of the 70's and 80's to... what exactly?

The economic situation of the 90's tore apart the foundation of the Japanese white-collar workers who are now threatened both by women's entry into the work force as well as their own shortcomings and lamentations as fathers, providers and men (Frühstück and Walthall, 2011). New masculinities are emerging, eagerly described, debated, criticized and celebrated in the expansive Japanese media market (Fukusawa 2006 and 2009, Glasspool 2012, Darling-Wolf 2004ab). Even if the white-collared *salaryman* is still the masculine ideal that society strives for at large, its power and influence have been undermined by recent social changes, and there are several clues that the new generations are moving away from traditional virtues of loyalty to the company above all (Hidaka, 2010).

The "New Man" has appeared in the Japanese popular idol industry throughout the 80's and 90's (Darling-Wolf, 2004b). New men's magazines cater to so-called city boys, boys who "just want to have fun", with a focus on fashion and how to make their girlfriends happy (Tanaka, 2003). The "herbivorous man", a term coined by Japanese journalist Fukusawa Maki (2006), has become a buzzword in Japan and abroad, describing a new kind of man that does not care about money, status and sex, but just wants to enjoy life on his own terms. The new emerging descriptions show the significance of new terms to classify the appearing masculinities, both in popular cultural depictions and real life.

The goal of this study is to research how a particular kind of modern Japanese masculinity is constituted in the media, supported by the massive and powerful Japanese entertainment industry. Through discourse analysis and the hegemonic masculinity theories established by R.W. Connell (1995), the study will attempt to identify and define resistant, dominant-hegemonic and incorporative practices in recent Japanese media productions. The main focus will be the presented masculinity of one of the many male idols contracted to billion dollar talent factory *Johnny's Entertainment* by the name of Ninomiya Kazunari. An established actor, singer, television host and idol, who has portrayed nearly every Japanese male stereotype imaginable in a wide variety of television and cinematic productions, Ninomiya is a part of the constitution of the "new generation" of Japanese men. His big, sad brown eyes and youthful face are recognized easily by any media-consuming Japanese, men as well as women. The boy band which he is a member of, *Arashi*, are seen everywhere from advertisement billboards to New Year's celebration and charity events,

morning news and prime-time television talk shows - both as hosts and guests. Ninomiya's media productions largely show a softer and more sensitive kind of man, someone who is kind and has other priorities than defined by society, his company or boss. He is not afraid to break down in tears, yet he still falls into certain masculine stereotypes, definitions and symbolism.

The main material consists of four of Ninomiya's recent film and drama productions, each portraying a mix of new and old masculinities; a samurai, a salaryman, a delinquent and a so-called *freeter* (a part-timer living with his/her family). Additionally, the study will take into consideration the audience reception of Ninomiya's productions and idol persona, analysing audience comments within the detached forums of 2-channel and Pirori 2-channel as well as audience reviews of his recent productions, attempting to identify elements of audience resistance to or agreement with the new masculinities portrayed.

2. Conducting the research

2.1. Research questions

The research questions of the study are as follows:

- Which values and discourses get attached to Ninomiya's persona and acting roles?
- How do these values intertextually reflect the contemporary structural and cultural changes faced by the Japanese society and masculine identity?
- How is Ninomiya and his values interpreted, accepted or rejected within certain audiences and community agreements?

2.2. Qualitative content analysis; theories of discourses, masculinities and audience reception

In order to analyse Ninomiya's media production, this study applies both theory and method from a discursive point of view.

Lindgren (2005) describes discourses as constitutive and prevailed patterns of meaning. Like an order of language, the discourse consists of rules and practices that make meaningful utterances possible. One of the main thoughts behind discursive analysis is that all representation and signifying practice are created by both language and social structures. The discourse is what connects text to context, creating perceptions of truth and reality discursively (Lindgren, 2005).

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis draws on the notion that concrete use of language always refers to earlier discursive structures; the language use always intertextually draws on meanings which are already established. By combining elements from different discourses, the concrete language use has the ability to change certain meanings and thereby also the social and cultural

surroundings. By focusing on this intertextuality, you can discover reproductions of discourses where no new elements have been inserted, as well as changes in discourses through different combinations (Fairclough quoted in Winther-Jørgensen and Philips, 1999).

In order to categorize these reproductions within a certain system of meaning, Foucault has suggested the use of the concept *order of discourse*. An order of discourse suggests a complex and contradictory configuration of discourses and genres within the same social area or institution. Areas where all discourses within the order of discourse are fixed into one meaning are considered stable, while areas that contain several contesting discourses about the same subject matter are considered unstable. By representing reality in one way rather than another, the discourses create objects in certain ways, create boundaries between true and false and make certain types of actions relevant while others are unthinkable. *A floating signifier* means that there is no discourse which has managed to fix its meaning completely within the order of discourse; rather, several discourses are gathering to conquer it and determine a stable meaning. These discourses and their internal relations constitute the order of discourse (Foucault quoted in Winther-Jørgensen and Philips, 1999).

Hegemonic and subordinate masculinities

Winter-Jørgensen and Philips (1999) consider that in order to analyse them, it is important to first set up boundaries for the discourses. This particular study will be based on Connell's (1995) Gramscian studies of hegemonic and subordinate male identities which have been very influential in masculinity studies.

Connell argues that mass culture generally assumes that there is a fixated and true masculinity and therefore often projects an image of "real" and "natural" men in the media and the everyday discourse. It is important to note that masculinity does not exist except in its contrast with femininity. Masculinity and femininity are not words used to describe a man or a woman in general terms, but rather for describing differences within these two groups. *Masculine* is seen as what a man *should* be, meaning that the concept of masculinity automatically includes a type of man who is *not* masculine and therefore does not fit into the ideal picture of masculinity. Connell writes that the "true" masculinity is said to have its origins in the male body, expressing something which has to do with the physical dimensions of the man. Sport is mentioned as an example which defines the male body as inevitably masculine.

Masculinity assumes that your behaviour is or should be a result of your sex, which in turn means that an unmasculine person will act differently, for instance by being peaceful instead of violent, conciliatory instead of dominating, not interested in (or bad at) sports and uninterested in sexual conquest (Connell, 1995:67). In this connection, Connell brings up the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and subordination. Hegemony refers to the cultural dynamics through which a certain

group maintains a leading position in social life. One type of masculinity gets promoted and idealized as "true" masculinity, whereas other groups get subordinated as undesirable; often homosexuals or others considered weak and attributed "feminine values" (Connell, 1995).

However, hegemonic masculinity is not considered to be normal in the statistical sense, in that only a minority of men might actually enact it. Its power lies in the fact that it is considered normative, embodying the currently most honoured way of being a man and requiring all other men to position themselves in relation to it. At the same time, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also mention that there is a considerable amount of research which shows that masculinities are not simply different from each other, but also subject to change. The various challenges to hegemony are common, and so are adjustments by the hegemonic system in the face of these challenges (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

In this connection, it is relevant to mention Fiske's theory of incorporation. *Incorporation* refers to the process by which the dominant (hegemonic) classes take certain elements of the resisting discourses, using them to maintain their hegemony rather than challenging it successfully. The elements of resistance get incorporated into the dominant ideology and thus deprived of their oppositionality; they get rendered harmless by the hegemonic forces (Fiske, 1982). By analysing the various articulations in a certain discursive order, it will be possible to identify elements of reproduction and change in the discursive production of truth.

When the focus is on an order of discourse, the interplay *between* the discourses becomes an important part of the analysis, since this is the arena where the social consequences of the discourses become most visible. When there is more than one way of showing reality, it is important to ask which consequences there will be if one version is accepted over another (Winter-Jørgensen and Philips, 1999).

Even if resistance to the dominant ideology does get incorporated, this also means that the hegemonic masculinity cannot stay the same forever.

There has been much writing about the crisis of modern men contemplating how they no longer have a useful place in the world due to social and economic changes. In this context, Gauntlett (2008) argues that several masculinities are at war within the contemporary media depiction. This relates to Foucault's order of discourse, since the media today is making several subordinated, alternative and normative masculinities simultaneously visible within the expanding spectrum of masculinity's discursive order. In this manner, the discourse of the "real" masculinity, described by Connell, is beginning to unravel.

Since hegemonic masculinity is an ideological stance which does not actually describe all men, it is possible that the audience will reject and re-interpret hegemonic ideological perceptions of reality

conveyed by the media and, eventually, change the "currently most honoured way to be a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) entirely, eventually turning the discourse of "the real man" and hegemonic masculinity into a floating signifier that can be re-claimed, challenged and changed, both directly and indirectly, by competing discourses.

Audience reception

In order to research how the Japanese media audience perceives these representational changes, a qualitative reception analysis has been applied to the audiences of popular idol Ninomiya Kazunari's productions and portrayal of masculinity.

Fiske claims that television is realistic not because it reproduces reality, but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality, carrying a convincing sense of the real (Fiske, 1987). Yet it cannot be expected that the audience is unable to identify and reject, or change, the inherent discourses of the media.

In earlier mass communication research, the audience was considered passive, uncritically receiving messages from the mass media. Today's reception studies, within the tradition of cultural studies, place emphasis on active audiences and the work they do. According to Goldstein and Machor (2001), "signifying practices as well as their reception occur in a site marked by ideological and semiotic negotiation and contestation shot through with varying and at times contradictory meanings and significances generated by different audiences" (Goldstein and Machor, 2001: 205). In the cultural tradition, reception analysis can therefore be used as a way to make sense of the audience's experience of media content and messages. The media text has to be "read" through perceptions of the audience from their different social or cultural groups which in turn constitute the meanings and pleasures from the texts offered (Goldstein and Machor, 2001).

In this connection, Fiske offers a two-step approach to an audience reception analysis; the method of ethnography, a study of the meanings that the fans actually *do* (or appear to) make of a certain phenomenon. He underlines that the words or behaviour of the fans are not empirical facts that speak for themselves, but texts that need "reading" in the same way as the main text does. Secondly, Fiske suggests a semiotic/structuralist textual analysis, closely reading the signifiers of the text while recognizing that the signifieds exist not in the text itself, but extratextually in the myths, counter myths and ideology of the culture. The distribution of power in society is paralleled by the distribution of meaning in various texts, and likewise the struggles for social power are paralleled by semiotic struggles for meanings within the texts (Fiske, 2001). The meanings in texts are never fixed or predictable, and the reception studies approach claims that the audience has a power to resist and subvert the dominant or hegemonic meanings offered by the mass media (McQuail, 1997).

Stuart Hall argues that people will usually respond to texts and messages in three general ways: A dominant-hegemonic, where individuals read the texts as the makers intended them to (how it was encoded), a negotiated way, where the audience works around problems in the text in order to find their own meanings and pleasures, or a "globally contrary", oppositional way, where the encoded meanings are rejected and put into an alternative framework (i.e. a feminist reading) (Hall in Staiger, 2005: 80). Whether the interpretation and culturally constructed subjectivities of the viewer takes on the form of dominant, negotiated or oppositional responses, the experience of the reception still depends on the interpretative formations that the reader of the text inhabits. Reception is considered "production in use" which always gets culturally activated within specific contexts and histories (Goldstein and Machor, 2001). Oppositional and negotiated meanings are possible because of what semiotics refer to as *polysemy* – the potential multiplicity of meanings we can take from a text, each referring to an ideological position (Hall in Evans & Hesmondhagh, 2005). Through an analysis of audience reception, it is possible to uncover certain disagreements among the audience and unveil oppositional or negotiated responses to the texts in question.

2.3. Application

Films and dramas from 2010 and after starring Ninomiya Kazunari in a main role will be analysed in detail. Due to the fact that idols and their public images are subject to change according to contemporary popular demand (Aoyagi, 2005:31), earlier productions will not be discussed.

The productions in question are the 2010 television drama *Freeter, ie wo kau* (hereafter: *A part-timer buys a house (for his family)*) which had an estimated average viewer rating of 17,14% (ARTV, 2010); the 2010 action movie *GANTZ* which was estimated to have over 450.000 viewers in the opening weekend, quickly surpassing one million¹; the 2010 movie *Ōoku* (hereafter: *The Inner Chambers*) which was estimated to have had one million viewers by its twelfth day², as well as the most recent 2012 television movie *Kuruma isu de boku wa sora wo tobu* (hereafter: *I will fly to the sky in my wheel chair*), aired during NTV's 24 hour charity television with an estimated average viewer rating of 23.8%.³

It is also relevant to mention that Ninomiya starred in Hollywood production *Letters from Iwo Jima* in 2006, as well as a 2010 New Year special called *Saigo no Yakusoku (The Last Promise)* in connection with Arashi's performance as New Year show hosts. However, these productions will not be analyzed in detail since *Letters from Iwo Jima* is an American production and *The Last Promise* does not feature Ninomiya in a particularly significant role.

Due to the fact that producers likely wish to encode the show or product with a certain discourse

1 <http://www.cinematoday.jp/page/N0030235> Accessed 7th of January 2013

2 <http://eiga.com/news/20101014/18/> Accessed 12th of December 2012.

3 <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/entertainments/news/120829/ent12082910000005-n1.htm> Accessed 9th of January 2013.

of celebrity (Goldstein and Machor, 2008) Ninomiya's idol persona will also be analysed, drawing on various performances as "himself", mainly within the boy band Arashi and the context of *Johnny's Entertainment*. Two solo performances supposedly written by Ninomiya himself will be analysed as well as the underlying meanings attached to his persona through his involvement in *Johnny's Entertainment* and his role within Arashi.

In the analysis of the audience, I will identify community agreements primarily within two different contexts: A Ninomiya fan forum and a Ninomiya *anti*-forum situated on the free and independent anonymous discussion sites of 2-channel (2-chan) and Pirori 2-channel (Pirori 2-chan). Various sub forums of 2-channel have been used in the research (*anago*, *toro* and *ikura*).

For movie comments, the audience review sections of *Eiga.com* (a Japanese internet movie database) have been used in combination with comments on 2-chan concerning the productions. In order to sort the large amount of posts and information, a key word search has been applied to large threads, mainly searching comments that involved "Ninomiya", "Nino" or "man/masculinity".

As the reception analysis approach considers the audience as constituted by different social and cultural groups, it is important to note that the audiences for particular media genres often comprise separate interpretative communities that share much of the same discourse and frameworks for making sense of media. While the audience is not seen as passive, its members cannot be seen as equal either, as some are more active fans than others (McQuail, 1997). This is important to remember when analysing various internet forums; both in regards to differences between particular forums and the people who use it, but also due to the fact that all consumers do not actively participate in internet discussions.

The study has not taken into consideration the influence of the so-called *Korean Wave* which has made a powerful entry in the Japanese popular cultural scene. While the increasingly popular Korean boy bands and productions are likely to have an effect on the perception of contemporary Japanese and Asian masculinities, these influences are beyond the limitations of this study.

All analysed content has originally been published in Japanese and has been translated by the author. Due to the ambiguity of the Japanese language and the intertextuality of Japanese media productions, there may be meanings that could have been translated differently. Where relevant to the content of the analysis, specific semantic functions of the Japanese language will be pointed out for clarity. Names are written in the Japanese way with surnames first, since idols are usually referred to by their surnames (*Ninomiya* is a surname).

3. Japanese masculinities then and now

Japanese hegemonic masculinity has been greatly challenged and changed throughout the years, leaving room for many competing definitions and re-definitions of what a man is and should be. This makes it necessary to sum up main characteristics of traditional masculinities in order to understand the contemporary view on Japanese masculinities and their pop cultural representations.

3.1. Samurai and salarymen; hegemonic masculinities in Japan

In 1871, the previously powerful embodiment of Japanese masculinity, the samurai, officially lost their elite status due to on-going structural changes. Even so, the ideal of Japanese "knighthood" has lived on in several Japanese cultural spheres, notably the soldiers during the Second World War (Low, 2003). After the war, the white-collar workers in large corporations became associated with the hegemonic masculinity of Japan, but even the so-called *salaryman* can be traced back to the samurai era and the strict values of the samurai code. Virtues such as duty, loyalty, self-sacrifice and mental and physical endurance went on to support discourses of hegemonic masculinity following the samurai, including the early constitutions of the salaryman identity (Dasgupta, 2003).

The *salaryman* specifically refers to white-collar workers who receive a monthly salary working for a large company, sometimes referred to as "corporate warriors". The salaryman identity has been explored by Hidaka (2010), drawing on the gender theory of R.W. Connell. Hidaka has interviewed three cohorts of Japanese men in order to identify how their masculinities get shaped in regards to the hegemonic discourses of the salaryman. She identified persistent resistance to gender equality, a negative labelling of certain alternative masculinities (such as the part time working *freeter*), yet she also identified lamentation and anxiety in the older generations of salarymen, as well as doubts, "individualised projects of reform" in the younger generations (Connell, 1995:159) and signs of change in the hegemonic masculinity of the salaryman (Hidaka, 2010).

Although less than 30% of employed Japanese men actually embodied this masculinity during its peak in the bubble economy in the late 80's, many more aspired to and were inspired by it. Frühstück and Walthall suggest that while the salaryman may have been the masculine hegemon of 1989, this is no longer the case in 2011, making room for a postmodern "game-ish realism" as defined by philosopher Azuma Hiroki. However, definite new roles for men have yet to materialize (Frühstück and Walthall, 2011). The salaryman still has a powerful influence on the perception of masculinity in Japan, but its hegemony is threatened by the economic and demographic changes. The burst of the economic bubble in 1990 has spurred a collapse in the traditional system of life-long employment, increasing the uncertainty of the future for many salarymen (Taga, 2003).

Additionally, the "fatherless household" syndrome where men spend most of their time at work

has inscribed the salarymen with a guest status within their families (Taga, 2003). Hidaka found a certain disappointment and anxiety in her retired participants, carrying regrets and embarrassment in their post-child-rearing life. The lamentation of failed husbands and fathers, she found, undermine the completeness of the salaryman masculinity (Hidaka, 2010).

Research has suggested that the masculine norm in Japan entails a strong sense of heterosexuality as well as a gendered division of labour; something which is still sustained by the power of the company and the salaryman identity as a "corporate warrior". The de facto continuation of the old *ie*-system, patrimonial lineage throughout the family which transcends the individual and supports the father as the head of the family, is also shown to have influence on the role of the man as the provider and the ideals of masculinity in contemporary Japanese society. The role as breadwinner and *shakaijin*, a full-fledged member of society providing for yourself and your family, was shown to be important even to the youngest group in Hidaka's 2004 interviews (Hidaka, 2010).

Even so, because of the changing economic and social conditions, the notion of Japan as a nation of white-collar salarymen has been drawn into question as the salarymen can no longer be sure of life-long employment at the companies to which they were supposed to give their undying loyalty. Napier (2011) asks who is replacing the salaryman, but considers that there is no *absolute* replacement which embodies "Japan" and modern Japanese masculinity in the same way as the salaryman. This leaves room for many new competing discourses. The Japanese masculinity has thus become somewhat of a *floating signifier* (Winter-Jørgensen and Philips, 1999), vaguely describing something that is no longer completely fixed or trusted as the ultimate truth.

Even if the gender relations are indeed changing, it is important to note that not all groups have equal access to articulate elements in new ways and provoke change, and thus the changes in Japanese masculinity are not without limit.

Discourse theorists such as Chouliaraki and Fairclough argue that there is a structural domain where the structures are indeed socially constituted, but are quite stable and difficult to change due to external factors (Chouliaraki and Fairclough in Winther-Jørgensen & Philips, 1999), and they mention a work place as an example of such a structural domain. Due to this, it is possible that any changes of the hegemonic masculinity in Japan will necessarily take place in other arenas than the large corporation itself, since the change risks suffocating in structural limitations and tradition.

A change has certainly been prompted in the Japanese context since certain elements of hegemonic masculinity have been eroded as a consequence of the changing economy and increasing gender equality. However, there are still many structural difficulties that continue to limit and contain resistance and change, particularly within the traditional and hierarchical work place of the

salaryman.

3.2. The "New Man" and the herbivore

While work place masculinities are still largely contained by the structural domain created and maintained by generations of salarymen, it is possible to identify re-definitions of Japanese masculinity detached from the large corporation and rooted in the Japanese youth culture.

The "New Man" is a term that was coined by theorists in the late 1980s in order to describe popular cultural re-definitions of masculinity developed in the wake of the second wave of the Japanese feminist movement. Most male idols today are represented as "New Men", with their appeal resting in greater sensitivity to gender roles and a supposed willingness to take on traditionally female roles. (Darling-Wolf, 2004b).

Tanaka (2003) has studied recent Japanese men's magazines and identified several trends of the changing masculinities, particularly in connection with men's fashion magazines focusing on fashion, love and beauty. (Tanaka, 2003).

In 2006, Japanese writer and journalist Maki Fukusawa coined the term *soushokukeidanshi* (literally "grass-eating men") in the business newspaper *Nikkei Shinbun* (Fukusawa, 2006). The term became a buzzword in Japan and main-land Asia, and the phenomenon has been covered in Western media as well (as seen by Neill, 2009), commonly translated as "herbivore men".

By "herbivore men", Fukusawa means to describe a certain type of man within the Heisei-generation⁴. This type of man is not interested in women and sex and does not wish to step in as a salaryman in the Japanese business life, but would rather live a hedonistic life of consumption and focus on his own hobbies (Fukusawa, 2006). The word has been adopted by Japanese media and news, spurring several related expressions referring to hybrid carnivore/herbivore masculinities, such as the cabbage roll (cabbage rolled around minced meat; a carnivore that *looks* like a herbivore) and the asparagus roll (meat rolled around asparagus; a herbivore that *looks* like a carnivore).

In her 2009 book on the topic, Fukusawa identifies several other new masculinities such as the "good for nothing" man and the education papa, focusing also on the masculinities shown within *Johnny's Entertainment* as expressions of different new emerging masculinities (Fukusawa, 2009). The reception of these new definitions in the general public, however, has been somewhat mixed. Fukusawa stated in her original article that during her attempts to publish a book on the subject, she got many comments from middle aged male publishers that "there aren't people like that, are there?" and "they aren't real men in that case" (Fukusawa, 2006).

Female reporters have also criticized the herbivorous men, stating that "nobody wants a man

4 The Heisei period is the reign of the current emperor, 1989-ongoing.

who has no sexual desire; rather, they hate them.” (Sakuragi quoted in Glasspool, 2012:118) This attitude does not extend to ”New Man” idols whose representation of sensitive masculinity in the media is balanced with a display of interest in the opposite sex, for example through hypothetical discussions about their ideal girlfriend or future wife (Glasspool, 2012).

Connell's theories about hegemonic and subordinate masculinity get into play here; the idea that there is one true and untouched, naturally given masculinity attached to the male body and (hetero) sexuality. The idea of the feminine versus masculine, the idea of a ”real” and a ”wrong” man gets re-created through the dominant discourses in society, and the hegemony establishes its power by judging the potential resistance as subordinate, feminine and ultimately failed (Connell, 1995). Basically, the hegemonic masculinity as defined by Connell is everything that Fukusawa's herbivore men *are not*, but even so the herbivore men have stayed relevant and have undeniably become part of an increasing variety of modern Japanese masculinities.

Indeed, there are persistent discussions in many parts of the world about the modern man and the crisis of ”masculinity”, and Gaunlett (2008) considers that it is necessary for men to find a new place for themselves in the world, following the new society and gender structures. He believes that popular culture plays a big role in the shaping of the genders since they give men and women tools to adapt to their contemporary lives. At the same time, he agrees that the male identity is currently unstable. Some discourses strengthen the traditional masculinities, while others challenge them; there currently is no stable ground for the discourses of masculinity in the media (Gaunlett, 2008).

In Japan the traditional masculinities are also facing a growing threat and change, continuously challenged by competing discourses of new masculinities such as the ”herbivore” and ”New Man”.

4. Japanese idol culture

Japanese pop culture is simultaneously similar to and different from its Western counterpart. In order to understand which intertextual values get attached to certain media personalities, it is first important to take a look at the environment in which they are created and distributed.

4.1. Johnny's Entertainment and representative power:

When it comes to recent representations of ”New Men” in the media, one of the big players in the vast idol field is *Johnny's Jimusho*. In English often translated to *Johnny's Entertainment* (alternatively *Johnny & Associates* or simply *Johnny's*), *Johnny's* is a massive entertainment and production company, owned by Kitagawa Johnny, who has discovered and manufactured generation after generation of young male artists to a mainly female audience (Darling-Wolf, 2004a and Lindqvist, 2004).

The first boy band produced by Kitagawa was created in 1963, and today the company

practically has monopoly on creating Japanese male idols. Besides super groups such as *SMAP* and *Arashi*, Kitagawa also runs the popular *Johnny Juniors*; a talent school where hundreds of boys in their young teens are taught singing, dancing and acting in order to later, maybe, get a chance to debut in a real group (Lindqvist, 2004).

The group *SMAP* made *Johnny's Entertainment* Japan's top talent agency in 1995 with earnings of 2,9 billion yen (approx. 33,5 million USD), and the corporation has come to be known as the "Pretty Man Factory", producing beautiful men for female consumption (Schilling, 1997).

Due to the immense popularity in Japan and other parts of Asia, *Johnny's* fan industry is very strictly regulated. In order to buy concert tickets or get the latest information about *Johnny's* idols, it is crucial to become a member of *Johnny's Family Club*. In order to enter, you must pay a fee of 3000 yen (approx. 34 USD) and have a Japanese address; foreign fans are automatically excluded. Once a member, you have the right to buy a lottery coupon by which you *may* (or may not) win a concert ticket. There is no public advertising for *Johnny's* concerts; every single concert ticket is allotted through the *Family Club* lottery, making it profoundly difficult to see popular *Johnny's* groups live in concert (Lindqvist, 2004). Additionally, *Johnny's* idols are strictly controlled and governed, explicitly forbidden to have girlfriends in order to sell an image of romantic availability to their fans. The scandal control is enormous, and idols who break the rules risk grave sanctions; dismissal from *Johnny's Entertainment* or year-long suspension (Lindqvist, 2004).

The near-monopoly and extreme popularity of *Johnny's Entertainment* is very relevant when it comes to contemporary images of masculinities in the media. Considering that the Japanese idols are much more than only singers and very successfully cross into other genres such as entertainment programs, television dramas, movies and a large amount of advertisement, the carefully constructed masculinities manufactured by Kitagawa take up a big amount of space within the Japanese media and entertainment industry. It is important to note that Kitagawa does not necessarily have any particular interest in changing society or depictions of masculinity in Japan per se. *Johnny's Entertainment* creates masculinities that are in fashion and desired by their audience; popular products that are to be consumed.

4.2. The discourse of *kawaii*

According to Lindqvist (2004), the most important quality in a *Johnny's* idol is to be *kawaii*. Someone who is cute and sweet, childish, innocent, androgynous, touching, helpless, vulnerable, small, weak and pathetic can be considered *kawaii* (Lindqvist, 2004). Directly translated, *kawaii* means "can love", something "lovable". *Kawaii* is sweet, dependable and gentle, comforting and warm, often vaguely connected to feelings of childhood and freedom (Allison, 2004).

Kawaii culture emerged in the 1980's and 90's in Japan, but the word also has ancient derivations from the word *kawaisou*, "pitiable", which implies the vulnerability of the subject (Aoyagi, 2005). *Kawaii* has become a culture of cute consumption. Scholars that have written about the rise of the concept and spread of "cute commodities" have linked the phenomenon to the growing consumerism and the (real or imaginary) role played in it by girls pursuing desires of self-pleasure by consuming clothes, accessories, music and cute character goods such as Hello Kitty (Allison, 2004).

Due to the influence of *kawaii* culture, beauty flaws of *Johnny's* idols are rarely hidden and are not seen as something troubling. Weird beauty marks, short legs, crooked teeth or pimples do not necessarily make an idol less *kawaii*; it can make them even cuter. Previously, the rules and governing of idols' beauty flaws were stricter, yet *Johnny's Entertainment* follows Japanese trends and thus conventional beauty and exceptional skill is not necessarily the most popular in the era of *kawaii* (Lindqvist, 2004).

One of Aoyagi's informants stated that "the earnest attempt of young and innocent-looking bodies to act stylish make them somewhat pitiful and therefore very sweet" (Aoyagi, 2005: 76). As both Lindqvist and Aoyagi argue, the charm of Japanese idols is that they are "life-sized", (*tōshindai*). In comparison with Western celebrities, Japanese idols typically depict images of people who are fairly standard. They possess appearance, ability and charm that are above average, but not so much as to alienate or offend the audience. The prototypical Japanese idols keep pace with the audience and are chosen to represent their generation, performing as familiar personalities and providing their fans with a sense that they too could be stars (Aoyagi, 2005).

Considering that many of the idols signed with *Johnny's Entertainment* never even get a chance to debut in a real group (Lindqvist, 2004), it is safe to say that each debuting individual gets carefully screened, selected and matched by the management who choose to promote one idol instead of another.

4.3. Ninomiya Kazunari, Arashi and *Johnny's* media representation

One of *Johnny's* many popular idols is Ninomiya Kazunari. Affectionately called Nino by fans, Ninomiya was born on the 17th of June 1983, which makes him 29 years old as of today and quite old for a Japanese pop idol.

Ninomiya is the youngest member of the five-man group Arashi which debuted in 1999. He is also very active as an actor and is visible in television dramas, commercials and cinematic movies frequently. In 2006, he even made it to Hollywood where he played the lead role in Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

Due to the cross-platform media ubiquity of Japanese idols, an idol group like Arashi gets very integrated into everyday media life in Japan. Because of their large distribution, they become not only identifiable, but familiar to audiences exposed to any kind of media. Morning news will discuss the latest concerts, billboards feature their advertisements for consumer products. They will appear in magazines in convenience stores, tabloids, television dramas, variety shows and commercials, thus making it near impossible to avoid them in daily life (Gailbraith and Karlin, 2012).

Ninomiya himself should not be directly understood as a dominating character in the Japanese media's depiction of contemporary masculinity. Many different productions are circulating in the media landscape, and although most Japanese male idols are controlled more or less by *Johnny's Entertainment*, "legitimate" actors-only types also constitute visible media masculinities alongside news casters, sport stars and game show hosts. Ninomiya's productions are, however, widely spread within Japanese popular culture due to Arashi's popularity, and can be understood as one out of several important contemporary depictions of Japanese masculinity, in no way diminished by the fact that he belongs to the powerful *Johnny's Entertainment* company.

According to a Japanese television ranking site, Arashi had the 7th place of idols who appeared the most on television in 2012 (their Johnny's big brothers *SMAP* hold 6th place), while Ninomiya himself ranked 24th and appeared in 147 programs with a total airing time of 192 hours and 50 minutes. The number one idol who appeared on television in 2012 was *Johnny's* Yamaguchi Tatsuya from the group *TOKIO*, followed by Nakai Masahiro (2nd) and Inohara Yoshihiko (4th) of *SMAP*. The third place was occupied by an unrelated popular girls' group, but otherwise all of the top posts were held by *Johnny's Entertainment* idols and groups. All five members of Arashi figure individually on the list as well as in the group (*TV-Ranking.com*, 2012).

5. Content analysis of Ninomiya and his character portrayals

The fact that a celebrity appears in a television show, film or commercial, is assumed to have a certain impact on viewers. Most likely, the producers wish to encode the show or product with a certain discourse of celebrity and popular character in order to raise ratings and consumption (Golstein & Machor, 2008). From these insights on *Johnny's Entertainment* and the visibility of the Japanese idol productions in mind, the study will analyse Ninomiya Kazunari and some of his most recent media productions in order to examine how he may affirm, reject or compromise traditional and hegemonic Japanese masculinities.

5.1. Ninomiya Kazunari's idol persona in the media

Ninomiya is depicted as perhaps the most *kawaii* of the Arashi members, based on the fact that he is constituted as the “little brother” within the group, being the youngest member within a somewhat hierarchical Japanese system of elders (Glasspool, 2012). He is quite short (usually said to be 168 centimetres) and often described as an “eternal 17 year old” by fans because of his youthful features. Due to the associations between *kawaii* and childhood, an escape from responsibilities and adulthood through cute consumption, Ninomiya can perhaps embody some of the qualities associated with cute consumption as a kind of adult masculinity which still stays in a field of eternal and irresponsible adolescence, free from the demands and requirements of serious adult life. Cuteness has become not only a commodity, but something associated with consumption itself; “the pursuit of something that dislodges the heaviness and constraints of productive life” (Allison, 2004:40).

Aoyagi recognizes three conventional elements which are considered important by the professionals for promoting idols: Something “unexpected” or strange, something (sexually) “tempting” and something which is “able to induce”, appealing to certain values that the public finds inspiring (Aoyagi, 2005). In this sense, Ninomiya's idol persona and its attributed values become very relevant within the contemporary youth culture he was created to cater to, including the recent “New Man” and *kawaii* values.

As discussed previously, the intensity of the Japanese media culture leads to a great intertextuality between various media products. The idol as a multimedia performer ends up operating within a system of meanings and codes that continuously refer to other texts. This provides them with a big potential to activate the audience. Since the idols appear in both fictional and non-fictional contexts, their performances refer both to their “real” and on-screen lives. This sustained exposure leads to the perception that they are not playing characters on screen as much as they are playing themselves (Gailbraith and Karlin, 2012). This function gives an interesting spin on the realness of the events in various dramas and movies. Ninomiya will bring a certain discourse into everything he does due to his high media exposure, promoting his personal image (as well as Arashi) intertextually through the feelings of familiarity felt by the audience.

The semiotic or cultural criticism's goal is to deconstruct the seemingly natural unity of realism, representations and ideology within media, and expose the “naturalness” as a highly ideological construct (Fiske, 1987). Through the intertextuality of the idol productions, everything featuring Ninomiya gets a significant ideological aspect to it, always containing references to his idol persona. Ninomiya is first and foremost a member of the group Arashi, produced by *Johnny's Entertainment*. This is something hardly forgotten by the audience when watching dramas or

movies starring the Arashi members, since Arashi songs often accompany the soundtrack or are played for opening/ending credits. If Ninomiya is seen by the audience as playing more or less "himself", the depiction of reality becomes a representative and ideological question, since he is not really an artist free to express himself. He is bound by the strict rules and management of *Johnny's Entertainment*, thereby also carrying their values with him in his every appearance. A fan in Nagaïke's study states that she likes *anyone* who participates in *Johnny's* productions, and *Johnny's Entertainment* is shown to be predicated on a particular image, the idols thereby constituting an iconic commodity with several common characteristics (Nagaïke, 2012).

The intertextuality is also what makes the representations of masculinity (and femininity for that matter) in the Japanese idol productions extremely relevant. Glasspool suggests that the idol productions and "New Man" ideal promote an ideological message of what *should* be desirable to women, defining the boundaries of legitimate female desire (Glasspool, 2012). However, while *Johnny's Entertainment* is arguably a producer of "perfect female fantasies" (Darling-Wolf, 2004a), they are in no way consumed only by females, at least not once they enter the arena of cinematic movies, television dramas, commercials, television game shows and so on. Like the objectification of women and female celebrities produced for men's consumption are said to influence women, the objectification and glorification of certain masculinities can also leave its impression on the media-consuming Japanese men. For instance Ninomiya had a fashion feature in July 2009 and November 2010 issues of men's magazine *Pop-Eye* (the men's magazine for "boys who don't want to get hurt" described by Tanaka (2003) and fellow Arashi member Matsumoto Jun has more recently been featured in the February 2012 issue, showing a very direct link between a male audience and the messages and ideologies of *Johnny's Entertainment*, Arashi and the so-called perfect female fantasy.

At the same time, the world of *Johnny's Entertainment* is a male dominated, traditional and hierarchical Japanese business established in a classical senior/junior system where younger, yet un-debuted *Johnny's* members perform as backup dancers for their seniors. Features with *Johnny's* idols often give references to the salaryman identity through the symbolic meanings of suits and ties (see attachment 1); yet they never lose their aesthetic appeal as "beautiful boys", exemplified by their hair styles which are still individualised and fancy. Television and media appearances in suits give references to the salaryman masculinity, and the television show *Arashi ni Shiyagare*, to take one example, promotes the hierarchical system by giving boy band Arashi lessons from various "big brothers" (Glasspool, 2012). While this may be seen as a sexist practice which discriminates women as having nothing useful to teach, it also helps to keep Arashi away from female company and thereby presenting them as romantically available and "cute boys" who need the guidance of their seniors in order to succeed as men.

5.2. Ninomiya as a male object: Discourses of sensitivity and homoeroticism

So which values exactly do Arashi and Ninomiya bring with them into their appearances? Arashi's songs quite often focus on love and "doing one's best". Many songs become soundtracks for movie or drama productions starring members of the band and are therefore widely distributed throughout a range of different media.

Ninomiya has done a couple of solo performances for Arashi, one being the love song *Rainbow*. The song is a slow ballad and the lyrics identify are the words of a romantic narrator who wishes to be loved by his significant other, who somehow finds it difficult to express her love:

I wonder why you can't say it?
'I like you', this one thing,
Sometimes I would like to hear it.
The rainbow is beautiful
Or rather, you are more...

The song describes the feelings of a vulnerable and sensitive young man who wants to be loved. Whether completely true or not, it is believed by members of the audience that Ninomiya wrote his solo lyrics himself. It has been performed alone on stage only accompanied by a piano, giving him a very soft appearance suitable to his romantic song, certainly staging him as the conveyor of the song's personal message. Even if Arashi's songs and lyrics are aimed at a mainly female audience, the theme of wanting to be loved is also reproduced in modern magazines for Japanese young men, as showed in Tanaka's studies (see Tanaka, 2003).

A different solo ballad by Ninomiya, *A song found anywhere*, expresses acceptance of momentary weakness and showing your feelings, messages that are also present in *Rainbow*.

We're not that weak, but we're not that strong either
That's why it's okay to cry, it's nothing embarrassing
[...]
Afraid of getting hurt
When I was always crying, I forgot how to laugh.

The acceptance of weakness and fear is in great opposition to traditional desirable masculine Western and Japanese traits. As defined by Connell (1995), weakness is considered something feminine that should not be attributed to "real men", yet the members of Arashi often cry in public and at moving achievements or charity events (Glasspool, 2012). For the Japanese, who traditionally are not allowed to show their inner emotions, this is a quite significant change. As stated by Winter-Jørgensen and Philips (1999), discourses can make certain types of action relevant while others are unthinkable. The fact that a crying man has become thinkable, even desirable when presented through popular idols, represents a definite media resistance to ideals of what "real men"

are supposed to be like. As Darling-Wolf (2004b) has pointed out in her studies, the "New Men" promoted in Japanese media are often shown as sensitive men who have no problem with performing traditionally female roles. For instance Arashi have appeared on several occasions wearing pastel-coloured aprons while preparing food; a notable occasion being the *Arashi Gekkan* photo-shoot in which Ninomiya and Ohno are cooking together in a somewhat romantically suggestive manner (see attachment 1).

Under the headline *Sexual Ambivalence as a Strategy of Consumerism*, Glasspool has analysed the homoerotic sexual ambivalence present in idol performances. There is a certain degree of homoerotic playfulness between Ninomiya and the leader of the Arashi group, Ohno Satoshi, which has earned them the fan nickname "Ohmiya". Casual groping, "kissing" on stage, as well as several ambiguous messages in interviews have naturalized Ninomiya and Ohno's homoerotic play within the Arashi fandom, yet a certain space is maintained where fans are able to interpret the homosexual/homosocial continuum as they wish. In addition to being a popular female fantasy as proved by the popularity of *Boys Love* manga, the homoerotic behaviour also seeks to prevent scandal by not defining the members as straightforward heterosexual adult males with girlfriends (Glasspool, 2012). Although the Ohmiya relationship is not actually homosexual, something that is still quite taboo in Japanese mainstream culture, the *Boys Love* boom may express a kind of preferred masculinity and contemporary taste for certain feminine values, as well as a willingness of the idols to show vulnerability and a more passive and cute masculinity.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that, in practice, incorporation and oppression can occur simultaneously, which may be the pattern that we are seeing when it comes to the visibility of homoeroticism in Japanese idol culture. As noted by Lindqvist (2004) and others, many female fans do not actually want them to be together for real. This is similar to the construction of visual lesbianism in heteronormative masculine culture which appreciates displays of homoeroticism - as long as the women are not actual lesbians who will not have sex with men (Nead, 1992). Certain women *do* want the idols to be together for real though, and the homoerotic display allows the fans whichever interpretation they wish.

At the same time, the audience may not desire the same qualities in their partners as they do in their idols. Interviews with Japanese women of different generations have shown a certain disregard of men who take on *too* feminine qualities and care too much about their looks. The boundaries for celebrities were quite different from "their own men" (Darling-Wolf, 2004b). While it is always suggested that popular idols are heterosexual, their actual sexuality is *significantly absent*, (Fiske, 1982) masking all matters of real male sexuality and relationships in relation to the staged idol persona. This perhaps contributes to giving the audience an enforced sense of the "perfect female

fantasy”, rather than seeing the idol as a model of what real men are or should be like. Yet even if the masculinity exhibited by male idols is not as available to real men, by making the male body an object for a (mainly) female gaze, certain boundaries are being pushed and changed. Even though the male body as a sexualized object is a kind of consumerist commodity and can therefore be seen as simply highlighting female desire and constructing a ”perfect female fantasy” quite unlike the ”real men” that women actually want to marry, it is also important to note that the power of incorporation can never be complete. Fiske argues that for discriminated groups ”hegemony is the means by which their consent to the system that disadvantages them is won”, yet the victories are never stable due to the contradictory experiences of everyday life. The struggle is never definitely over, and so the victories of the dominant ideology have to be constantly defended and held on to (Fiske, 1982:184).

The visibility of the popular *Johnny's Entertainment* idols thus contributes to the construction of the idols as some of the most influential masculinities in contemporary Japanese pop culture, and the incorporative aspects cannot be seen exclusively as a victory to the status quo of masculine hegemony as their messages are constantly mixed with re-definitions and elements of change.

5.3. Rejecting masculine stereotypes? Ninomiya as a samurai, salaryman and action hero

Ninomiya has starred in several movies, often in a main character hero-type role. Yet also in his ”macho” roles, many of the qualities expressed through the ”New Man” ideals and discursive constitution of *Johnny's Entertainment* idols are also visible throughout his productions.

Yūnoshin, the sensitive samurai

In the 2010 cinematic movie *The Inner Chambers*, Ninomiya stars as low class samurai Yūnoshin. Inspired by a manga comic, the movie is set in an alternative medieval Japan where most of the male population has been killed by a mysterious red pox and women have the power.

The main character joins the inner chambers of the female shogun; the harem of beautiful men who serve her. He does so in part to help his poor family financially, yet it is also implied that he wants to get away from his childhood friend and love interest, Onobu, since his family's low social status makes their love impossible and painful to him.

Due to the lack of female contact, the men take advantage of each other and develop homosexual relationships in order to advance their careers within the chambers. Yūnoshin denies the homosexual encounters from the very beginning, with force if necessary. Within the gender-swapped world of the movie, he is shown as a ”real man” who reaffirms heteronormativity, is a sublimely skilled warrior, loyal both to his family and his shogun. He even personifies the traditional Japanese *loyal-to-the-death* ideal (Barrett, 1989) as he is willing to die in service of the shogun and almost does.

What is interesting in this connection is not so much Yūnoshin's status as a samurai, skills with the sword or loyalty to his liege, as it is his devoted affection to his childhood friend and love interest. Through the scheming of the men in the inner chambers, Yūnoshin gets chosen to take the virginity of the female shogun. Yet, in doing so, he will “hurt” her and therefore he must subsequently pay with his life according to the palace code.

Barret concluded in his study of old samurai movies that the warrior heroes of Japan hardly ever show any fear of death and quell their emotions, in particular their passionate love for a woman. The Loyal Retainer archetype willingly sacrifices his wife for his Lord, while the Chaste Warrior archetype cannot show love in order to win in battle (Barrett, 1989). Yūnoshin, however, shows both regret and a certain degree of fear, mainly related to his unresolved feelings of love. Once assured that his family will not suffer for his deed, his main issue is that he never got to tell Onobu that he loves her. His last wish, that he disrespectfully makes, is that he may call the female shogun the name of his love during the act, something that she grants and gets touched by to the extent that it becomes his salvation.

While it is true that the main character embodies many of the traditional samurai values, he also possesses a great deal of compassion and “soft” emotions. He does not kill, not even when threatened to be killed. He does not defame the man who attempted to murder him. While remaining loyal to the shogun to the extent that he will sacrifice himself, he remains loyal to his love and his family throughout the story. The focus on the love story becomes quite clear through subtle messages in the film, further emphasized by the first few pages of the manga. Ninomiya himself has stated in interviews that, rather than a strictly historical movie, *The Inner Chambers* is a “modern interpretation” (Eiga.com, 2010). The romantic focus is also clearly emphasized intertextually through the theme song, Arashi's *Dear Snow* (original English title) which tells the story of fragile snow, symbolizing a lover out of reach, but always remembered and longed for. As is often the case, the audience does not get a chance to forget that a member of Arashi is playing the main role and the added values that come with it.

Kurono, the hesitant superhero

In the 2010 movie *GANTZ* (and the sequel *GANTZ: Perfect Answer*), Ninomiya plays a somewhat different role of a reluctant hero, Kurono Kei, who needs to come to terms with his new powers. *GANTZ* is also inspired by a manga, albeit a more male-oriented one known for its vivid portrayals of sex and violence.

In the movie, Kurono fights with guns and swords against alien enemies, trying desperately to protect his friends. There is no loyalty towards the superior; every job that is done is done out of force and for survival, not out of respect for the employer, the eerie black ball known as Gantz.

When Gantz orders the group of fighters to kill off Kurono's crush Tae next, he refuses, begs everyone to leave her alone and protects her with his life. When she and everyone else die, he sacrifices everything to resurrect them. Like Yūnoshin in *The Inner Chambers*, Kurono is no Chaste Warrior or Loyal Retainer type, nor does he do anything out of loyalty to his superior. He acts on his feelings and morals alone.

The choice of Ninomiya to play Kurono of *GANTZ* is quite interesting. Fiske argues that productions catering to a largely male audience have less need to produce polysemic texts which allow for oppositional or resistive meanings to be circulated, due to the fact that masculinity's relationship to patriarchy is less resistive than femininity's (Fiske, 1987:198). Kurono in *GANTZ*, in many ways, is a classical action hero with many masculine qualities. He wants to protect and save everyone, is aggressive, a leader type, and seems to have everything under control most of the time. A hero can provide many points of entry for the viewer's masculine identification (Fiske, 1987). From this point of view, the choice of Ninomiya Kazunari as the actor is somewhat problematic due to his intertextual connections within the Japanese media industry and female consumption. Ninomiya will inevitably bring outside values into the production; ultimately, according to blogs and reviews of the movie, attracting a large female audience.

The character also has several short-comings as a hero. In his first battle, he cannot bring himself to shoot his foe. In a zoom of his troubled face, breathing quickly and extremely nervous, the viewer gets a sense of hesitation and vulnerability which is perhaps not quite as masculine as what you would expect an action hero to be. He is a sexual character, yet fails at all advances he makes in the movie. This is an interesting clash with the manga, which is famous for its explicit sex. Ninomiya and Arashi emit images of *pure* love, something which translates into the movie where eventually a pure and platonic love story ensues between Kurono and Tae.

Additionally, when Kurono loses all his friends in a big battle, failing in his leading and protection of them, he decides to commit suicide on the train tracks. The only reason he does not die is because Tae pulls him up and confesses her love to him. In this sense, both Yūnoshin of *The Inner Chambers* and Kurono of *GANTZ* get saved by women. The traditional notion of the woman as a disturbance to be avoided for the warrior hero is somewhat diminished, even if Kurono's following love for Tae does become his undoing, leaving a mixed message about her role in his successes and failures. The majority of women in *GANTZ* are shown as quite meek and weak, eventually in need of the protection of the strong Kurono. The action scenes prove that, although Kurono has his weaknesses, he is still the hero, the leader, the strong one. His role and skills as a hero do not get questioned, even if he does experience moments of emotional weakness.

Disturbance and reinforcement of traditional masculinity

Characters such as Kurono and Yūnoshin show "real men" who fight and protect, are strong and able, yet still have a soft side. Within the limitations of the genres, the characters are still kind, compassionate and genuine, contrasted to more rough and ruthless men.

As far as Connell's description of the *un*-masculine man goes, these characters are not particularly disturbing to the hegemonic constitution of masculinity. An un-masculine person would behave differently from the masculine by being conciliatory, bad at sports, uninterested in sexual conquest and so forth (Connell, 1995:67). Both Kurono and Yūnoshin are eventually violent, even if they do choose their battles with honour and are less aggressive and more merciful than their opponents. They are both dominating, good at fighting and interested in sexual conquest. Yet their gentleness and ultimate devotion to their lovers, a devotion that arguably surpasses that to the superior, is quite different from the traditional Japanese samurai warrior. Even if not explicitly stated, the choice of Ninomiya as a main character will always bring the soft values into the movie, particularly in the cases where the soundtrack features Arashi's romantic ballads. Additionally, the character of Yūnoshin lives in a world where roles of men and women have been reversed, attributing several feminine values to the male characters and further emphasizing the soft masculinity, or even feminine aspects, of Ninomiya's persona.

A similar character portrayal is Saigo of *Letters from Iwo Jima*, who is mainly watching out for himself and his friends, missing his wife and child, not particularly caring about the war with the Americans. Even though this is an American production, the choice of Ninomiya as an actor shows the imagined effect of his features and characteristics, as well as his ability to play troubled characters with compassionate and "feminine" qualities.

In the discourse theory established by Laclau and Mouffes, discourses are reproduced or challenged through particular articulations. An important question to ask is how a concrete articulation can challenge or change a discourse by re-defining some of its various momentums, which meanings are being contested and which remain unchallenged and fixed (Laclau and Mouffes quoted in Winter Jørgensen & Philips, 1999). The samurai, the action hero and the soldier are three common roles that male celebrity has taken on, and even if the representations of Ninomiya as a samurai or hero in themselves are not particularly challenging to the status quo, they are still re-defining certain momentums in the articulation of discourses about heroes, about warriors, about the "real men" that Ninomiya represents in a new way. The size of the change can be debated, yet it is undoubtedly present.

Connell and Messerschmidt argue that hegemonic masculinity does not need to be the most common pattern in the everyday lives of boys and men, but is rather something which works in part

through various exemplars of masculinity such as sport stars (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Super hero, samurai and soldier characters can be considered masculine exemplars which quite often portray a very direct kind of hegemonic masculinity. Due to this, the choice of a "female fantasy" to portray these hegemonic masculinities is not irrelevant. The use of Ninomiya's face and character in the movies is important to the question of which kind of masculinity discourse gets constituted in the texts. The hero is still ultimately strong, just, honourable and protective, yet the face of Ninomiya, his soft acting and troubled expressions, bring certain discourses into the content which somehow re-articulates certain (but not all) aspects of the dominant hero-discourse. Ninomiya shows that, like he sang in his solo *A song found anywhere*, it is okay even for the strongest hero to cry.

5.4. Failed masculinities? Ninomiya as a *freeter* and delinquent

While Ninomiya has participated in several productions where he has played various kinds of "masculine exemplars", he has also starred in several roles portraying a more incomplete and perhaps "failed" kind of man from the viewpoint of hegemonic masculinity.

Yasu, the disabled delinquent

In the 2010 television drama *I will fly to the sky in my wheelchair*, Ninomiya plays bleached-blond youth delinquent Yasuyuki (Yasu) who smokes, drinks, sleeps around and loves martial arts. The movie begins when Yasu injures his spinal cord and gets told that he will be bound to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Yasu's macho persona more or less gets taken away from him the very instant he becomes disabled, in that he can no longer fight or support himself. The story is based on an autobiography and shows a specific kind of masculinity thrown completely out of balance. Certain references are made to a *yakuza* (Japanese gangster) lifestyle as described by Barrett, yet Yasu has no boss, honour or goal, and cannot directly be compared to the organized *yakuza* criminals. His physical difference from the young *yakuza* hero in older movies is notable. Previously often played by muscular actor Takakura Ken, the young *yakuza* hero evokes images of loyalty, strength and brotherhood (Barrett, 1989). Yasu, a small scale delinquent, on the other hand, has a small frame and generally abandons his comrades when trouble arises, something he later comes to regret.

Yasu is in many ways still "a real man". The problematic of the designation of masculinity to the male body and its capabilities becomes obvious in situations where the body is simply not able (Connell, 1995), since even though Yasu inhabits many "masculine" personality traits, such as sleeping around, being good at sports and martial arts and being physically aggressive, his "real, inherent masculinity" gets stripped from him the moment he can no longer walk, even if he still

possesses the same values as before. Since he can no longer perform his masculinity adequately, he is deemed weak by society and by himself, and weak is something a "real man" cannot be. Yasu gets automatically inscribed with a subordinate masculinity and has no choice but to change drastically. He cannot threaten, he cannot fight, he (presumably) cannot not pick up girls, he cannot even live without the help of others, something that drives him to the limit of suicide. Although, in the end, it is others who save him from the final jump.

An interesting scene in the movie is when Yasu tells the cancer sick boy Daichi what *a real man* should be like, somehow manifesting his own lost superiority to the little boy. He teaches him martial stances and punching techniques, but comes short when he has to demonstrate the kicking, bringing the two characters together in that they maybe aren't "real men" after all. In the end, the boy will likely never reach manhood and Yasu will never walk or kick again.

The inner turmoil that Yasu experiences with his situation is depicted in one of the movie's last scenes where he is looking over the cliffs where he wants to commit suicide, expressing his desire to be cool again and to break free of his broken body.

I wonder... if I turn to the sky like this and I could fly. Then I could be cool...
My body became like this... Just by living, I'm a nuisance. I wonder what I should do. What should I do... I don't know any more... Help me. Please help me.

In the end he breaks down and cries, asking the crowd for help, the moral of the story being that it is okay to ask others for help and to not be strong all the time, something also largely contrasting with the Japanese traditional beliefs of not showing your emotions. The movie takes a strong stance against committing "honourable suicide" to save yourself from weakness and shame, something which was common in traditional samurai and soldier masculinities, and Yasu even ends up being a counsellor for others who need help, despite previously rejecting counselling.

Seiji, the fortunate freeter

Another example of a "failed" masculinity in a contemporary light is the 2010 television drama, *A part-timer buys a house (for his family)*, in which Ninomiya plays 25 year old Seiji who quits his new job as a salaryman after three months, thereby falling completely out of the Japanese work-system. As mentioned earlier, the traditional constitution of the salaryman is as a position with life-long employment, extreme loyalty towards your company and generally dedicating yourself to corporate life. Quitting a job after three months greatly disables further job-hunting, since Seiji gets deemed unreliable and lazy by possible employers.

According to Barrett (1989), depictions of salarymen in Japanese post-war films have usually been of men loyal to their companies, whether they had an admirable boss or were only servile for economic reasons. An alternative salaryman was portrayed in the 1960's, valuing personal success

more than loyalty; yet still in a business sense, climbing up the career ladder. Comical salarymen characters, poking fun at the system, yet still conforming to it, have also been portrayed (Barrett, 1989). While Barrett's studies of the salaryman in Japanese movies is somewhat dated, it says something important about the incorporation and resistance within salaryman depictions throughout Japanese film history. More recent depictions, such as 2012 summer drama *Rich Man, Poor Woman* have shown a similar incorporational attitude towards the salaryman. In the end, he just needs to conform and enter the hierarchy in order to succeed and be liked as a worker.

Ninomiya's Seiji character disregards the life as a salaryman completely and refuses to stay in a job that he does not like with a boss that he does not respect. He does try to get a new job, but always gets obstructed by his mother's deep depression. Seiji attempts to care for her while his father has no idea how to handle the situation, and Seiji chooses human relationships, himself and his family, over the prestige of employment several times throughout the series. In the end of the drama, he has to choose between a respectable salaryman job at a big company and a promotion at the small construction company where he has been doing part-time work, choosing the small and less prestigious option simply because he likes the people and they respect him and his values.

Seiji's attitude towards working in a place he does not like is further emphasized by the father's work situation. Through an indirect source, Seiji and his sister learn that the father is not respected at his workplace and only ever gets to check other people's work, never do anything on his own. The father in this aspect represents the older generation who puts up with the traditional system and does not handle emotions well, while Seiji represents new and changing work and family values.

While Seiji's choice of construction work can be said to represent an established sense of masculinity, various disturbances are present in the environment, thus not quite giving it the "laddish" environment one may expect. One of Seiji's superiors is a woman and the colleagues are not really expressing any sexist or traditional attitudes. The only worker who might show a stereotypical, somewhat sexist construction worker attitude is Seiji's main boss. However, comparisons are often drawn between the boss and Seiji's father, which ends up giving him an air of a sympathetic, yet old-fashioned position within the drama.

Several key issues about men and women's employment are taken up in the drama. Seiji is considered a failure who can never accomplish anything due to his lack of full-time employment, while Seiji's superior and love interest, Manami, is a highly educated woman in the construction industry who dreams of building bridges of her own design.

The end conversation between Seiji and his father in the last episode shows the focus on changing times in the work and family life very clearly:

Seiichi (father): And when you marry, you definitely can't have a wife who quits her job.

Ayako (sister): What?! And this is coming from the man who made mom quit her job!

Seiichi (father): It was a different time then! For example, if Seiji loses his job, what will happen to the kids?

Seiji (Ninomiya): Shut up! (Literally: "You're noisy!")

The father admits the generational gap, that the times are changing and that he and Seiji are not alike. In the same way, Seiji's housewife mother is not similar to the construction engineer Manami or the other young women portrayed in the series. It shows the big difference from the social life during the years of bubble economy and life-long employment, and that the lifestyle lived by Seiji's parents is no longer possible or desirable. At the same time, Seiji shows a lot frustration with the romantic relationship between his parents, in no way understanding why his mother would put up with a man like his father. This underpins the contemporary young generation's frustrations with traditional gender roles and domestic patterns, as well as a new focus on romantic, pure love and sensitivity over more traditional patterns of practical and labour-divided relationships. In the end, Seiji and his father unite to buy a house to help the mother, and Seiji breaks free of the lazy *freeter* label.

Re-articulations of hegemony and subordination

While *I will fly to the sky in my wheel chair* certainly deals with a very explicit form of subordinate masculinity, that of the disabled male body, it does not really deal with it in a way that challenges the hegemony of the physically able male body. According to Gauntlett (2008), the inescapable contradictions in popular culture are important since they provide an open realm of possibilities for creating an identity as a male or female. Popular culture, he suggests, offer a range of stars, icons and characters from which we can borrow certain ideas of their persona for our own construction of identity (Gauntlett, 2008). While Yasu does not necessarily provide any new male personas to choose from in a direct way, his struggle and realizations still give identity advice which can relate to every person. Yasu's morale is that it is important to ask for help when you need it, there is no shame in breaking down, crying or being "weak". While in the movie the only people who are really shown as *needing* help are handicapped men and sad women, the fact that Ninomiya is playing the role contributes to the message from a "healthy male" perspective on an intertextual level. Combined with his other performances in drama and film, as well as the message in the lyrics of the various solo songs that he has supposedly written himself, the discourse changes a little. Bearing in mind that Arashi is an extremely visible group on television and in advertising and this particular movie was aired in connection with Arashi's hosting of the annual NTV charity 24 hour television, the inherent intertextuality of the production cannot be denied.

A part-timer buys a house (for his family) also deals with alternative masculinities, but while certain challenges are made to the traditional salaryman lifestyle, the main character still does end

up with a full time job, a girlfriend, and the ability to support himself properly in the future. The part-time working identity as a *freeter* is still shown as subordinate and undesirable, something that Seiji manages to “escape” from. Hidaka's studies showed a negative attitude towards *freeters* in all three interviewee age groups, emphasizing that they are not considered responsible and that being a *freeter* is incompatible with marriage. However, the youngest group did show a certain tension between their privilege of practising the hegemonic masculinity and the alternative as a *freeter* which would provide much more freedom, yet none of the respondents considered that the *freeter* lifestyle was superior to that of the salaryman (Hidaka, 2010).

Fiske considers that television broadcasts programs which are full of potential meanings. The media tries to control and focus this meaningfulness into a certain preferred meaning, which in turn performs the work of the dominant ideology. In this sense, reality is always encoded and sense can only be produced when the “reality”, the representations and the underlying ideology merge into a coherent, seemingly natural unity (Fiske, 1987). Seen in this light, the ideological stance of *A part-timer buys a house* still supports the traditional working class model, although it is articulated in a slightly different way.

Of the analysed media productions, there is not a single story in which Ninomiya's character does not show his emotions clearly at least once. Ninomiya's idol persona and characters show that it is okay to be sensitive, it is okay not to be strong all the time, and that ultimately it is perfectly okay to cry and sacrifice yourself for your loved ones.

Through the constitution of discourses, men are not free to constitute themselves in whichever way they would like. To a certain extent, it is their cultural histories and social positions that decide which identities they can take upon themselves, which identities they are able to choose from (Lindgren, 2005). The re-articulation of various hegemonic and traditional masculinities and the enforced visibility of subordinate alternatives can contribute in providing a greater spectrum of contemporary Japanese masculinities to choose from. However, while non-hegemonic patterns of masculinity can prove to be durable, hegemony can still be stabilized by the incorporation of these masculinities into an already functioning gender order rather than by active oppression, leaving the opposing discourses in a continuous battle for dominance.

6. ”Buck-toothed mouse man” or ”manly cute idol”? Analysis of the audience reception of Ninomiya and his productions

In order to understand the role of the masculinity that Ninomiya portrays and its possible influence on Japanese perceptions of masculinity, it is important to look at how the audience perceives and considers his “texts”, both when it comes to his persona and the characters portrayed

in his various acting productions.

Evans and Hesmondhagh (2005) note that many audience analysts believe it impossible to simply read off the meaning of a celebrity or star. Instead they believe that we should uncover the various ways in which diverse members of the audience make sense of the celebrities, raising the question of *what we do with celebrities* rather than what they do to us (Evans and Hesmondhagh, 2005).

6.1. Reception of Ninomiya's idol persona

In a Pirori 2-channel Ninomiya fan thread, one of the most re-occurring words used to describe Ninomiya (Nino) is *kawaii*, representing the importance of cuteness in his media persona:

Nino is *kawaii*!! He's like an eternal 17 year old. He even looks good in girls' clothes!⁵

I would like him as my big brother. He seems kind. Nino is the best!⁵

He's *kawaii*, masculine, charismatic, great at acting, in his different endeavours his personality really comes out, his dancing and singing is great – he's really just PERFECT! A perfect artist.⁵

These three comments show some common viewpoints, yet they are only a small sample of the large pool of comments that used *kawaii* and similar wording to describe why they like Ninomiya. The fan thread itself is titled "Isn't Ninomiya Kazunari just extremely cute?" with over 2000 posts.

The constitution and consumption of *Johnny's Entertainment* idols and particularly Ninomiya as *kawaii* mark his distance from hegemonic masculinities in the sense that he is cute, harmless and looks like an "eternal 17-year old". An average 29 year old Japanese male would typically already be a *shakaijin*, a full-fledged member of society working in a company. Yet the fact that Ninomiya is not, combined with the fact that his love life and scandals are strictly managed by *Johnny's Entertainment*, provides him with the ability to forever seem young; a cute and innocent boy detached from the patriarchal family and company structures associated with the average 29 year old Japanese man.

The discourse of *kawaii* can therefore also be seen as something negative from an incorporative perspective. Since *kawaii* is mainly used for someone young and vulnerable, the term risks alienating the cute idol in a sense that he no longer acts as an image of a contemporary Japanese male. Rather than being "a real man", the discourse of *kawaii* risks making the idol seem more like a boy or child, incorporating the "less strong" men into a hegemonic discourse of what real men should be like. At the same time, several of Ninomiya's movie roles show him in roles of a masculine exemplar, constituting his male identity outside of the cuteness as a "real" man.

Many fans do not consider him **only** *kawaii*. As exemplified by the third fan comment above,

⁵ Three comments from: <http://pirori2ch.com/archives/1665510.html> (number 57, 606, 275) 15th of December 2012.

many posters consider him both cute AND masculine, *kawaii* AND *kakkoi* (cool). Especially when speaking about his recent movies in the fan threads, they mentioned Ninomiya in the role of Kurono in *GANTZ* as super cool. While *kawaii* was definitely the most prominent adjective to describe him, *kakkoi* was mentioned several times by many different fans. Due to the origins of *kawaii* culture as a kind of childish sweetness and dependence (Allison, 2004), the combination of manliness, coolness and cuteness seems contradictory. The fact that these fans do not necessarily see them as such represents a kind of change in which values make a man cool and masculine, as well as the audience's perception of what a real man should be like.

On the other hand, the *kawaii* qualities of Ninomiya seemed to be the number one issue that anti-fans had with him, showing that there are still very differing opinions on these competing discourses and the compatibility of *cute*, *cool* and masculine. One particular comment exchange in the anti-forum shows this contrast quite clearly:

A: No matter what cool dances he does, he always ends up looking cute!

B: That he always ends up looking cute... that means that he doesn't have any manly appeal, doesn't it? Fatal.⁶

The first comment reflects existing studies where respondents describe the idols as "innocent bodies trying to be cool", but always end up being cute and pitiable and therefore adorable. (Aoyagi, 2005) While the fans seem to think that *cool* and *cute* can co-exist within a desirable idol, the anti-fans were not of the same opinion. To the second poster, the cuteness is an *opposite* of manly appeal; being *cute* and manly at the same time is not seen as an option. Rabinowitz considers that "authorial reading is not only a way of reading, but, perhaps equally important, a way of talking about how you read – that is, the result of a community agreement that allows discussions of a certain sort to take place by treating meaning in a particular way." (Rabinowitz quoted in Bury, 2008: 294) Differing opinions on cuteness as something that either strips the male of his masculinity or as something that can co-exist with manliness seems to be a general disagreement within the audience.

Out of the almost 300 posts in the anti-thread, many anti-fan comments focus on Ninomiya's presumed lack of manliness and masculinity:

First of all, he's short. In the recent commercial, his shoulder measurements are like a woman's so the suit doesn't suit him at all. When he passes 30, he can't be a "boy-man" anymore so I guess he'll disappear.⁶

He has no manly elements. In this sense he's very unlike KimuTaku and like Nakai. [...] That's why he's hated by guys.⁶

These are two examples out of many comments somehow discrediting Ninomiya's value as a man.

⁶ Comments from: <http://anago.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/jan/1312472757/> 15th of December 2012.

This manliness issue as well as common complaints about his height is perhaps also directly related to his *kawaii* image. Since the concept of *kawaii* is mainly associated with children, teenagers and people in their early twenties, it can be considered somewhat difficult to attain for a grown man in his 30's. One anti-fan states that "Ninomiya is a brat. He does not seem like an adult at all, whatsoever"⁶, truly showing how the *kawaii* discourse of Ninomiya's image can be negatively read by the audience, discrediting his value as an adult.

A great deal of comment posters also seem concerned with his looks and appearance in another sense; his teeth, his nose, his face, his general attractiveness. Interestingly, many of the little imperfections that are considered "flaws" by the people on the anti-forum are things that Lindqvist (2004) describe as the embodiments of *kawaii*: smallness, looking young, having strange birthmarks and other imperfections, being "life-sized".

The most common insults in the anti-thread, but also in the fan thread where they are vigorously spammed, are "small, bald, horse-faced, bucktoothed, rat" and the term "*nezumi otoko*" (mouse man) which sums up many of the insults of his looks, referring to a popular manga and anime character which supposedly looks like Ninomiya.

Additionally, rumours about Ninomiya's supposed dating ventures with female celebrities are also spammed in the fan forum, as well as people stating that Ninomiya is obviously the least popular member of Arashi, aimed at hurting fans who see him as romantically available and, like is common in Japanese fan culture, do anything they can to support their idol (Lindqvist, 2004; Gailbraith and Karlin, 2012).

The words *otaku* (a nerd, someone who is really obsessed and knowledgeable about one subject, often seen as unemployed) and *freeter* (the home-dwelling part-timer), usually referring to men, are also used by several posters in order to insult Ninomiya. The words are used in a negative way in order to criticize, indicating the lack of respect towards certain subordinate masculinities. It is notable that some posters have chosen to use existing subordinate masculinities as insults, suggesting that they believe that Ninomiya is linked to these masculinities which are considered undesirable in contemporary Japan, particularly since it would be possible to describe the same qualities in completely gender neutral terms using words such as "lazy" in order to convey more or less the same message. Accusing Ninomiya of being an *otaku*, a *freeter* or someone who possesses no masculine qualities at all due to being small, woman-like and childish, shows an intense preoccupation with his masculinity and qualities as a *man*, rather than as an idol, celebrity, entertainer or person.

Even in the examined fan thread, many comments are against Ninomiya. It is, as in all online activity, difficult to say whether the criticism is only made in order to bother the fans, or if it comes from a genuine dislike. The persistent re-posting of insults by some posters, mostly ignored by the

fans, suggests that they do actually care, at least enough to keep coming back.

The anonymity of 2-chan makes it impossible to know the gender spread of the positive and negative comments. Since *Johnny's Entertainment* fans are overwhelmingly female, (Lindqvist, 2004; Gailbraith and Karlin, 2012) it is safe to assume that most participants in fan forums are female. As discussed by Lindqvist (2004), Darling-Wolf (2004ab), Aoyagi (2005) and more, the consumption of male idols, particularly among adolescents, can provide a "safe" fantasy space to engage in semi-sexual encounters with the opposite gender. This "fantasy space" is most likely not appreciated by most males. Due to the still different social status of men and women in Japanese society (Hidaka, 2010), the cultural and social background of male and female readers will be different. A few posters do explicitly state that they are male, stating that "even for a guy like me, Arashi are super *kawaii*"⁵. Some of these posts have somewhat sexual undertones, stating that Ninomiya is "erotic"⁵ and that the poster would like to be "held closely"⁵ by Arashi members, suggesting that the poster, if indeed male, has a sexual interest in men as well and, therefore, is able to participate in the fantasy space where homoerotic encounters are somewhat normalized.

When it comes to the active anti-fans, Ninomiya critics often used the masculine-sounding Japanese words for I, "*boku*", to describe themselves, suggesting that they are male. Others used the pronoun "*ore*" which is only applicable to males. This perhaps represents a certain degree of reluctance towards change among the heterosexual (and actively commenting) male audience who wish to hold on to traditional masculinities. There seems to be a tendency of women and men with a somewhat homoerotic agenda to be more positive towards the soft masculinity that Ninomiya embodies, despite the fact that Ninomiya depicts heterosexual masculinities in his various roles.

6.2. Reception of Ninomiya's character portrayals

When it comes to audience reception of the movies that Ninomiya has participated in, the reception is somewhat different than in the strict Ninomiya threads. Although some reviewers do make an effort to rate Ninomiya's performance, persona or character, many do not focus on it. Various bloggers and viewers of *GANTZ* in the cinema mention how big the female audience was, and in the movie site *Eiga.com*'s review section, several commentators mention that they watched the movie as "Ninomiya fans" (as opposed to *GANTZ* manga fans) While most fans state that Ninomiya is super cool (*kawaii* is not used to describe this performance) in the role of Kurono, some anti-fans mention that they definitely will not watch it because "mouse man" Ninomiya is featured.⁷

While most reviewers of *GANTZ* on *Eiga.com* do not seem to have so many personal issues with Ninomiya in the role of Kurono, reviewers of *The Inner Chambers* are more critical.⁸ Some of the same masculinity issues come back, stating that "if only he was 5 centimetres taller..." and that he

⁷ Eiga.com *GANTZ* comments: <http://eiga.com/movie/54943/review/>, 3rd of December 2012.

ought to do something about his bent back. It is also brought up that he is not quite manly enough to play a historical masculine character and that his strength and seductiveness aren't sufficient. One reviewer states that he/she is a fan of Ninomiya, but can really only "view him as a boy", therefore not approving of him for the manly samurai role.

Relating to the intertextual discourse within *Johnny's Entertainment* and the constitution of *Johnny's* idols as "cute, androgynous boys" (Japanese *shōnen*, as described by Nagaike, 2012), it seems that the audience particularly has difficulties accepting Ninomiya from the viewpoint of a traditional samurai masculinity. While *GANTZ* is a contemporary science-fiction story which revolves around contemporary men, the masculinity of medieval Japan as well as its representations in fiction seems to be somewhat fixated into certain expectations and archetypes among the audience. The actor Ninomiya, the *kawaii* eternal 17 year old, does not fit this stereotype, causing parts of the audience (fans included) to react to him as the choice of actor. Some posters, however, do believe that he is manly, strong, kind and therefore very charming in the role. "Kind" is a key word in this regard, since the archetypal samurai characters as described by Barrett (1989) were hardly kind, loving or "charming" in this sense. The dichotomy between "manly" and "unmanly" is notable here and can be seen as an expression for the unstable masculine identity. The audience does not really seem to completely agree on what "a real" or "a masculine" man is, and therefore read the characters in many different ways.

When it came to the one-shot television drama *I will fly to the sky in my wheel chair*, which was shown on August 25th 2012 during NTV's annual 24 hour charity television, comments on Ninomiya's performance were scarce and not related to his persona. The lack of comments can be interpreted in itself, notably due to the fact that the 2012 charity television was held with Arashi as main show hosts. The 24 hour television has a special drama every year, which, according to posters in the thread, more or less have the same feeling to it. The fact that a member of Arashi was expected in the drama due to their 2012 function as the show hosts, as well as the expectation of a charitable emotional drama, likely leads to less discussion and opinion on the actors. After all, the content and cast are more or less decided from the context.⁸

A viewer of the *A part-timer buys a house (for his family)* drama expresses the opinion that the main characters clothes were too fancy for him, and considers that Ninomiya should not be shown in "idol mode" since it ruins the story-telling.⁹ This comment expresses the intended intertextuality which has been inserted into the show by the producers and how the audience has the ability to resist the dominant message and celebrity discourse.

On Fuji Television's website, several comments mentioned that Ninomiya was *cool* in the role,

8 2-chan comments on *I will fly to the sky*: <http://toro.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/tv/1345992156/> 15th of December 2012.

9 Fuji TV comments on *A part-timer buys a house*: <http://www.fujitv.co.jp/ie-wo-kau/message/index.html> 15th of December 2012.

that his kissing scene in the special drama was cute and good¹⁰, yet otherwise most comments, both on 2-chan and Fuji TV's own website, centred on the storyline and not so much on Ninomiya's portrayal of the role or his persona. A considerable amount of 2-chan comments were made about Ninomiya being ugly (or at least not particularly handsome), and some commented on Ninomiya's character, Seiji, being way too passive and not trying hard enough. A responding commentator interestingly answered that it may just be a sign of changing contemporary society and the age of herbivorous men and carnivorous women.¹⁰

When comparing comments on *GANTZ* and *The Inner Chambers* with comments on *I will fly to the sky* and *A part timer buys a house*, it appears that it is less difficult for the audience to envision Ninomiya in a role of somewhat pitiable and "cute" passivity rather than as a complete macho character, likely due to his cute boyish looks and intertextual connections to *Johnny's Entertainment*, Arashi and the Japanese entertainment industry as a whole.

Ninomiya as a normal contemporary Japanese man does not seem to carry as many inherent discourses of manliness, and therefore not as many opinions that Ninomiya failed in the role. This perhaps also shows that contemporary Japanese masculinity has indeed changed, since Ninomiya in a modern day role appears to be easy enough for the audience to understand and relate to.

7. End discussion and concluding remarks

When asked by a CNN reporter whether the herbivore men will eventually grow out of the herbivorous lifestyle, Fukusawa responded that while some may, Japan's image of masculinity is changing nonetheless (Neill, 2009).

The "city boy" which *Pop-Eye magazine* caters to (Tanaka, 2003), the herbivore defined by Fukusawa (2006 and 2009) and the "New Man" in the Japanese idol industry described by Darling-Wolf (2004b) and Glasspool (2012) show very specific real life challenges to the dominant-hegemonic salaryman masculinity, which, as noted by Frühstück and Walthall (2011) can be considered disappearing.

The discourse analysis of Ninomiya's roles in the media points directly at specific re-articulations of hegemonic and traditional Japanese masculinities in contemporary media productions. The idol industry's thorough use of intertextuality in order to promote their top celebrities makes sure that the audience never forgets who they are watching and which values are both intertextually and directly presented to them. Ninomiya is, even when portraying traditional warrior masculinities in movies such as *GANTZ* and *The Inner Chambers*, shown as someone soft, sensitive and genuine, standing by the words and discourses of his primary profession as an Arashi idol and singer. Members of the audience reacted to this, particularly when it came to his samurai depiction which is deemed

¹⁰ 2-chan *A part-timer buys a house* comments. <http://archive.2ch-ranking.net/tvd/1293120354.html> and <http://ikura.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/natsudora/1317804681/> 15th of December 2012.

unmanly by some, but as Ninomiya himself has stated, *The Inner Chambers* should be seen as a "modern" depiction rather than a historical drama, and as such he probably did not attempt to represent a conventionally traditional or hegemonic masculinity to begin with (*Eiga.com*, 2010). The choice of Ninomiya as an actor in all of the productions has likely been a conscious one from the producers, knowingly hinting at a "New Man" identity and the large (female) fan base.

While traditional masculine elements are definitely still present in his roles, conforming partially to the hegemonic masculinity and affirming heteronormativity, Ninomiya's acting re-articulates several elements, making room for love, momentary weakness, tears, failure and a certain degree of the homosocial/homoerotic, several values that are closely intertwined with his celebrity persona and somewhat linked to aspects of the feminine herbivore man.

Kawaii culture and idol culture need to hint at something pure, innocent, detached from everyday life and adult responsibility, making it necessary for the idol to always act the part. Ninomiya is a grown man, yet still retains his boyish looks and childish innocence, translating into his productions. The cuteness and manliness gets mixed, thus not completely stripping Ninomiya of his status as a man simply due to his *kawaii* features. The image of Arashi in cute pastel coloured aprons is co-existent with the serious depictions in suits, further dislocating the presumptions about traditional masculinity and changing which actions are discursively *thinkable* for a man, eventually turning popular culture's desirable masculinity much more hybrid.

While most of the re-articulations can be seen in an incorporative light, slight changes can be identified in every production and appearance. Even if the modifications in themselves are not so terribly ground-breaking, they will likely have some effect on the hegemonic masculinities from a discursive point of view. While the presentations of traditional and alternative masculinity by a "New Man" such as Ninomiya cannot be seen as a definite change which relieves subordinate masculinities (such as the part-time working *freeter*) of their subordinate status, images of the soft man, the crying man, a man who is not so sexually aggressive and who gives priority to himself, his family and loved ones over his company, his country or boss, are becoming quite important in contemporary Japanese popular culture.

Winter-Jørgensen and Philips state that no practice is a complete copy of earlier structures; every seemingly reproductive articulation contains a small piece of change, (Winter-Jørgensen and Philips, 1999). Ninomiya certainly demonstrates several different ways of being a man, not necessarily only through his actions and words, but also through his looks, his small frame and generally boyish exterior combined with his often masculine roles and language. Choosing a "beautiful boy" to play a "real man" certainly sends mixed signals and meanings, showing a more complex and hybrid version of masculinity to the audience and, perhaps in time, providing more thinkable male identities to identify with and imagine.

Since idols are important visible personas in Japanese popular culture, their potential influence cannot be denied. Aoyagi states that "while the pop idols may not be the most talented actors on earth, their images continue to reflect and contextualize the concerns of their audience, [and] offer models of attractive lifestyles [...]" (Aoyagi, 2005: 85) If the hegemonic masculinity presents the *currently most desired way of being a man* (Connell, 1995), it is without question that idols will have a certain influence in defining the desirable. The "New Men", the herbivores, the education papas, and all the other various kinds of masculinities recently discussed in Japanese society (Fukusawa, 2009) show a need and a desire to re-articulate, describe and coin new terms for new kinds of masculinities detached from the traditional gender-divided salaryman identity; something that automatically gets reflected in the popular culture.

As Lindqvist (2004) suggests, *Johnny's Entertainment* has not always accepted the flawed *kawaii* idols, but follow the trends of the Japanese society just like all other popular idol and media producers. The Japanese idols are "life-sized" representatives of their generation, familiar personalities that inspire and catch the affections of the audience (Aoyagi, 2005). As such, values of an idol can always be said to refer directly back to the fans and the desires of contemporary society, and Ninomiya's hybridity can be said to embody a general trend within Japanese society.

Judging from the study of his productions and audiences, there is certainly no definite stable discourse present throughout Ninomiya's various appearances. The traditional manly characters that he portrays are marked by weakness and sensitivity, while his "failed" characters eventually "win" by becoming part of the larger society once more and conquering their "defects", thus incorporating them into the dominant social discourse. Ninomiya's character portrayals show a hybrid man, someone who is both strong and weak, childish and innocent, adult and mature, resistant and dominant all at once.

As with all celebrities, Ninomiya's characteristics are of course idealized and exaggerated, particularly due to the strict governance of *Johnny's Entertainment*. Ninomiya's audiences disagreed greatly on the boundaries of his masculinity, and while the concepts of *cool* and *cute* were merged to some, others deemed them mutually exclusive. Ninomiya's character portrayals show many competing and hybrid discourses, but so do the perceptions and opinions of his masculinity within the fan and anti-fan bases, showing that there is no single community agreement among the audience.

The various new and hybrid presentations of Japanese masculinities persist as an on-going challenge to and re-articulation of the hegemonic masculinity discourses in modern Japan, enabling various contesting views access to the discussion of the currently most desired way of being a man, ultimately resulting in an unstable discourse which is more open to re-definition and change.

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(The Inner Chambers)

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(A part-timer buys a house (for his family))

Kurumaisu de boku wa sora wo tobu (2012) Japan: NTV

(I will fly to the sky in my wheel chair)

GANTZ (2010) Japan: Toho, NTV, Nikkatsu

GANTZ: Perfect Answer (2011) Japan: Toho, NTV, Nikkatsu

Letters from Iwo Jima (2006) America/Japan: Warner Bros. Pictures and Dreamworks Pictures.

Director: Clint Eastwood

Attachment 1: Arashi

In accordance with the rules and regulations of copyrighted materials, the images will not be posted directly into the study.

In order to view the images, please see the following sources:

Arashi in an AU Android commercial: http://arashifcchile.blogspot.se/2011_01_01_archive.html

Accessed on 21st of January 2013.

”Ohmiya” featured in *Arashi Gekkan*: <http://photozou.jp/photo/show/1829330/123233564>

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