

West above the rest?

– Investigating the depiction of Caucasian western characters in Japanese Cinema

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Abstract

The primary aim of this thesis is to analyze and uncover stereotypes concerning Caucasian westerners among Japanese citizens. This is done by looking into recent Japanese cinema in order to analyze how Caucasian westerners are displayed in the movies in which they appear. A semiotic approach as defined by Jonathan Bignell is used in order to gather data from the selected movies, and the findings discovered in this process is analyzed using a theoretical framework primarily relying on labelling theory as defined by Erving Goffman. Upon conducting the data collection the thesis furthermore engages in a larger analysis where the way of using foreigners in Japanese cinema is compared to the way it is being done in Hollywood. Ultimately the thesis displays how the roles of foreign actors are clearly distinguished from that of Japanese actors, as well as how Caucasian western foreigners tend to be treated more favorable than minorities of other ethnicities when they appear in Japanese movies.

Keywords: *Foreigners in Japan, Nihon-jinron, Japanese cinema, Minorities, Media Semiotics, Labelling theory, Stereotypes, Discrimination.*

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Abbreviations

CRT – Critical Race Theory

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

*All Japanese names in this thesis are written in the Swedish manner with the given name preceding the surname.

1 – Introduction

1.1 Motivation for the study

When reading guidebooks about travel in Japan one thing the books tend to have in common is their admiration for Japanese hospitality. The authors stress how common it is for travelers to receive extensive assistance when in need, with locals going out of their way to lend a hand, which overall adds to a first impression of Japanese people as kind and helpful. According to Miho Iwata (2017, p. 310) this is especially prevalent for travelers of Caucasian western origin, who Iwata argues are admired due to the economic development of their countries of origin. There is however more to this reality, and upon staying in Japan for extensive periods of time Debito Arudou (2015, p. 703) claims that all foreigners are likely to face various forms of discrimination when trying to integrate in Japanese society, such as being denied housing due to their argued inability to live according to local customs. Caucasian westerners being both praised and subjected to discrimination simultaneously is a contradictory reality, which sparked my interest in the topic of these individuals in Japanese society and thus I decided to explore this topic for my Master's thesis. However, since many studies has already been conducted on the position of foreigners in Japan in general, (see Arudou, 2015, Hwang, 2016, Iwata, 2017 Ko, 2010, Kobayashi et al., 2014, Robertson, 2015, e.g) I have decided to study this topic from a new and creative angle, which hopefully can guide me to original findings about the way in which Caucasian westerners are perceived in Japan.

In the United States, there has been a long tradition for studying general attitudes towards race and ethnicity by looking at how they are portrayed in contemporary Hollywood cinema, and this approach provided me with the idea of using Japanese movies to study Caucasian westerners in Japan. Similar studies on the position of minorities in Japan has already been conducted concerning the Ryukyuan people of Okinawa as well as other Asian minorities (Ko, 2011). Yet, as no previous studies have been conducted on the position of Caucasian westerners I address a gap in the current literature thereby I aim to provide us with new knowledge on this topic. According to the World Bank (2016), the population of Japan has started to decrease since the beginning of the current decade and consequently the country has seen an increase in the demand for foreign workforce. Since this development looks to

continue the amount foreigners working in Japan is likely to grow accordingly. Such a development will no doubt also affect the way in which foreigners are perceived in Japanese society and I believe this gives my research topic contemporary relevance.

1.2 Research question

In order to understand the co-existing positive and negative ways in which Caucasian westerners are treated in contemporary Japanese society I have decided to pose the following research question: *How do recent Japanese cinema depict Caucasian westerners and how does this contribute to our understanding of the way they are treated in contemporary Japanese society?*

1.3 Disposition

In this *Introduction (1)* chapter I briefly provide some background for my thesis by presenting my interest in this topic and my research question. Furthermore, this chapter provides a definition as well as some reflections on the core concept ‘Caucasian westerners’ which I use throughout the thesis. This chapter is followed by a *Literature review (2)* in which I discuss the way in which minorities have been displayed in cinema both in America and Japan, briefly present features of Japanese cinema in general and introduce studies dealing with multiculturalism and ethnicity in Japan in general. The literature review concludes with a brief section in which I reflect on my academic contributions. In my *Method (3)* chapter, I present my academic assumptions concerning the nature of research as well display the thought-process of selecting and working with the data, hereunder presenting media semiotics as a method and discussing its relevance to the scope of this thesis. The chapter also outlines the ethical considerations and limitations I was faced with within the process of doing so. The *Theory (4)* chapter displays my construction and usage of theory as well as how I have defined it and modified it to fit the case of Japan. In this chapter I also make a definition of ‘stereotypes’, which is a central concept for this thesis due to its significance in studies dealing with ethnicity and discrimination. My *Analysis (5)* chapter show my theory being applied on my data and based on my findings I discuss how different foreigners are receiving different treatment in Japanese society based on their ethnical appearance, both amongst each other and compared to Japanese nationals. Ultimately I sum up my findings from the analysis in the *Conclusion (6)* chapter.

1.4 Defining Caucasian westerners in relation to this thesis

During the entirety of this thesis, I will continuously refer to ‘Caucasian westerners’ which is a term I have decided upon using for the sake of being brief. I am aware that this is a problematic and ambiguous term given that people from all over the world with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds can be ‘Caucasian’ and look western, yet in the scope of this thesis and for the sake of clarity I use it as a category with which I refer to subjects that I am studying. When I refer to ‘Caucasian westerners’ in this thesis, what I actually refer to is people of white, Caucasian descent originating from the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the economically advanced countries in Western Europe. My reasoning for doing so is tied to historical reasons, namely that when Japan went through its period of modernization it was from countries in Western Europe and America that it received new technological advancements meaning that these countries became closely tied with development.

Economic factors are also part of why the countries that during the cold war was part of the east bloc are not part of my definition, given that these countries for the majority of the 20th century were not economically advanced on terms with the rest of Europe and therefore failed to become associated with development (Myslinska, 2014 p. 1). This can be seen as somewhat bewildering today given that a former east bloc country such as Slovenia (\$21,650) has a higher GDP per capita than a former west bloc country such as Portugal (\$19,838) according to the World Bank (2016), but it is based on a historical idea of development I have chosen to divide in this way. Furthermore, I have decided to include Caucasian citizens of Canada, Australia and New Zealand since these countries also saw early economic development and because they are associated with high levels of education in Japan given that they, like Americans and Western Europeans, primarily take up high-skill positions when working in Japan.

Lastly when I refer to ‘Caucasian westerners’ in this thesis I refer to both men and women. Among OECD countries Japan are among the most conservative in terms of gender equality according to the UNDP (2015), and that the position of men and women in Japanese society is strictly divided and based on traditional ideas about gender according to Robert Marshall (2017, p. 274-275). Furthermore the demographic situation among Caucasian westerners living in Japan is also uneven to a large overrepresentation of male expats in Japan (Owens,

2017 p. 30).¹ There is a weakness in studying Caucasian westerners across genders on equal terms in a society where uneven gender perceptions exist. Yet, as I will display in section 5.3 men and women are both subjected to a prevailing perception as the ‘foreign’ and when analyzed primarily as a foreign subject I argue that men and women are largely subjected to the same positive and negative stereotypes in Japanese society.

In extension hereof, ‘stereotypes’ is also a term which will be used widely in this thesis but due to its varying meaning across academic fields I will introduced my usage of this term in section 4.2 of the theory chapter.

¹ As for Americans 73% are male and 27% are female.

2 - Literature review

The following chapter will introduce a background to my research topic, as well as introducing a group of relevant studies that my thesis builds upon. Given that no English language studies has previously been published dealing with the roles of Caucasian westerners in contemporary Japanese cinema, I have decided to rely on literature from a handful related research fields that I have divided into three different topics. These, which I will introduce in the following order are; minority representation in cinema in general, studies on the traditions and trends of Japanese cinema and studies about race and ethnicity in Japan. Each of these will also be preceded by a small introduction in which I display their relevance in relation to this thesis. Given that all of the movies I have analyzed are productions made within the last three decades I have also chosen to especially pay attention to newer academic publications dealing with movies. Movies are continuously changing cultural product where trends and tropes keeps developing and this means that newer articles will show better understanding of newer productions. On occasion, I will also refer to older, more influential studies, although this will primarily be in the section about studies on race and racism as well as in my theory section. All this I do with the intention of locating my own thesis in relation to the three fields that I outline.

2.1 Cinema and minorities

The first research area related to the topic of my thesis is studies on the way minorities have historically been depicted in cinema. However, since little such studies have been conducted on Japanese cinema I have decided to include studies on Hollywood as a point of reference since this is the national cinema with the most global outreach and influence according to Kristin Thompson (2010, pp. 483 & 486-487). Furthermore, the multiethnic nature of American society means that many Hollywood movies include diverse casts and that this is a topic, which have received much scholarly attention in American academia. After doing this I will introduce the few studies made about the case of Japan in order to display the academic field that my thesis aims to expand upon, as well as outline some differences in the way diversity is conveyed in Japanese popular culture compared to how it is done in Hollywood.

Beginning with the case of Hollywood, Mary Beltrán (2005 pp. 50-51) have made research suggesting improvements in Hollywood's ability to depict minorities in a diverse manner by putting a historical perspective on the representation of minorities in American movies. By doing this Beltrán have reached conclusions claiming, that while progress is still yet to be made, Hollywood cinema has improved a lot in its casting of characters of minority descent over the last few decades. Such improvements have made even further progress since the release of Beltrán's article, given that the last few years has seen the release of highly successful movies which have included a majority of characters with minority backgrounds. This is especially apparent with movies such as *Moonlight* (2016) winning three Oscars in the 2017 ceremony including 'Best motion picture of the year', and *Black Panther* (2018) becoming an immense financial success earning \$371,367,531 during its worldwide opening week according to Box Office Mojo (2018).

This trend confirms Beltrán's optimism, and since the movies Hollywood are producing merely reflects what movies the free market is interested in consuming according to Ann Arnold (2017) this trend suggests that international movie audiences have become less attentive to ethnicity when deciding upon a movies to watch. Yet, despite Arnold's argument that Hollywood productions are primarily controlled by the will of the free market, Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2016, p. 451) argues that this is only the case to a certain extent and that Hollywood does have some freedom to pursue diversity. Her reason for arguing so is by comparing Hollywood productions to American TV productions and displaying how the TV productions, which are also made with commercial targets in mind, have been significantly more successful than Hollywood in incorporating more ethnic and gender diversity while remaining popular.

Yet, despite TV productions and a few Hollywood movies having proven that movies with central minority characters can be economically successful, problems persist in terms of breaking down the stereotypical roles that people of certain ethnicities historically have been confined to. This is for example the case with characters of authority that act based on their knowledge, who are still likely to be played by a white actor while a character who acts more based on emotions still tend to be played by an actor of minority descent (Smith, 2013 p. 792). In extension hereof Tom Pollard (2017 pp. 141-143) has shown how Asians in Hollywood movies are largely confined to specific roles, such as the exotic geisha, the yellow peril posing a threat to American society or Kung-Fu experts who despite being

skilled at his trait is bound to be defeated by a Caucasian hero. Pollard furthermore displays how Hollywood has a tradition for casting Caucasian instead of Asian actors in roles where they play a character of Asian origins, recent examples being Emma Stone in *Aloha* (2015) & Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) (Ibid. p. 141). Hollywood and American society thereby still have issues to address, and because of the global outreach of Hollywood, cinematic trends and ethnicity tropes popularized in America are likely to spread across the world. Nevertheless, if Hollywood's ethnic stereotypes have also spread to Japanese cinema has yet to be studied thus far.

Mika Ko has however looked into how different minorities of Asian origin has been portrayed in Japanese movies. In her extensive work she explores the depiction of both Zainichi Koreans, Okinawans and ethnic Chinese people in Japanese cinema and concludes that while their portrayals are not necessarily xenophobic, they are clearly separated and distinguished from the ethnic Japanese characters. This is a curious finding given that many of these characters, based on their appearance alone, easily could pass as being ethnic Japanese, but instead of allowing them to blend in, their claimed cultural differences are further emphasized with the intention of putting them in contrast to their Japanese counterparts (Ko, 2010 pp. 60-62).

Another study that further supports this is Wes Robertson's look at the role of foreigners in popular manga series and how these characters are being made distinguishable from their Japanese counterparts. Also using a semiotic approach Robertson documents how foreign characters are seen to be talking in katakana instead of hiragana when the author is emphasizing their incorrect way of pronouncing things in Japanese.² This is also done by making these characters express the wrong kanjis even when using the correct word, or by making them use hiragana in instances where kanji would have been more appropriate (Robertson, 2015 pp. 213-217).³

This leaves us with a notable difference between the American and the Japanese way of displaying minorities in their respective movies. Recent Hollywood movies such as *Black Panther* has shown that putting minorities in leading roles does not need to be an obstacle for commercial success and thereby a minority actor can be cast in the role of the hero, a role

² The two alphabets of the Japanese language.

³ The originally Chinese signs, which today are also used to write Japanese.

which historically have been reserved for white actors. Despite white washing still being a big issue in Hollywood as argued by Pollard (2017 pp. 141-143) this shows that majority and minority characters sometimes can be cast in similar roles. In Japan however, there exist another method to casting where certain roles are designated for characters of certain ethnicities. Foreigners are not cast in roles that could have been taken by a Japanese actor thereby blending into society, but instead take up roles that due to the script needs to be performed by non-Japanese actors.

This difference in cinematic approach in terms of the way minority characters are used has guided my in making my initial hypothesis since this is a case where a popular cultural outlet is making a clear distinction between Japanese and minority characters.

2.2 Japanese cinema

In this section I introduce some background knowledge about Japanese cinema in order to display the significance of the national cinema landscape. Furthermore, I reflect on the similarities and differences between Japan and Hollywood cinema, given that I in my previous section (2.1) established Hollywood as a point of reference for studies on how minorities are represented in cinema.

Due to its size and national importance, Japanese cinema has been the object of study for countless movie scholars. The cinema scene in Japan is particularly notable due to its efficiency in having a national cinema capable of competing with and even exceeding the Hollywood studios in terms of sold tickets, with the Toho production company alone selling every third ticket according to UNESCO (2013) statistics.

Up until the end of the Second World War, the national cinema had been primarily producing the jidaigeki (時代劇) genre films as well as samurai movies, most of which were silent even after the early 1930's where silent movies became largely replaced in the west (Thompson, 2010 p. 171).⁴ However, in the years hereafter Japanese cinema grew in both scope and artistic variety, which led movies of this period to receive international praise with directors such as Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu & Kenji Mizoguchi claiming international awards and reaching art-cinemagoers around the world. Japanese cinema's first

⁴ Jidaigeki is a certain genre of Japanese cinema where the movies are set in the Edo period of Japanese history. The stories herein centers on ordinary citizens of no novelty.

breakthrough to a mainstream audience came in 1954 when *Godzilla* became an international recognizable icon and a commercial goldmine for Toho. An astonishing 32 movies has since been made about the iconic monster, three of them in Hollywood. This has led scholars to refer to the period leading up to 1960 as the golden age of Japanese cinema (Tezuka, 2012 p. 25). Yet, latter eras has also seen their international hits such as the horror movies of the 1990's & 2000's and the Studio Ghibli led animation craze also beginning in the early 1990's and still being popular to this day (Thompson, 2010 p. 636).

Yoshiharu Tezuka argues that the last three decades has seen an additional Internationalization of Japanese cinema. Not only was this sparked by SONY's acquisition of Columbia Pictures in 1989 which let to one of the world's biggest film studios suddenly having Japanese owners, it also became apparent with an increasing amount of Japanese and Western co-productions some of which became world-wide commercial hits. Other less successful co-productions have also been made, but what is important is that the increase in international co-production, also between Japan and other Asian countries, has led to a further internationalization of the national cinema landscape (Tezuka, 2012 p. 114).

Despite a further internationalization of Japanese cinema, the national cinema scene also has some cinematic stylistic tendencies that are defining for the country's approach to making movies. When reading about the history of Japanese cinema one is likely to come across descriptions such as 'traditional Japanese aesthetics' referring to the way in which Japanese movies stand out from their contemporary counterparts. What is commonly meant by this is the way in which directors Ozu, Mizoguchi & Mikio Naruse, among others, were rethinking contemporary cinema by reshaping typical narratives and creating minimalistic dramas about small points of friction between normal people. Action and dramatic conversations are set aside in favor of casual conversations in which the directors present their audiences with long still camera shots to give focus to the few central characters and their thoughts (Thompson, 2010 pp. 170-171). Starting from the 1950's this type of movies became associated with Japanese cinema, and while similar movies were also being made abroad, they were here confined to a much smaller and more elitist audience whereas they in Japan enjoyed mass appeal. Furthermore, this certain stylistic approach to movies lives on in contemporary Japanese cinema where directors such as Naoko Oigami, Mika Ohmori & most notably Hirokazu Koreeda have made slow-paced dramas surrounding somewhat ordinary people in relatable day-to-day struggles (Iles, 2008 pp. 101-103).

Another good example outlining a difference in Japanese and Hollywood cinema is in what is considered movies of high standards. According to the Japan Times (2018) Japanese critics have a long tradition of hailing the movies made by Clint Eastwood despite of how they were received in the US. Whereas Eastwood also managed to achieve high acclaim in Hollywood for hits such as *Million Dollar Baby* 2004 and *Gran Torino* 2008, he also directed several movies, which found no such success. In Japan on the other hand 13 of his last 14 movies have found their way to the yearly top ten movies poll in Kinema Junpo, one of Japans most respected film magazines. This finding emphasizes a central variance in the way movies are valued in Japan different from in Hollywood.

These differences in the way movies are both being produced and valued in Japan compared to the US have been part of giving me my initial interest in the topic of this thesis, since the existing academic works suggest that differences are also to be found in the way foreign characters are being used and framed.

2.3 Multiculturalism and ethnicity in Japan

In the last section of my literature review, I will introduce studies on minorities in Japan in general. Since the overall aim of my thesis is to provide new information on this topic it is important to establish what findings other scholars have reached on this issue as well as getting an understanding of the depiction of Caucasian westerners that I am likely to come across while analyzing Japanese movies.

The eagerness to separate ethnic Japanese people from people of other Asian origins in Japanese cultural products is according to Ko tied to a, especially among conservatives forces, prevalent belief that ethnically Japanese people share a cultural uniqueness that does not share ties with other nations and thereby is something that is inherited more than learned (Ko, 2010 pp. 17-18). This belief, in Japanese referred to as Nihon-jinron (日本人論), has also been part of deciding Japanese national policies towards immigration, where it has historically has been close to impossible for residents without Japanese ancestors to obtain citizenship. Furthermore, the scarce amount of immigrants who have been able to receive citizenships, such as the Brazilians with ancestors of Japanese origin, have been facing discrimination upon “returning” to Japan due to their inability to speak Japanese without a foreign accent (Hwang, 2016 p. 711).

This unwelcoming sentiment shown by certain Japanese citizens towards newcomers demonstrates that there is still not full acceptance of people who are not of Japanese origins. Yet, is this negative sentiment more prevalent when it comes to certain foreigners? My interest in researching this topic comes from an idea that some foreign residents in Japan perceived more positively than others and in existing academic works, it has already been documented that for example Korean immigrants are preferred over their Chinese counterparts (Kobayashi, 2014 p. 13). This phenomenon has been shown to exist to an even larger extent when the immigrants have been of different ethnicities. As an example, this is visible in the nationwide English language schools where teachers from ‘native English’ countries are being valued as superior to English speakers from majority non-white countries where languages besides English are also widely spoken, such as the Philippines, India and a handful of African countries (Owens, 2017 p. 30).

This claim is further supported by Miho Iwata’s (2017) findings, which suggest that a racial hierarchy, based on the economic development of the nation state from which the given foreigner is comes, does indeed exist. Iwata goes on to argue that this racial hierarchy is further imposed by the way Japan has structured its system of foreign workers. Whereas Caucasian westerners are mainly recruited for white collar positions such as in global companies or as teachers, people from developing countries, mainly in South East Asia, are hired for the low-skill blue collar work that Japanese citizens themselves are not interested in doing (Iwata, 2017 p. 309). The current system is thereby reinforcing the racial hierarchy already in place, but Iwata furthermore claims that over-representation of high-skill workers from white developed countries have been part of developing a Japanese society where they are understood as being superior to even Japanese citizens themselves (Ibid. 2017 p. 310). Dagmar R. Myslinska (2014) takes this claim further and argues, that the historical relationship, which Japan has shared with the West has been part of creating this situation. When Japan went through the process of modernization, Caucasian westerners became associated with modernity, technological development and power and to advance therefore also became tied to a westernization (Mylinska, 2014 p. 1).

However, the position of Caucasian westerners in Japan remain a contradictory one, given that positive and negative stereotypes regarding this group of people co-exist, both working

to define them in contrast to Japanese nationals.⁵ This is in contrast to foreigners of other ethnicities who inhabit underprivileged positions in Japanese society by being subjected to a larger amount of negative stereotypes while not enjoying the privileged position Caucasian westerners sometimes do (Owens, 2017 p. 30). Caucasian westerners are enjoying small benefits such as being allowed into nightlife venues by skipping the line or without paying the same fees as Japanese citizens or being forgiven cultural missteps for which Japanese people would have received criticism. Yet, simultaneously they are faced with discriminating behavior, for example by not being allowed to rent apartments or by something as simple as people avoiding to sit next to them in public transportation (Debnár, 2016 p. 151). Businesses taking 'Japanese customers only' also still exist despite being criticized by NGO's and social activists such as the American born, now Japanese citizen, Debito Arudou who was refused entrance at bathhouses in Hokkaido with his also Japanese children (Arudou, 2015, p. 703). On top of that, international NGO's and the UN OHCHR has for decades criticized Japan for failing to implement laws against discrimination, and while 2016 saw the first law being passed to prevent hate-speech against Zainichi Koreans, more broad policies are still lacking (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Myslinska (2014, p. 5) argues that this failure to address ethnic discrimination has its roots in the concept of Nihon-jinron introduced in earlier in this section. Despite the fact that this idea has been proven to be socially constructed and rooted in myths it is still accepted among many Japanese and acts as a divider that separates and defines what is Japanese in opposition to the 'other' which consequently becomes non-Japanese (Debnár. 2016 pp. 147-148). The general position of foreigners in Japan is also best understood when using the idea of Japanese uniqueness. This is because there is a prevailing consensus that to be Japanese, one also has to look Japanese and be able to speak the language without a foreign dialect, meaning that foreigners are seen as 'temporary guests' in the country no matter if they have lived there for decades and established their families there (Ibid., 2016 pp. 147-150). Essentially this means that Japan is a state where citizens are defined by their appearance and no matter where a given foreigner is from, he or she will always be seen as a temporary

⁵ The term 'othering' is here used in accordance with a definition made by Edward Said where members in a group define themselves in opposition to another group of people by emphasizing differences. (Gregory, 2004, p. 24)

guest because the requirements for being Japanese can never be acquired even through successful integration.

It is from this contradictory reality that I draw a central hypothesis for my thesis, namely that a glorification of Caucasian westerners do indeed exist in contemporary Japanese society but that this admiration exist simultaneously with discriminatory behavior stemming from a hegemonic idea that foreigners cannot adapt to Japanese society.

2.4 Literature gap

Based on my literature review I have now identified a gap in the literature, which I can explore. The position of Caucasian westerners in Japanese society has already been studied by several scholars, but none have done it using media semiotics to study movies as I will do in this thesis. In doing this I rely on other existing studies similar to mine such as Ko's study of the position of other minorities in Japanese society using movies and Robertson's study on the appearance of foreigners in Manga. Upon exploring this gap I hope to become able to add to our existing knowledge concerning how Caucasian westerners are perceived in Japanese society.

3 – Method

In the following chapter I display how I have collected, analyzed and gathered the sample pool of movies that I use in my thesis. After initially outlining my epistemological and ontological standpoints, I introduce the focus of my research and explain why I have chosen media semiotics as my method to analyze movies over other relevant methods. In this chapter I also give a clarification on the way in which I have decided upon what movies to study as opposed to other movies and additional cultural products. Finally, I touch upon the ethical considerations concerning the thesis as well as reflect on its various limitations.

3.1 Epistemology

Epistemological considerations are surrounding the issue of whether or not we should conduct social sciences according to the academic standards of natural sciences. Therefore, epistemology is concerned with what information we can define as acceptable knowledge and how to obtain and interpret this. According to Alan Bryman (2012, p. 27) two major epistemological stances exist, namely positivism and interpretivism. For my thesis I adopt an interpretivist approach meaning that my conclusions are derived from my personal interpretation of the data I use. In opposition to positivism, this approach rejects the idea that absolute facts and universal laws exist in social sciences and instead argues that knowledge will always be based on the person perceiving. Furthermore, the interpretivist approach claims that since the world is ever changing so will the observable realities, meaning that the information we gather should be seen as perceived realities instead of facts (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe et al. 1991).

This approach is compatible with the semiotic method applied in this thesis, given that this method relies primarily on the researcher's subjective ability to decode and understand signs. Another researcher would be capable of exactly replicating this study but the observer cannot extract him- or herself from personal experiences, which are certain to determine focus areas and interpretations, and thereby create unique end results as a product hereof.

3.2 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the question of 'What is there?' and here also Bryman (2012 p. 32) defines two central positions prevalent in answering this question, namely objectivism

and constructionism. In my research I take the constructionist ontological standpoint since I view social phenomenon as something which is continuously being constructed and revised meaning that it does not have an independent existence separate from its actors such as an advocate of the positivist ontological standpoint would claim.

From a ontological standpoint language itself is also a construction that has been created through human interactions and language works as a conceptual tool that help us understand the world around us (Ibid. p. 34). This aligns well with semiotics as a method and, as I will explain later while introducing the method, this approach also has its origins in the analysis of language and how we perceive the world based on the limitations of the language we use to refer to it, as argued by Ferdinand de Saussure (Bignell, 2002 pp. 11-12).

3.3 Research focus

Since I am interested in researching what stereotypes about Caucasian westerners exist in contemporary Japanese society, many types of research could provide information to try and uncover such a broad topic. Yet, I have chosen to do so by looking at Japanese popular culture because this is a product that aims to reach out to the largest possible audience. Consequently, the people in charge of creating this content will try to make a product that consumers will receive positively and thereby rely on ideas that a hegemonic acceptable (Arnold, 2017). Therefore I argue, that even though movies are not spotlessly representative for how society is in reality given that they are exaggerating drama to an unrealistic extent, movies are still very useful in giving us an impression about common values and ideas in the society that they have been produced within. The data I use are therefore mainly primary sources, but I also make use of secondary sources such as academic articles to gain information about Japanese society. Using movies for gaining information about a society does also have some limitations, which I touch upon in section 3.7 at the end of this chapter.

3.4 Method: Media semiotics

I now move on to talk about the process of ‘mining’ information from the data (movies) that I have chosen. To do this I will make use of semiotics, which Bryman (2012 p. 559) defines as “*an approach to the analysis of symbols in everyday life*”. Semiotics as a method is the study of signs as a way of communication, meaning that images or other sign-bearing objects are studied with the intention of uncovering the signified meanings they convey. As

in the case of the movies that I study, this means that I will investigate non-verbal information being conveyed about the Caucasian western characters that appear.

Semiotics as the method we know today has its origin in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure whose ideas concerning using semiology to analyze linguistics paved way for a new approach to studying literature where symbolisms and metaphors became the central object of the analyzer. By dividing the sign into a signifier and the thing being signified, Saussure made it visible how language influences the way people grasp a concept. Saussure himself gives the example that in English hearing the two words 'sheep' & 'mutton' will give the listener two different associations. However, in French these two words with separate meanings are collected in the single word 'mouton' that will consequently alter the signified concept to the listener (Bignell, 2002 p. 12).

In 1958 Charles S. Peirce was the first to take the semiotic approach and use it to analyze non-verbal signifiers thereby further developing Saussure's thoughts. In his writings, Peirce illustrated how not only texts but also the entire world we inhabit is crowded with non-verbal signs that signify meaning to their audiences. These span everything from dress codes to traffic signals as well as the given pictures chosen to accommodate a news story in television or written press (Ibid. 2002 pp. 14-15).

When applying this to movies, media theorist Christian Metz argues that movies possess unique signifiers that differs from other art forms given that it is the only art form to transmit both sound, vision and movement to an audience separated in time and space from the actual performers. While this arguably has become false after the writings of Metz with the introduction of new media outlets such as videogames, this still provides the film-media with a limited exclusiveness where movies can provide its audiences with signifiers that are unavailable in other forms of art (Ibid. 2002 pp. 184-185).

What this means in relation to the movies I aim to study is that I will look in-depth at the cinematic character signifiers, which the production team has left consciously or unconsciously in their product. Jonathan Bignell (2002 pp. 190-194) emphasizes certain elements of a movie that he claims are important in terms of what a director is trying to express about the given characters. These include camera movements that can be revealing for the characters relationship or power-relation in a scene as well as the way music and sound is being used to give us implications about what the given characters are thinking or

feeling. As Bignell displays the viable methods with which to analyze movies are plenty, but since the aim of my thesis is to look at how Caucasian westerners are displayed in Japanese cinema I will exclusively use semiotics to analyze how these characters are distinguished from their Japanese and other foreign counterparts. To do this, central points for analysis will be looking into what types of roles Caucasian westerners are cast in and how the Caucasian western characters relates to both Japanese and other foreign characters in terms of hierarchy and power relations. According to Bignell (Ibid.) this diversity in different things to study is also an advantage cinema holds over literature when using semiotics. Whereas literature is tied to an established set of rules that makes up a language and thereby becomes meaningful to the given reader, movies are freer in their possibilities for artistic expression and the director has a seemingly endless amount of ways in which he or she can transmit implications to the audience. In section 5.1 of my analysis, I will expand on these implications when analyzing how cinematic instruments are used to frame characters in a positive or negative manner.

Using this vast array of signifiers, I will become able to analyze the thought process behind displaying foreigners in a certain way. I believe this will help me uncover ethnical stereotypes that are not necessarily outspoken and help me in creating important sub-questions that can assist me in answering my central research question. Here I refer to questions such as, is there a specific pattern in the way foreigners in Japanese movies dress/appear? Or, is it somehow implied that Caucasian westerners have a different position than other foreigners in Japanese society?

This is also what I see as the big advantage that using semiotics in my thesis has over other means of data collection such as hermeneutics or qualitative content analysis. Hermeneutics are primarily focused on the history and experience of a few key individuals. Thereby in using this method there is a risk that the scholar will fail to see general structural trends that persist in society if these certain individuals are not representative of the given ideas (Bryman, 2012 pp. 560-561). Qualitative content analysis would also be a viable option for my thesis given that I by using this method would be able to search for general themes and patterns in the movies and reflect back and forth based on these (Ibid. 2013 pp. 557-559). Yet, when looking at movies I still believe semiotics holds an advantage over qualitative content analysis because of its attention to minor details as therefore its possibility to explore

the little indicators that qualitative content analysis would perhaps overlook due to its focus on more central themes.

3.5 Choice of data

To structure the data I use for my analysis I have made certain requirements to reach a both diverse but also feasible amount of movies to analyze using semiotics, the first being that for the movies to be considered Japanese the director or distributing organ in charge has to be a from Japan. In addition, I acknowledge that looking at various other Japanese cultural products besides just movies would provide me with further insight about how these products frame Caucasian westerners. Yet, instead of broadening the scope of this thesis, I have decided to focus exclusively on movies with the intention of making more focused conclusions, although they might be smaller in scope. As for the movies, I will only look Japanese feature films, which means that other movie-types such as animation (anime), short-films and series will not be analyzed in my thesis work. This I also do for the sake of maintaining limited focus.

In extension hereof I have also decided to exclude art cinema given that movies in this genre are not produced with the same commercial initiatives in mind as regular commercial productions. Art cinema often relies financially on a national film institute in order to provide the director with the creative freedom to produce a work of his or her choice, not necessarily representative for the society that they are produced within. Defining whether or not a given movie is ‘art cinema’ is not always straight-forward and therefore, in order to establish a way in which it is possible to include or exclude movies, I have based my definition of ‘art cinema’ on the Oxford dictionary of film studies, where it is defined as; *(...) aesthetic properties (including narrative/narration that is loose, episodic, elliptical, and lacking in closure; with image and sound taking precedence over plot) that are usually attributed to the artistic vision of the director (...)* (Kuhn et al., 2012).

Lastly I have decided that the movies I study shall be less than 30 years old. This timeframe is set because I intend to make conclusions about contemporary Japanese society and although I am aware, that Japanese society of thirty years ago is not the same as it is today, a society as such is an ever-developing entity, which will never be entirely the same in a historical perspective. This given period is instead based on the fact that the late 1980’s and

early 1990's saw some major developments in the national movie industry with SONY acquiring Columbia, one of the biggest film studios in the world, and with the beginning of Japan claiming international acclaim particularly for movies in the horror and animation genres (Tezuka, 2012 p. 145).

After establishing this framework for my field of study I began searching for all the movies that met my criteria. To do this I have used internet movie databases such as IMDB.com & Asianwiki.com where I have looked for western names in the cast lists. Furthermore I have made use of my Japanese network from which I have gained recommendations for movies with foreign characters and lastly I have made use of a few books on Japanese cinema in general. Yet, given that Japan is a much more heterogeneous country than its western economically developed counterparts the amount of movies with ethnically diverse casts turned out to be lower than I initially expected and much lower on average than it is the case for western movies made in the same period.

The movies I have based my analysis on are listed below in chronological order after initial premiere:

- *Rhapsody in August (Hachi-gatsu no rapusodi)*, Akira Kurosawa, MGM and Scochiku (1991).
- *Swallowtail Butterfly, (Suwarouteiru)*, Shunji Iwai, Rockwell Eyes (1996).
- *Dr. Akagi (Kanzou-sensei)*, Shohei Imamura, Studio Canal (1998).
- *Brother*, Takeshi Kitano, Shochiku (2000).
- *Between Calmness and Passion, (Reisei to jounetsu no aida)*, Isamu Nakae, Toho (2001)
- *Hotel Hibiscus, (Hoteru Haibisukasu)*, Yuji Nakae, Cinequanon (2002).
- *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World, (Sekai no chuushin de, ai wo sakebu)*, Isao Yukisada, Toho (2004).
- *Arch Angels (Warau Mikaeru)*, Issei Oda, Albatros (2006)
- *Kamome Diner (Kamome shokudou)*, Naoko Ogigami, Nippon Television Network (2006).
- *The Ode to Joy (Baruto no gakuen)*, Masanobu Deme, Toei (2006).
- *Sukiyaki Western Django (Sukiyaki wesutan jango)*, Takashi Miike, First Look Studios (2007).
- *Honokaa Boy (Honokaa Boi)*, Atsushi Sanada, Toho (2009).
- *Pool (Puru)*, Mika Ohmori, Nippon Television Network (2009).
- *Memories of a teenage amnesiac (Dareka ga watashi ni kisu wo shita)*, Hans Canosa, Toei (2010).
- *My Darling is a Foreigner (Darin wa gaikokujin)*, Kazuaki Ue, Toho (2010).

- *Joker Game (Joka gemu)*, Yu Irie, Toho (2015).
- *My Uncle (Boku no ojisan)*, Nobuhiro Yamashita, Toei (2016).

These choices concerning my data has left me with a sample of 17 movies to study. This sample of movies have broad diversity with all of them being made by separate directors from world famous names such as Akira Kurosawa, Takeshi Kitano & Takashi Miike to directors of little fame even in Japan. The genres are also diverse with both dramas, love-stories, action, family movies, comedy and thrillers being present. This diversity is important to get a broad understanding of Japanese cinema, which will ultimately give a broader understanding of how Caucasian westerners are framed across genres.

3.6 Ethical considerations

An immediate challenge which is general for many researchers doing fieldwork in Asia is the one of language and culture, which can prevent the researcher from obtaining information that would have been accessible with a sufficient cultural and linguistic understanding. By now, I have been studying Japanese on my own for about two and a half year, but I would still not be able to watch a regular feature film without subtitles and therefore my linguistic barrier still has to be noted.

Given that the data I use in my thesis will be mostly primary sources except existing scholarly work, my ethical considerations will have less to do with the respect of the rights of key individuals and more with general ethical thoughts to be aware of (Sultana, 2007 p. 375). I have made sure that the initial design of my study is intended to benefit public good in society by contributing with new knowledge about discriminating behavior in Japan. Furthermore I have made sure that while conducting this study I have caused now harm to the people assisting me. On the contrary I hope that the findings that I will make can play a part in a larger debate that hopefully can develop Japanese society in a manner where ethical discrimination is becoming an increasingly rare and unaccepted phenomenon.

3.7 Limitations to research

One limitation to my research is in the nature of using movies to make assumptions about society. As noted in section 2.1 movies are products that aims to reach out to the largest possible audience. Consequently, the people in charge of creating this content will try to create a product that consumers are unlikely to get offended over and this will accordingly

make them stick to ideas that the society around them deem to be acceptable. However, this nature as a product for entertainment means that movies make use of character tropes that display certain characters to an exaggerated extent and the movies should therefore never be interpreted as just reflections of real life society. Still I argue that movies are useful in giving us an impression about general values and ideas in the society that they have been produced within. This argument is strengthened by the fact that popular movies and cult movies alike are able to wield a soft power in society by affecting the way in which people interact and by creating sub-cultures where fans of given movies can share their thoughts on it.

Another weakness in my research is that I am aware of other Japanese movies with western characters that I have been unable to include since they did not include English subtitles. As previously stated I have some knowledge of the Japanese language, but my current level makes it impossible for me to understand the linguistic nuances and I have therefore decided on leave out the movies I discovered with no English subtitles. These consist of *H Story*, (2001), *Hospitalite (Kantai)*, (2011), *Sayonara (Sayounara)*, 2015 and *Oh Lucy!*, (2018) of which the latter was released during the writing process of this thesis. In extension hereof I assume that there exist more movies with western characters that I might have overlooked during my search, and as I have previously noted I believe that studies including other types of cultural products can further improve our understanding of the position of Caucasian westerners in contemporary Japan.

4 – Theory

In the following chapter I introduce my own theoretical framework for this thesis by borrowing from two established theories, namely and labelling theory and critical race theory (henceforth CRT). Initially I present the two theories before displaying their relevance to the case of Japan as well as operationalize the concept of stereotypes that is central in labelling theory and is used throughout this thesis. Lastly I show how using ideas from these theories provides my thesis with advantages that other theories lack. However, I start by introducing labelling theory as this is the central theory from which I draw my theoretical framework.

4.1 Labelling theory

Labelling theory has its origins in the works of Émile Durkheim who documented how criminal behavior is not only an infringement of the laws in a given society but also a violation of the norms in society. Thereby Durkheim argues, that the punishment of the deviant behavior is done in order to satisfy society's need for standardized conduct among its subjects (Allan, 2005, p. 123). This idea was developed into the field of sociology in the 1930's by George Herbert Mead who expanded on Durkheim's ideas by arguing that our individuality is composed by a self-image that is constructed by the way we think other people perceive us. According to Mead we thereby label people who we perceive as sticking out from the norms (Macionis, 2011, p. 107).

In the 1960's Erving Goffman further developed the idea of labelling theory into the definition used in this thesis. (Goffman, 1963, p. 81). Goffman describes labelling theory as the 'tendencies of majorities' where the bigger group in a society creates negative labelling to address the behavior of minority groups and thereby creating stereotypes about these. The majority does so by establishing what is considered normal behavior in both legal and non-legal terms, and the individuals who deviate from these norms can thereby be classified and ultimately discriminated against. 'Labelling' of other people thus serves as a way in which society defines hegemonic cultural norms and values by creating boundaries separating acceptable and unacceptable behavior. What is important when labelling theory is being used in this thesis is therefore not the deviant behavior itself, but how Japanese society perceives and responds to deviant behavior and ultimately labels it (Ibid.). This theory holds relevance in the case of Japan, given that the Japanese society has created various stereotypes about

Caucasian westerners as shown by Debito Arudou (2015, p. 720). Since the formation of stereotypes is central to this theory I will now elaborate on my operationalization of this concept.

4.2 Defining stereotypes

In the Oxford dictionary (2018) stereotypes are defined as; “*A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing*”, but in academic fields within social sciences increasingly elaborate explanations of the term exist. From a sociological approach stereotypes relates only to social groups and it sees the stereotypes as derogatory generalizations attributed to certain groups that are always incorrect and reflective of the stereotyping actors prejudices (Adorno et al., 1950). What this means in practical terms is that ethnic minority who has historically been subjected to negative stereotypes continue to be so because the majority creating these stereotypes can maintain their societal benefits by doing so (Steel, 1995, pp. 808-809). Yet, while this definition is perhaps useful in some instances I have chosen to not use it in the scope of this thesis given that it does not take stereotypes that are grounded in reality into account. While some stereotypes are degrading and inaccurate, a common stereotype in Japanese society such as “Caucasian westerners are tall” is fair given that their average height of Caucasian westerners is indeed above the Japanese median.

Another definition is rooted in an economic approach to social sciences and here stereotyping is seen as discrimination through statistics (Arrow, 1973). This means that statistics concerning for example the level of education or criminality rates among people of different ethnicities are creating stereotypes in society. As an example, if Japanese employers have adverse beliefs concerning the skill of minority workers, Japanese society will continue to attract primarily minority workers with little education thereby fulfilling the prior belief. However, what this definition fails to take into account is that many stereotypes are inaccurate and therefore will not be able to fulfill themselves. In the case of Japan such a stereotype could be that “Caucasian westerners do not understand any Japanese” which ultimately does not change the fact that many Caucasian westerners living permanently in Japan in reality do.

This brings me to the ‘stereotype’ definition originating in social psychology, which I have decided to operationalize in this thesis. Here Hilton & Hippel (1996, pp. 240-241) defines stereotypes as the imagined ideas of difference among groups made in order to easily understand other groups, which are used routinely in day to day life thus becoming generally accepted. Thereby stereotypes becomes tied to the factors that most easily distinguish a group from the perceiving part, as well as factors that show little variation within the given group. According to Hilton & Hippel stereotypes are thus based on some form of empirical reality, but they are highly selective given that they surround the factors that most clearly distinguishes one group from others. Furthermore stereotypes are in most cases subjected to exaggerations of these empirical differences. What this means in practical terms is that stereotypes are creating generalizations about individuals belonging to a certain group. As an example of this, just because some Caucasian westerners in Japan has the characteristic of being unable to use chopsticks it is not the case that all individuals in this group are unable to do so (Ibid.).

This definition suits the case of Japan well, given that positive and negative stereotypes about Caucasian westerners coexist, but both are often based on exaggerations of reality. Such stereotypes are also directly reflecting how Caucasian westerners are treated in Japanese society, an example hereof being that the stereotype ‘Caucasian westerners do not understand any Japanese’ results in Caucasian westerners being addressed in English, even when they display some familiarity with the Japanese language.

4.3 Critical race theory

This leads me to CRT which has its roots in the works of the African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois whose ethnographic studies on African-Americans in Philadelphia laid the basis for his claim that the ‘race idea’ is a central thought when studying society and history which is defining for the way in which we construct narratives. One of his most well-known theoretical ideas is the thought of a veil that acts a border separating races. This veil can be seen through, meaning that people of different ethnicities can interact with each other but they can never end up in the same ‘room/space’ (Ritzer, 2010 p. 206). Some of his thoughts are also visible in the works of Edward Said who argues that the West has been looking at foreign nations through a lens in which constructed and historically rooted ideas about other countries and cultures have been defining the way we think about ‘people of the orient’.

What this essentially means is that people of non-western countries never have been allowed to themselves define what they are and what they represent, because the West has been in charge of doing that for them since the beginning of colonialism (Windschuttle, 1999).

Du Bois' work was later developed by other academics and especially in the field of law it was used to address a need, given that civil right movement had lost its drive and thereby CRT came to works as a tool to address judicial racial inequalities. Later however, the theory also found its way into sociology tied to the belief that race is a constructed reality, which is created and demarcated by 'hegemonic conceptions', as defined by Antonio Gramsci, made by groups of people who gain from these existing (Ritzer, 2010 pp. 653 & 657). The idea of race as a constructed reality holds significant relevance to my theory but as I will display now CRT has some other features that makes it a poor fit for the scope of this thesis.

A central feature of CRT is as just stated that it was developed as postmodernist theory to fight against racial inequality, especially in the case of institutionalized white supremacy in the US. The theory thereby is not striving for neutrality and is not used to address stereotypes regarding Caucasian westerners, since this is the group of people who historically have been establishing such racial stereotypes globally. This is also why the theory's usage on the case of Japan in existing academic works have been in order to address the inequality which Japan indigenous minority people or Zainichi are facing and not in regards to Caucasian westerners (see for example Arudou, 2015 or Levin & Richardson, 2008).⁶ My own position as a Caucasian Scandinavian male thereby makes me incapable of using CRT given that I am not part of the struggle for equality such as the proponents of the theory are.

4.4 Changing ideas of foreigners in Japan

This social-constructivist approach of CRT does however correlate well with the case of Japan, where scholars such as Mika Ko (2011, pp. 12-14) have outlined how a general Japanese perception of foreigners in relation to Japanese people themselves have changed several times since the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Ko argues that when the Meiji government started their modernizing project of developing Japan into a unified nation-state they realized that they needed an ideology to assist them in pursuing this aim. Thus, the idea of Japan's racial homogeneity was constructed as a mean

⁶ Zainichi is the Japanese term for people of Korean heritage living in Japan.

to establish a sense of unity and despite the presence of ethnically different minority groups such as the Okinawans and Ainu people it worked as a foundation for the Meiji state. However, with the annexation of Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910, the idea of racial homogeneity was no longer valid and to accommodate Japan's expansions and consequently new views on the Japanese state and the position of foreigners within it were re-developed. The central unifying factor of the state became the obedience to the emperor as a leading figure and diversity was therefore embraced based on the idea that the emperor was able to lead people of all origins. While this did not mean that discrimination and oppression of minorities ceased in the pre-war period it still displays how the perception of foreigners in Japan was constructed in order to pursue given political agenda. This is further emphasized by the fact that Japan after its defeat in the Second World War and subsequent loss of its colonies, once again changed the idea about Japan as a nation. The 'imperial' as a unifying force had negative associations to Japanese militarism and Japan was now to be a peaceful democratic country. Therefore, in the years following the war and in the beginning of the country's economic rehabilitation, the idea of a shared culture and ethnicity was re-introduced and popularized by both right and left wing intellectuals (Ibid.).

Ko's historical perspective on the perception of ethnical minorities in Japan clearly illustrates how race and ethnicity are constructed concepts used in order to pursue political agendas and therefore this aspect of CRT holds relevance for my thesis.

4.5 Othering

Another theory that holds relevance for this thesis is that of 'othering' as defined by Edward Said (Gregory, 2004, p. 24) which I touched briefly upon in section 2.3 of my literature review. Said describes the practice of 'othering' as an act in which people establish their own identity as a group through emphasizing what separates them from 'other' people outside this group. The 'other' can thereby be people of another nationality but it can also be something as simple as people supporting another football team or people with another hair color. Using this in terms of theory means that the focus of the analysis will be on the way one group distinguishes itself from others. In the scope of this thesis however, I believe that 'othering' is not as suited a theory as the framework I apply. This is due to the way 'othering' splits people up in only two distinct groups that you are either part of or outside from. This picture is somewhat over-simplified in the case of Japan given that, as I will show

in my analysis, the ‘other’ group consisting of non-Japanese citizens is in fact composed of several different groups of people who are not all viewed in the same way in Japanese society. Given that Caucasian westerners are not seen in the same way as for example foreigners of Asian descent, I believe that my theoretical framework provides a clearer way to analyze, not everyone who is considered the ‘other’, but only Caucasian western people among foreigners in Japan.

Now that I have established my thought process behind my theoretical framework, I will move on to my analysis where I will display how my findings relate to this theory chapter.

5 – Analysis

In the following chapter, I analyze the movies I have selected in order to analytically demonstrate the way in which Caucasian westerners are portrayed in Japanese cinema and henceforth discuss what information this can provide us with about Japanese society. As stated in section 3, this is done using media semiotics as defined by Jonathan Bignell to extract data from these movies. Furthermore, by drawing on the theoretical framework I established in section 4, I explore the way in which structures in Japanese society are creating differences between Japanese citizens and Caucasian westerners in both positive and negative regards. To investigate these differences I start my analysis by looking at examples of positively and negatively framed Caucasian westerners in Japanese movies in order to shed light on the position Caucasian westerners take up in Japanese society. This position is obviously not a fixed, black and white set of ideas shared by all Japanese people, but based on the characters they play and by comparing them to similar roles performed by foreign characters of other ethnicities I display how there are general trends in the way Caucasian westerners are depicted. Finally this leads me into discussions on how Japanese movies are making use of foreign characters, how this differs from the way it is done in Hollywood cinema and what information this gives us about general stereotypes and perceptions on multiculturalism among Japanese people.

5.1 Positive and negative characters – more diversity than initially expected?

When I initially set out to do this thesis I had a hypothesis that I was going to discover that Caucasian westerners would be primarily positively framed in the movies where they appear, due to the preferential treatment they at times receive in Japanese society compared to how other minority groups are treated. This hypothesis was only strengthened while doing my literature review given that I discovered several academic articles claiming that such a phenomenon was indeed real and based on historical factors and the primarily dignified position of Caucasian westerners in the Japanese professional working environment (see for example Iwata, 2017 p. 309 or Myslinska, 2014 p. 1).

After analyzing my data however, this hypothesis has turned out to be flawed as the foreigners in the movies I have analyzed have turned out to act in much more diverse roles than I initially expected. To clearly illustrate this I will now show how the movies I have

analyzed contains opposing images of Caucasian westerners, which show the broad variety of findings I have discovered during my analysis.

A very positive representation of a Caucasian western character can be found in Akira Kurosawa's *Rhapsody in August* (1991) which takes place in modern day Japan but surrounds the collective memories of the Nagasaki atom bombing. Richard Gere plays Clark, an American of half Japanese descent now living in Hawaii, visiting his distant relatives in Nagasaki. Clark appearance is tall, casually but tidy dressed and is always polite and respectful about Japanese customs. His aunt initially doubts whether he will understand the collective memory among the people of Nagasaki but Clark is quickly shown to put these suspicions to shame. Ultimately, *Rhapsody in August* therefore show Caucasian westerners in a positive light but it should be noted that while Richard Gere is American, the character he plays is of half Japanese descent. This circumstance is likely part of making him more appealing in the eyes of a Japanese audience, even despite the fact that Clark has never lived in Japan and does not speak the language. However, this positive image of a Caucasian westerner is in contrast to the foreigners appearing in Yu Irie's spy drama *Joker Game* (2015).

The plot in *Joker Game* surrounds American, British & Japanese intelligence agents scrambling for vital information about the development of the atomic bomb in the years leading up to the Second World war. The central villain in the story is the American ambassador Graham played by Richard Moss. Graham is initially very friendly upon meeting the protagonist Jiro but the audience soon realizes that this is a mere façade over his ruthless pursuit of personal gains as seen in the way he trick women to have intercourse with him by promising that he will bring them to America. Furthermore, Graham is obese and is continuously seen to take advantage of his position to address other people in a degrading manner.

This contrast in the way foreigners appear is also visible in other Japanese movies, an example being *Arch Angels* (2006) and *Between Calmness and Passion* (2001) both in which several Italian characters appear. However, in the former they are displayed as religious fanatics and in the latter they are welcoming and warm. Other movies within the scope of my analysis are testimonies that these examples are not exclusive, with positive Caucasian western characters being present in *Dr. Akagi* (1998), *The Ode to Joy* (2006), *Pool* (2009) and *Honokaa Boy* (2009) and negative Caucasian westerners appearing in *Swallowtail*

Butterfly (1996), *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007), *Memories of a teenage amnesiac* (2010) and *My Uncle* (2016). The movies not already mentioned I have left out either because the Caucasian western characters in these either do not stick out in any particular positive or negative way, or because both characters with positive and negative traits appear. As examples of the former, this is the case in *Crying out love in the center of the world* (2004) where we are introduced to two Australian tour guides who do their job in a plain and normal manner, and in *Hotel Hibiscus* (2002) where American soldiers on a base in Okinawa are doing their duty in keeping a curious group of kids out of a military base. Examples of the latter is visible in *Kamome Diner* (2006) where we meet both friendly and unfriendly Finnish characters visiting Sachi's Japanese diner. The same is true for *My Darling is a Foreigner* (2010) where the male protagonist Tony is a helpful and kind character but his American friend is portrayed in a much more and selfish and negative fashion.

Yet, despite my hypothesis assuming that Caucasian westerners would be presented in a predominantly positive manner it is not surprising that the findings made across my selected movies are more diverse. As it is the case with native Japanese characters both actors in good and bad roles are present. Therefore, in order to study a supposed special status of Caucasian westerners in Japanese society I find it necessary to compare the roles they act in to roles played minority characters of other ethnicities. This makes it possible to put a perspective on the stereotypes surrounding Caucasian westerners, given that the movies treat them differently from other foreign characters. In order to do that, this analysis also leads me into investigating the way Japanese movies are creating differences between Japanese nationals and Caucasian westerners. To do so I go into detail with two movies, Shunji Iwai's slightly experimental *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996) and Japanese action icon Takeshi Kitano's (Beat Takeshi) *Brother* (2000). These two movies are notable in this context because they both include foreigners of several different ethnicities and as I will now go on to demonstrate this factor can help us in uncovering how Japanese society perceives Caucasian westerners.

5.2 West above the rest? – Movies with characters from different ethnic backgrounds

Swallowtail Butterfly takes place in a futuristic version of Japanese society inspired by the economic boom the country experienced in the 1980's. Although the movie is set in the past,

its steam-punk inspired flashy aesthetics makes it seem like a future version of an unnamed Japanese metropolis. Most of the events in the movie take place in a ghettoized urban area called Yen town where the inhabitants are almost exclusively of foreign descent and are living with very little contact to the Japanese society that surrounds them. Early in the movie, we are told that these inhabitants, whom in the movie are somewhat confusingly are called Yen towns, primarily have come to Japan in order to get a share of the booming national economy and thereby be able to return to their country as wealthy people. Upon watching the movie it quickly becomes clear that development of the story has been of less importance than visual aesthetics to director Shunji Iwai. For the majority of the movie there is no clear plot and the audience is instead just following how the various characters go about doing their stuff, while struggling with economic hardships that seem natural for the citizens residing in Yen town.

In an interview Iwai himself was asked to address the symbolism of Yen Town and what the place represents. To this Iwai describes Yen Town as a depiction of a multiethnic Tokyo that could come into existence in the near future, resembling other ethnically diverse megacities across the globe. On the Yen towns Iwai furthermore remarked that he sees them as a positive driving force who are motivated by a strong energy to aspire in society and achieve their goals. A driving force which according to Iwai is prevalent among citizens of other Asian countries but not among the Japanese (Schilling, 1999, p. 71). Iwai himself does therefore seemingly have a positive image of foreigners, and as I will show now this is also visible in the aesthetic appeal that Yen town has in *Swallowtail Butterfly*, despite it being a poor ghettoized area.

The majority of the Yen towns are shown to be of Chinese origin, albeit a few of them are played by Japanese actors. This gives Yen town an overall distinct Asian feeling to it with its shady Chinese inspired opium dens, red-light districts demanding the audience attention and chaotic streets resembling countries in South East Asia. Furthermore, the movie makes frequent use of distorted and unclear camera angles, which gives the audience a feeling of being somewhere unknown, exotic and foreign. Despite the fact that Yen town is a ghetto inhabited by people in the bottom of society this depiction makes it appealing and seductive to the perceiving audience. The appeal in the visual aesthetic is aided by the soundtrack of the movie which consist of up-tempo pop and rock music visibly performed by the movies female protagonist Glico and the Yen Town band. Furthermore, the many female Chinese

prostitutes are repeatedly sexualized by being shown with close angle shots while they show off some skin or try to attract customers in similar ways. These many factors again recalls the writings of Said that I introduced in section 4.3, and his definition of Asia as being the orient, a place that has not been allowed to define itself but instead has been defined by an outside perceiver. However what is notable in the case of *Swallowtail Butterfly* is that it is not the west but Japanese Iwai who is doing so, and that despite Yen town being Asian in its aesthetic, it almost only resemble countries outside of Japan and holds very little resemblance to typical Japanese urban landscape. This finding emphasizes the topic I introduced in section 2.3 of my literature review concerning the idea of an imagined Japanese cultural uniqueness (Nihon-jinron), which is impossible for foreigners to become a part of, and which is distinct, even from the rest of Asia. To return to the above mentioned statement by Iwai, claiming that he wanted to create Yen town as a futuristic multiethnic version of Tokyo, it is furthermore notable that the multicultural in this regard seemingly is without any Japanese people and the foreigners instead are confined to their own collective multicultural area, which once again emphasizes the idea of Nihon-jinron. Yet, within this mixed group of foreigners who are seen as different from the Japanese people I argue that foreigners of some ethnicities are viewed more positively than others, which I will now go on to illustrate using the foreigners in this movie as an example.

The ghettoized city of Yen town is as already noted primarily inhabited by people of Chinese origins, but we are also introduced to several other minority groups that was present in Japan in the 1980s. These includes characters of both Iranian, African American, South East Asian and Caucasian western descent. Even though the movie is not explicitly stating so, it also becomes clear to the audience that a certain hierarchy exists among these people and that some of them are financially much better off than the people they live amongst. Initially the movie only introduce us to a small group of Yen towns who consist of Chinese, Iranian & African American characters who are living in the absolute bottom of society, earning their money by scamming Japanese people or, as it is the case for the women, prostituting themselves.⁷ However, once one of the central characters Glico manages to

⁷ Iwai's choice of using Iranians and people with African heritage is correlated with Japanese media during the 1980's and 1990's framing people of these origins as criminals not belonging in Japanese society, as documented by H. Richard Friman (2001 p. 330).

record an album that becomes a hit she is able to escape this life and open her own open-mic club in a less poverty stricken area of Yen town.

Despite her success as a singer, it is also notable that Glico never becomes part of the Japan inhabited by Japanese people, but upon her gaining success she is introduced to new foreign characters who are part of this more financially stable side of Yen town. Here the movies Caucasian western characters are introduced when they are hired to become the house band in Glico's newly opened club and from their appearance it is clear to the audience that this band is visibly distinct from citizens of Yen town we have been introduced to thus far. Besides the keyboard player, all of the band members are of Caucasian western ethnic origin. Furthermore, they distinguish themselves by being fashionably, albeit somewhat alternatively dressed, which stands in contrast to more poor and shabby appearance that the other Yen towns share. In this fashion, the movie creates a clear separation between the economically challenged Yen towns made up of foreigners from primarily developing countries and the more privileged Caucasian western foreigners from developed countries. The movie is in this way creating a pattern that is reflecting a general perception of foreigners in Japanese society as argued by Owens (2017, p. 30). It is in this regard also notable that Arrow, the only African American character in the movie, is part of the Yen towns from the poorer backgrounds in contrast to the white characters with whom he shares American heritage. The movie is thereby making a distinction between characters from the same country, implying that social status in Yen Town and Japan is based on ethnicity more than country of origin.

Swallowtail Butterfly gives us several implication about ideas of ethnicity and stereotypes prevalent in Japanese society which I have displayed in this section. Yet, in order to investigate if these are commonly shared ideas or merely a product of Iwai's own views on society, I will now proceed to analyze *Brother*, another movie that includes foreigners of several different ethnicities.

As it is the case in *Swallowtail Butterfly*, the gangster action drama *Brother* also has some notable findings in the way it displays foreign characters. The plot centers on Japanese high-ranking yakuza Yamamoto, played by the director Takeshi himself, who due to a defeat to a rival clan back in Japan decides to flee the country and live with his half-brother Ken in Los Angeles. Here Yamamoto quickly finds himself part of a new gang war where various

smaller gangs are struggling for the right to deal drugs in different areas of Los Angeles. Where *Brother* becomes interesting in relation to the scope of this thesis, is in its stereotypical depiction of people of different ethnicities. The primary minority character of *Brother* is Yamamoto's closest friend in Los Angeles Denny, whose role is based on the Hollywood popularized trope of the funny African American side-kick, typically supporting the white hero. Denny is living on the edge of society and takes part in minor criminal activities in order to provide for himself and his family according to his own statement. The movie is however contradictory in regards to this claim when Yamamoto and his gang are invited to a party at the home of Denny's family and we see that the family actually lives in a presentable middle-class sub-urban villa. Takeshi is thereby suggesting that Denny engages in criminal activities based on his own willingness to do so, given that this is not a necessity with the family background he has, which promotes a stereotype about African American people being more prone to criminal activity than other American citizens. Another thing to note about Denny's role in Yamamoto's gang is that while he is a reliable side-kick who is fast with a witty remark, he is clearly not influential enough to challenge any of the other gangs without the help from Yamamoto himself who is shown as superior both in terms of strength, wit and bravery. *Brother* is thereby both using a Hollywood trope by including an African American character as support for the hero, but at the same time not sticking to Hollywood tropes by giving him a financially stable middle-class background. Yet, because of his activities as a small-time criminal, *Brother* ultimately applies a stereotypical perception of criminal black people originating in the US and applying it in Japanese cinema. As I now will move on to display, such American stereotypes are also visible regarding the Italian Mafia appearing in the latter part of the movie.

The characters in the Italian mafia appearing in *Brother* are also displayed in a stereotypical manner originating from Italian stereotypes in the West. The Italian mafia bosses follow typical gangster tropes of being cool, composed and in possession of an aura of superiority. Reflecting back on the findings I noted earlier regarding other Japanese movies that includes Italian characters, it is worth noting that in both *Brother*, *Arch Angels* and *Between Calmness and Passion*, characters of Italian origins appear, but in roles based on three distinct stereotypes about Italian people. *Brother* and *Arch Angels* are similar in the sense that they both are action movies and that in both movies the Italian characters take up roles as villains, but that is also where the similarities end. In *Brother* the Italian villains are

based on tropes common to Hollywood cinema of Italians as being involved in organized crime, whereas in *Arch Angeles* the villains are instead Catholic religious fanatics who take advantage of their privileged position at a religiously based academy to pursue ulterior motives. This latter perception of Italian people as religious fanatics are much less established as a trope in Hollywood cinema, where religious people with evil motives in recent history primarily have been depicted as Muslims. Yet, based on a general stereotype about Italian people as being more religious than citizens of the other western European countries, director Issei Oda depicts Italians in *Arch Angeles* as radicalized villains, out of touch with the Japanese society in which they reside. It is notable that such variation exist within the scarce depiction of Italians in Japanese cinema, especially given that not all of these depictions rely on Hollywood tropes, but as shown above we see that stereotypical ideas about Italian people have created a foundation for them being depicted in a negative manner.

There is however, more to say regarding the way ethnicity is defining how the Los Angeles gangs appearing in *Brother* are shaped. Yamamoto's own group is the only multiethnic fraction within the turf war with Yamamoto and Ken being of Japanese origin, Denny being African American and a group of unnamed henchmen being of both Asian, African American and Latin American origins. Upon starting to deal drugs in the ghettos of Los Angeles, Yamamoto and his men are confronted by a gang of Mexican drug dealers of whom every member is of Latin American descent. Upon defeating this gang, Yamamoto's group go on to confront another which consist of gangsters of Asian descent. Only when Yamamoto's clan becomes a dominating local force does the Italian mafia make their appearance, demanding that Yamamoto's and his clan pay them a share of the profits they are making.

This holds relevance in relation to my analysis given that the movie is explicit in the way the gangsters of different ethnicities are divided by fractions. Until the end of the movie when the Italian Mafia appear and defeat Yamamoto's group, not a single Caucasian westerner has made an appearance in any of the criminal organizations, including Yamamoto's multiethnic one. This finding suggest that the white US citizens are somehow elevated beyond the criminal gang activities that the various minority groups are engaged in and not belonging in the criminal organizations. As it was the case in *Swallowtail Butterfly*, *Brother* thereby suggest at the existence of an ethnical hierarchy in which Caucasian

westerners are seen more favorably than other foreign characters. Despite the fact that the Italian mafia consisting of Caucasian westerners also do appear in the latter part of the movie, this criminal organization distinguishes itself from the other groups. First of all the Italian mafia is the most powerful group, seen in their ability to topple Yamamoto and his men. Secondly they are shown as being too dominant to deal with smaller groups given that they only give attention to Yamamoto's and his men when they manage to become a respected group amongst the other smaller criminal organizations. Therefore, even though the Italian mafia, like the organizations consisting of minority characters, is also involved in criminal activities they are still hierarchically above the other organizations based on their power and influence.

Initially I expected that the Japanese movies would display Caucasian westerners in a primarily positive manner, but in the light of the findings of this thesis I argue that a more broad perspective is needed to understand the role of Caucasian westerners in Japanese cinema. The diverse way in which Japanese cinema is displaying Caucasian westerners should be viewed in relation to Myslinska (2016, p. 1) who has shown how positive and negative ethnic stereotypes about them exist at the same time. Instead, the movies suggest that among foreigners in Japan, Caucasian westerners are in a broad perspective preferred to foreign residents of other ethnicities, confirming the findings of Owens (2017, p. 30). Thereby I argue that while Caucasian westerners are not necessarily preferred to Japanese citizens such as it is argued by Iwata (2017, p. 310), they still enjoy a special status over other foreigners which is visible in the way the characters they play in Japanese cinema is different and more positive than it is the case for other foreigners. In fact, the findings I have made using these movies contradicts the findings of Iwata, which combined with my personal experiences was a major part of creating my initial hypothesis. However, since this hypothesis has been proven to be flawed, I will go on to discuss the nature of the way Caucasian westerners are treated in Japanese cultural products.

5.3 Japan & Hollywood, roles written for minority characters

Dave, the front man in the Caucasian western band in *Swallowtail Butterfly*, whom I have already mentioned in section 5.2, is himself aware of the special position of foreigners in Japan when he states: “(...) *Indeed both of my parents are American. But I was born and grew up here in Japan, I cannot speak English at all. Isn't it funny? Yes, it must be funny.*”

Then am I Japanese or American? Because of my appearance, I am treated like a foreigner. But I was born and grew up in this country and I do not have any home country but Japan (...)".⁸ Once again this realization corresponds with the idea of Nihon-jinron and that you have to appear Japanese to be Japanese and based on my findings I argue that this idea is also visible in the way foreigners are being cast in Japanese cinema.

As I touched upon in section 2.1, recent Hollywood productions have shown that it is economically viable to make movies in which minorities take up the central roles. As previously noted this approach still has room for improvement, however it is a step in the right direction towards embracing multiculturalism in society. In Japan on the other hand I argue that a more ethnically conscious approach to filmmaking exist in contrast to the case of Hollywood. Based on the movies I have analyzed, not a single of them included a foreigner in a role that potentially could have been played by a Japanese actor. Instead, all roles were written particularly for foreign actors who needed to be foreign due to the nature of the plot. In studies on minority representation in Hollywood the concept of 'white washing' is widely used when supposedly minority characters are played by actors belonging to the white majority (Pollard, 2017). As it was the case in *Swallowtail Butterfly*, Japanese movies also employ a similar 'Japanese washing' by casting Japanese actors in roles written for foreigners. Based on the movies I have analyzed, Japanese filmmakers are thereby only using foreigners in roles where it cannot be avoided, instead of letting foreigners blend it in Japanese society by casting them in roles that could also have been filled by a Japanese actor. By employing this approach to casting, Japanese filmmakers and production teams alike are also promoting the idea of foreigners being different from the Japanese and as being the 'other'.

Thereby my study supports the already introduced findings of Robertson (2015) who has shown the way written language is being used to separate foreigners from Japanese citizens in manga in similar fashion to the way I have now documented that it is being done in Japanese cinema. This finding furthermore supports the theoretical framework I apply to this paper given that Japanese society has constructed these differences in order to maintain them

⁸ *Swallowtail Butterfly* (from 01.01.58) quote directly transcribed from the English subtitles included in the movie.

and preserve the imagined idea of Japan as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous society, which ultimately benefits the national conservative forces backing this idea.

When discussing this, it should be noted that among OECD nations Japan is among the most ethnically homogenous countries and that multiculturalism in movies therefore as a result hereof is less frequent. As former director Nagisa Oshima notes in his documentary *100 years of Japanese Cinema* (1995), the most visible change in Japanese cinema to occur around the 1990s was the increasingly frequent inclusion of foreign characters, long after this had already been normal in other major film nations.⁹ Yet, despite foreigners making a late entrance in Japanese cinema the diversity of their roles are still highly limited even compared to other OECD countries where the ethnical homogeneity in the population remain high. As an example my own country Denmark has seen directors experimenting with a Danish take on the majority & minority character ‘buddy cop’ genre that has been popular in Hollywood for decades, but in the case of Japan such movies are still preserved for Japanese actors who tend to differ in personality or background rather than ethnicity.

Based on these findings I argue that Japanese cinema in its current state is contributing to the idea of Nihon-jinron and in my concluding chapter, I will reflect on what that means for Japanese society and the Caucasian westerners living within it.

⁹ (from 47.58)

6 – Conclusion

What I set out to do in this thesis was to analyze stereotypical perceptions of Caucasian westerners in contemporary Japanese society by researching how they have been presented in recent Japanese cinema. What I found was that the movies I have analyzed show a broad variety in the way they do this, reflecting a Japanese society where positive and negative attitudes towards Caucasian westerners coexist. My findings therefore dispute the findings of scholars claiming that whiteness and Western-ness are perceived as being racially superior in Japanese society due to the level of economic development in the countries these foreigners usually come from (see for example, Kozakai, 1996, Tanabe, 2004 or Iwata, 2017). What the movies I have analyzed instead reflects is the construct of *Nihon-jinron* which divides Japanese society into a space reserved for people of Japanese ethnic origin and a foreigner space for everyone else, much similar, although less extreme, to the imagined Japanese society in *Swallowtail Butterfly*. Yet, within this foreigner space, I argue that Caucasian westerners inhabit their own space situated hierarchically above other foreigners as I have documented in the way they are treated differently than other foreigners in movies where they appear together. This I argue, reflects a general trend in Japanese society where Caucasian westerners in various situations are treated more favorably than minorities of other ethnicities, thereby inhabiting a position as the preferred immigrants.

Based on this finding, my thesis is also upholding my theoretical framework given that Japanese society also display the idea of race as a social construction in which a dominant ethnic group, in this case not Caucasian but Japanese, has created the notion of ethnic differences in order to gain and maintain privileges connected to being part of this ethnicity. Furthermore it is also visible through the analyzed movies that Caucasian westerners are subjected to labels of deviance for Japanese norms. This is seen in the way they are exclusively cast in roles where the plot of the movie need them to be foreign due to a label that they are unable to blend smoothly into Japanese society. More distinct labels are also seen across the movies I have studied, examples hereof being Italians labelled as religious fanatics in *Arch Angeles* and as eccentric, warm and welcoming people in *Between calmness and passion*.

Reflecting on the research design of this thesis I also identified weaknesses in the way my research has been conducted. Throughout the paper I have continuously used Hollywood

cinema as a point of comparison to the way ethnic minorities are being used in Japanese cinema. This holds relevance given that the global outreach of Hollywood cinema has the power to impact national cinemas across the globe, thereby exporting cinematic trends popularized in Hollywood. Yet, there is also an issue in comparing cinema in Japan and the US due to how different the two societies are. Whereas the US is ethnically diverse, Japan is relatively homogeneous meaning that it is not surprising that there exist differences in the way minority actors are used in the two respective national cinema landscapes. Furthermore, based on my own reflection that movies have much variety in the way they depict society I identify a weakness in my research based on the amount of movies I have analyzed. Since I have watched several more movies than I have cited during my analysis I can confirm that these have largely supported the findings I have made using the movies I have gone into detail with. Yet, having a broader pool of data to analyze from would have provided me with an idea of more general trends in the way Japanese cultural products depicts Caucasian westerners which could have contributed with more information in regards to this topic.

Therefore, my agenda for further studies is to build on this study by including other Japanese cultural products that aim to resemble real-life society such as TV-Drama's or videogames. As noted in section 1.1 the amount of foreign residents in Japan is continuously rising, and I therefore believe that such a study is necessary in order to address the discriminative behavior that foreign residents are still likely to face in Japan.

7 – Literature

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