

**DEMYSTIFYING JAPANESE UNIQUENESS.
REPRESENTATIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH IN CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE FICTION CINEMA**

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Declaration

I, Anastasiya Savina, declare that this thesis (*Demystifying Japanese Uniqueness. Representations of Life and Death in Contemporary Japanese Fiction Cinema*) and the work presented in it are my own and has been produced by me as the result of my own original research.

Anastasiya Savina

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Abstract

Demystifying Japanese Uniqueness. Representations of Life and Death in Contemporary Japanese Fiction Cinema strives to create a thorough analysis of selected contemporary Japanese films with a specific focus on the fictional drama genre produced in the period from the mid-1990s to present day in relation to specific social and political circumstances and critical of essentialisation. By investigating visual and narrative film patterns as well as its scholarly and critical readings, which contributed to interpretations of Japanese cinema through terminologies such as ‘obscurity’, ‘mysticism’ and most importantly the elusive concept of national ‘uniqueness’, this thesis works towards demystification.

Chapter one – *History, Monumental Style and Aesthetics of Shadows* will give a historical background by investigating events within political, social and cultural developments, which influenced film production and contributed to the mystification discourse of Japanese cinematic patterns during its early phases. Chapter two – *The Instruments of Mystification. Japanese Cinema in the Period of the 1990s–2000s* consists of a detailed analysis of the instruments of ‘mystification’ such as the influence of pre-contemporary cinematic aesthetics, a non-linear concept of time, and the deliberate export and promotion of films that fulfil the criteria of being quintessentially Japanese. The analysis is created through a close reading of drama fiction film examples. Finally, the last chapter of the thesis – *Japanese Cinema and the Significance of the Disasters* argues the shift in cinematic consciousness and strives to uncover any significant changes in post-3.11 cinema production and how the incident has influenced the approached towards the representations of life and death in Japanese cinema as well as their ‘mystification’ over the last five years.

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Demystifying Japanese Uniqueness. Representations of Life and Death in Contemporary Japanese Fiction Cinema.

This thesis aims to create a thorough analysis of selected contemporary Japanese films with a specific focus on the fictional drama genre produced in the period from the mid-1990s until present day. By investigating visual and narrative film patterns of individual examples, which contribute to reading Japanese cinema through terminologies such as ‘obscurity’, ‘mysticism’ and most importantly the elusive concept of national ‘uniqueness’, this thesis works towards de-mystification. It is vital to note that the emphasis on repetitive cinematic patterns, which are found through the reading of individual film examples, can be a dangerous generalisation of a particular genre or cinema as a whole. Bearing this in mind, I conduct this study as a process of reflection, which is connected to my own background as a filmmaker, and allows me an appreciation that film is a fluid subject matter that remains in constant transformation and can be, at different points of time, read or understood in a variety of ways (even by the directors whose opinions are constantly influenced by the critique received.) Thus, my understanding of this process should be able to negate any act of generalisation.

I first arrived to this subject as an admirer of Japanese cinema as well as a practitioner of filmmaking. While exploring a vast variety of cinematic works produced in Japan and also analysing how the Western audiences happen to perceive numerous Japanese films and cinema genres in general, I came to see a degree of bewilderment that often narrowed down the spectator’s experience to a simple acceptance of ‘mysterious’ Japanese cinematic style rather than a deeper enquiry and analysis of the films’ narratives and visual patterns. This, therefore, became my motivation to commence a theoretical and textual research in order to track down how the ‘bewilderment’ or ‘mystification’ occurs and what are the factors that sustain it, as well as being able to address a wider audience with my findings.

In the course of my theoretical research I have encountered an extensive number of critical writings that relied on the analysis of the past traditions, aesthetics and ethereal concepts to justify the ‘mysterious’ in Japanese cinema, at the same time widening the gap between Japan and the rest of the world. In the light of that, I believe it was imperative to address a more

resolute analysis that narrows that gap and provides clarity for the film spectators, film practitioners and theorists. Moreover, while I acknowledge that most recent theoretical works have started to move away from the notion of Japanese mysticism, it is evident that international film distribution and promotion (through a variety of the world's leading film festivals) to present day select and encourage cinematic works that answer to the specific style that sustains the perception of bewilderment among wider audiences, which makes the issues of 'mystification' of Japanese cinema significant to the present day.

My thesis addresses the following questions and issues:

- What are the cinematic patterns of Japanese fiction cinema that are perceived from the position of cultural "uniqueness" and 'mysticism'?
- What are the additional, beyond the actual film, factors that lead to 'mystification' of Japanese fiction cinema?
- How does the use of linguistic terminology encourage 'mysticism' and how does it contribute to the notion of national 'uniqueness'?
- Can significant changes relating to the subject of 'mystification' be anticipated within the current Japanese cinematic landscape?

Mystification (to mystify) is defined as to utterly bewilder [someone] or to make [something] obscure (Oxford English Dictionary) and also as something that cannot be either explained nor be analysed, therefore asks for acceptance. Thus, in the context of this subject, the term 'mystification' will be used to refer to the bewilderment that can occur among the film audiences/critics/scholars caused by a set of cinematic techniques and directorial choices (story structure, visual elements, lighting, editing and other) and may un/purposely lead the spectator or scholar of Japanese cinema into an imagined world of the Orient, an 'otherness', while constructing his or her understanding of Japanese cinema as a blind admiration for the 'sacred alterity'¹ and producing the analytical work that is inclined towards strengthening the notion of Japanese 'uniqueness'.

¹ 'Sacred alterity' is a term by Peter N. Dale, 1986.

In its most extreme form, this desire not to compromise the 'otherness' of the East by the symbolic nomenclature and projective categories of Western cognition leads to the disarming avowal by writers like Barthes that, in order not to traduce the Orient by imposing on it the interpretative bias of occidental discourse, they will make no claim to speak about Japan when writing about the country they elect to call 'Japan'. The exotic label is a mere device around which the writer assumes a complete liberty to weave 'Orientalist' fictions. (Dale, 1986, p.4)

This work advises against the issues that 'mystification' poses in cinematic reading and critique and strives to undo it while raising an awareness by pointing out three main instruments of cinema production and distribution, which, I discovered, can potentially lead to creating a sense of Japanese 'mystified' originality and provide for the discourse of national 'uniqueness'. It should be noted that the proceeding points are interchangeable and can either be present as a collective of all, or at most one or two and with a various amount of magnitude in each film case. This shows the similarities (or patterns), but also points to differences, therefore avoiding generalisation of all selected cinematic examples.

- The non-linear concept of time expressed through the film's narrative structure by consistently placing the representations of past and present and life and death as a uniform notion side by side rather than as opposites.
- Aesthetic modes of the past (both cultural² and cinematic³) expressed through a cinematic visual style.
- Deliberate export and promotion of Japanese films that fulfil the criteria of Japanese 'mysticism' and 'uniqueness'.

While 'mystification' is a more easily defined term, 'uniqueness', on the other hand is a very complex concept when applied to the study of Japanese culture and cinema. To put it more

² Cultural aesthetics of the past refer to the traditional concepts such as impermanence, nature glorifications, the circular nature of life and others, which are found through the religious teachings of Buddhism or native Shinto.

³ Cinematic modes of the past refer to the popular pre-contemporary film techniques and narrative structures, most commonly located in the Japanese Golden Age of cinema from the post U.S. occupation years.

concretely, ‘uniqueness’ relates to the Japanese theory of *nihonjinron*.⁴ *Nihonjinron* represents a vast number of literary studies written and published for decades⁵, regarding the subject of Japanese cultural or social identity as defined within disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and many others. All these discourses have created an emphasis on ‘uniqueness’ and on the homogeneity of Japanese culture that, according to many scholars and followers of *nihonjinron*, can never be fully comprehended by people of other nationalities, thus enhancing a severe state of nationalism. Therefore, *nihonjinron* has engendered a continuous debate on the subject matter of what it means to be Japanese. It was maintained among both native scholars and international ones feeding into the discourse on nationalism and ‘uniqueness’, both enhancing that notion and later on also disputing it.

Despite the variety of authors and complex studies on *nihonjinron* (both native and foreign) I have chosen to refer to the study of Peter N. Dale – *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (1986) that I believe provides a useful, nuanced and most importantly anti-nationalistic analysis of the concept of “Japaneseness”. I consider this particular theory to be a well-articulated valuable publication, confident in constructing arguments, which openly point out and expose the problematic issues of *nihonjinron* and the excessive nationalism it advocates. Dale explains “Japaneseness” as follows:

In contrast to modern empirical research on Japan, the *nihonjinron* are characterised by three major assumptions or analytical motivations. Firstly, they implicitly assume that the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogenous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from pre-historical times through to the present day. Secondly, they presuppose that Japanese people differ radically from all other known peoples. Thirdly, they are consciously nationalistic, displaying a conceptual and procedural hostility to any mode of analysis, which might be seen to derive from external, non-Japanese sources. In a general sense then, *nihonjinron* may be

⁴ *Nihonjinron* directly translates as theory of Japan or Japanese people. It can also be referred to as “Japaneseness” or ‘Japanism’

⁵ *Nihonjinron* goes as far back as the *Kokugaku* (national studies) of the 18th century, but gained wider popularity after WWII when it was used to analyse Japan and Japanese characteristics in comparison to Europe and The U.S.

defined as works of cultural nationalism concerned with the ostensible ‘uniqueness’ of Japan in any aspect, and which are hostile to both individual experience and the notion of internal socio-historical diversity. (Dale, 1986, p.1)

Dale also stresses the linguistic interpretation of the word ‘unique’ and the ways it is being used in the context of “Japaneseness”. The ultimate definition of it being ‘the only one of its kind’, when analysing its connotations within Japanese culture it rather suggests the unusual. He states that “within a genre it is a tacit convention that the word and concept of ‘uniqueness’ are co-terminus and indeed synonymous with Japan.” (Dale, 1986, pp.25-26) The often inappropriate use of the word, therefore, usually leads to the mystification of the discourses on Japan and all things Japanese within the critique of various Western scholars (Dale particularly focuses on Roland Barthes and Pearl Buck, however, there are also others like Donald Richie, Keiko McDonald, Donald Keene and many others who can be mentioned in this context) subduing the critical analysis. The example of this would be Pearl Buck’s remark, “If there is one single truth about Asia, it is that while each country there is totally different from every other, Japan is the most different of all. Here people are unique, even among the Asian peoples.” (Buck, 1968, cited in Dale, 1986, pp.25-26) Concluding this argument might mean that it is grave enough that as a Westerner one stands no chance to understand the nature of the Japanese, but even being Asian (of a close geographic proximity) would not be of much help either⁶. Statements of this nature, therefore, create a protective bubble around the ‘mysterious’ world that Japan is. It is also a great example of what has initially triggered this research and the resistance one has to face while approaching this subject from the outside (being a foreigner) or with a lack of Japanese language skills.

Putting the debate on *nihonjinron* aside and focusing on the core structure of general film critique, Noel Carroll in his book *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (1988), denounces (in the context of Western film) contemporary film theorists for purposely mystifying the understanding of cinema.

⁶ These kinds of arguments are largely present within *nihonjinron* writings despite the obvious facts that Japanese religion, culture and even language have been historically influenced by non-native religions and philosophies like Buddhism and Confucianism.

The most obvious, recurring problem with contemporary film theory is that its central concepts are often systematically ambiguous, due in some cases, but not all, to their essentially metaphorical nature. A consequence of this is that, in the main, the arguments and analysis of contemporary film theory turn out to be little more than extended exercises in equivocation. (Carroll, 1988, p.226)

While discussing the reliance on metaphors and analogies in contemporary film theory, Carroll presents a vital argument on the use of certain cinematic terms which “in the language of contemporary film theory, can be extended to virtually anything.”

This, of course, is not a testimony to the explanatory power of these concepts, but rather evidence that they are ill defined and ambiguous in ways that render them theoretically useless. That is for a term to be theoretically adequate we should have a clear sense of when not to apply it as well as the sense of when to apply it; it should have some rigorously stipulated parameters. For only then can we rest assured that the concept has something relevant to tell us about whatever specific phenomenon we are investigating. (Carroll, 1988, p.227)

Potentially, this can be applicable to my discourse. The extensive use of the term ‘unique’ or any such terminology, which linguistically points to mystical Orientalism naturally feeds into the discussion on “Japaneseness” and resolves in building a blockade that prevents a more meticulous critique but rather produces an ambiguous theory, which gets reduced to what Carroll calls an ‘exercise in equivocation’ and in the context of Japanese cultural analysis usually calls not for comprehension but for acceptance. (Richie, 1972) Thus, throughout this study I will firstly aim to carefully investigate the cinematic methods, which can potentially lead to ‘mystification’ or be read as ‘mystical’ while, at the same time attempting to demystify them by locating the historical, political and social contexts that have determined or at least impacted their occurrence. Secondly, I will strive to be alert to and argue against cinematic theories and critiques, which support ‘mystification’ and contribute to the ambiguous concept of national ‘uniqueness’ and ‘Japanification’ (such as the works of

Junichiro Tanizaki or Noel Burch) by using texts and theories, which counter argue those notions.

Consequently, in the investigations of Japanese cinema in relation to specific social and political circumstances, my positioning within Japanese film studies will be critical of essentialisation and the interpretation through the haze of “Japaneseness”. The analysis will attempt to be wary of processes and instruments of the mystifications of patterns of life and death while articulating specific practices, narratives and aesthetic styles and how they have been read, criticised and promoted.

As far as the methodology is concerned, the thesis contains a textual analysis of contemporary Japanese cinema of a selected genre and a period. My aim is to utilise a varied body of scholarly works, of both Western and Japanese origins (aside from the discourse on cinema of post 3.11 for which not much scholarly publications are yet available or are still being in the process of production). Some of the cinema and translation theories will serve as supporting elements in the formation of the foundation for the thesis (Dale, Carroll, Sakai) while others will open up a debate of ‘mystification’ of cinematic patterns as are comprised of religious and traditional aesthetic theories (Kenko, Tanizaki). Additional materials include a variety of articles; film reviews and directors’ interviews collected through various published and web sources. The principle challenge of reading the available theories will be to de-essentialise approaches while being cautious of ethnocentric debates.

While the selected writings from Western and Japanese academic contexts will form a crucial base for my thesis, my own arguments will largely develop out of my reading of cinematic examples and their narrative and aesthetic forms. The methodology of working with specific examples is to assist me in creating a non-essentialised piece of writing, avoiding generalisations and rather contributing to the diversification of understandings of the different factors leading to the ‘mystification’ of Japanese cinema. This approach also responds to my position as a non-Japanese scholar, arriving at this topic from the outside. The film material itself could thus be viewed as a major source of theoretical argumentation as well, which will be thoroughly addressed within the chapters. The films I am working with are fictional dramas varying from the mainstream, indie and cult cinema directors. I have chosen to look at the subject of ‘mystification’ through fictional drama narratives (with an exception of one

animation film example⁷ in the last chapter) as I believe it to be the most suitable genre reflecting on the cinematic realities of life and death.

To sum up, the following are the crucial research methodology decisions I have made that helped me to conduct this study:

- To explore the historical and political contexts in which Japanese cinema was produced as well as the analytical debates which grew out of historical events in order to discover what over time contributed to the formation of Japan's 'mystified' identity.
- To be cautious of any ambiguous critical writings that praise Japanese cinema for its 'unique' quality and, which generally rely on terminologies that enhance 'mystification'.
- To thoroughly conduct textual analysis of selected cinematic works through which I examine the factors of 'mystification'. (Even though the selection of the films presented in the thesis can be considered sparse, this decision was purposely done, as I believe that a meticulous inspection lessens a simple superficial appreciation but provides for more resolute analysis and avoids generalisation.

Overall the critical gesture of the thesis is to resist uniform justifications and theorisations and to open out cinematic narratives to understandings or translations of their subject in a critical way, staying clear of generalisation and Orientalism. The scholarly work of Naoki Sakai - *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (2008) offers me crucial guidelines in the formation of my approach to theoretical critique. Sakai's discussion of the formation of the "Japanese Spirit", of the philosophy of aesthetics and the representations and meanings of death in artistic language are pertinent to my thesis. Also, the themes of the experience of translation or the experience of not understanding; the subjectivity of translation; as well as social and political issues involved in translation and the idea of continuous negotiations of a subject, as I pointed out earlier, through which meanings are regularly formed, will contribute to my working with the chosen film examples.

⁷ The reason for including an animation film example in the fictional drama-focused work is explained in the third chapter of the thesis.

Chapter one of the thesis will give a historical background by investigating events within political, social and cultural developments which influenced film production and in one way or another contributed to the ‘mystification’ discourse of Japanese cinematic patterns during its early phases. It will also analyse the critical theories on the subject matter, which have affected and shaped the scholarly debates within the field of Japanese cinema production of selected periods. I will start with an exploration of the period of 1930s-1940s that indicated the rise of nationalism and the enhancement of cultural values initiated by the impending loss of national ‘purity’ (Junichiro Tanizaki, 1933) to the Americanisation and Westernisation (through the unification of what is seen as a Western medium and Japanese aesthetics). This period is also defined by important historical events such as the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and later WWII, which reinforced xenophobia and resulted in war propaganda cinema and governmental participation in film production (the 1939 Motion Picture Law). Following that, I will conduct a textual examination of Darrell W. Davis’ “Monumental Style” (1996) cinema and the concept of “Transitive Japaneseness”. Davis’ study will be examined against the critical work of Daisuke Miyao (*The Aesthetics of Shadow*, 2013) that explores the early cinematic medium with a focus on lighting technology and its uses. Japanese cinema during the American occupation and the Golden Age of Japanese cinema (1950s) with a particular focus on Yasujiro Ozu will be inspected with references to Tadao Sato’s critique (*Currents in Japanese Cinema*, 1982). Finally, the chapter will be concluded with the examination of Japanese New Wave Cinema of 1960s-1970s along with the political, social and cultural struggles, gender politics and the rise of debating sexuality that was present during that period. My main sources here will be David Desser with additional theories from Isolde Standish, Gregory Barrett, Dennis Washburn and Keiko McDonald.

Chapter two begins with an introductory outline of the political, social and cultural conditions that Japan was encountering in the 1990s, when its ambivalent relationship with The U.S. was significant (Harry Harootunian and Tomiko Yoda, 2006; Christopher Goto-Jones, 2009). The second part of the chapter investigates the influence and hereby repetitions of pre-contemporary cinematic patterns (influenced through religion, philosophy and aesthetic

theories of the past) as well as the non-linear concept of time and alleged ‘inability to let go of the past’ through a close reading of drama fiction film examples of the mid-1990s: Hirokazu Koreeda’s *Maboroshi* (1995) and Shunji Iwai’s *Love Letter* (1995). This thorough investigation of the films will reflect upon the specific kinds of representations of life and death (as two entwined elements) expressed through the means of cinematic patterns and aesthetic techniques that lend themselves to mysticism and to enhance “Japaneseness”. The third part of the chapter will locate modifications of those cinematic techniques in the indie cinema of the 2010s via Naomi Kawase’s *Hanezu* (2011) in which the representations of life, death and the past (recent and ancient) are situated side by side, hereby creating a film structure that urgently calls for a resurrection of past traditions through what could be read as a mystifying aesthetic and narrative. The discourse will be enriched with the concept of impermanence (Donald Keene, Yoshida Kenko) and nostalgia (Svetlana Boym) as significant and reoccurring elements of Japanese film production. This chapter will critique the ‘mystification’ within cinematic narratives and how it is read by unravelling three major devices of ‘mystification’ indicated earlier. By placing the emphasis on these mystifying ‘traps’ (which naturalise chosen film examples as ‘uniquely’ Japanese) and their understanding and analysis, the chapter establishes a de-essentialised and de-mystified reading.

The final chapter of this thesis strives to uncover whether any significant changes have taken place in film production after the Tohoku disaster of 3.11 and to what degree. The social, cultural and political movements explored in this chapter present a platform from which one can look at the current Japanese cinema trends that became a primary research method of this chapter. As some social and cultural changes were inevitable, I will explore developments within Japanese cinema during the last five years. My focus lies in the examination of the ways in which traumatic events and their aftermaths can influence approaches towards the representations of life and death in Japanese cinema and how they can also alter the concepts of ‘mystification’ and ‘uniqueness’. The section will draw points of comparison, locating similarities and differences (social, cultural and cinematic), between 3.11 and the preceding traumatic incidents (The Great Kanto Earthquake, 1923; The Hiroshima and Nagasaki Atomic Bombing, 1945; The Great Hanshin Earthquake, 1995) in order to address how cinema production in Japan has reacted and reacts now to disasters of such severe magnitude. With the example of Sion Sono’s *Himizu* (2011) I will argue for a shift in cinematic consciousness. The principle points of discussion will be:

- The effect 3.11 had on the cinematic production in the following years.
- The changes within the aesthetic representations of life and death.
- The presence of social and political issues in Japanese cinema after 3.11.
- The reoccurrence of previously established cinematic patterns.
- What potential does 'mystification' and 'uniqueness' have to prevail further?

Chapter 1

History, Monumental Style and Aesthetics of Shadows

Acknowledging the fact that patterns of contemporary Japanese cinema lie in a combination of compound cultural and social values collected and fused through one or many historical periods, it becomes vital to look into the earlier years of Japanese cinema with reference to those periods. Thus, ultimately, the investigation of representations of life and death in contemporary Japanese cinema as well as the demystification of cinematic patterns inevitably means to initially investigate into the complexity of historical events filled with social, political and cultural upheavals.

Film history is usually practiced using a kind of parallelism, establishing the connection between fictional worlds on screen and the actual world contained in primary documents from the same period. It is deeply satisfying when we “discover” correspondences between film imagery and documented historical fact - when it looks as if film indeed reflects history. However, this sells film short. Film is a primary document of history and can reveal things about their time that other historical records may not.
(Davis, 1997, p.8)

Up until World War II, the large majority of Japanese feature films were based on stories of Feudal characters, portrayed through the *Jidai-geki* (Period Drama) films dealing with the figure of the Samurai or a swordsman. Gregory Barrett in his book *Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Socio-political and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes* writes: “Since the feudalistic system government before 1868 was based on relationship between lord [seldom presented as the main character] and vassal, it was inevitable that the royal retainer would become a major hero.” He continues stating that the duo formed by “the Loyal Retainer and the Tormented Lord, represents the ideals of loyalty and sincerity, and served a metaphor for the required attitude of the government in Japan...” (Barrett, 1989, p.22)

These narratives were based upon the established social and political systems at the core of which was a fundamental concept of Kokutai⁸. With the Kokutai as a main ideology, the emperor was defined as a divine being, a father of the nation to whom all Japanese people were linked by blood. This ideology existed and shaped social and political systems with no major modifications up until the defeat in 1945 when emperor Showa, in response to the occupation strategy, renounced his ‘divinity’ and lost his political influence. Nevertheless, Kokutai was able to create a structure of a united Feudalistic society supported by strong principles of nationalism advocated by the Japanese Government up until the end of World War II.

Kokutai ideology had experienced an intense growth by the mid-1930s consequential to inflation and the Kanto earthquake in 1923 (will be closer examined in the third chapter of the thesis). The period also saw the rise of “so-called ‘patriotic societies, radical right-wing clubs some of which had existed since Meiji times, all of which have now displayed an unprecedented virulence” (Burch, 1979, p.141). In the book *To the Distant Observer. Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema*, Noel Burch argues that the mobilisation in rejections of Western values and increased sentiments of nationalism withdrew Japan into herself (economically and psychologically). Comparing this historical period to Fascism, Burch thus comes to argue that “the nationalism of 1930s was a mass phenomenon to an extent and in ways which that of the European Fascist countries was not (i.e. no equivalent in Japan to the Italian resistance movement, neither to the physical elimination of an important part of the German population), and at the cultural level it struck particularly sensitive chords in both the masses and intelligentsia”. He then highlights the debate that “the social pressure to adopt Western [particularly American] modes undoubtedly abated.” Burch also makes the statement that ‘liberal intellectuals’ such as Ozu, Mizoguchi and Ishida in the period of 1934 – 1943 have “perfected the approach to film making that was not only uniquely [the use of the word encourages “Japaneseness”] Japanese but was equal to the finest achievements of the traditional arts [presumably Japanese] of previous generations.” (Burch, 1979, p.143).

Burch’s general scope of historical events from social and political perspectives may be correct. However, the author’s argument on the works of film directors like Ozu is

⁸ Literally translates from Japanese as ‘national body’. It is a complex term that embodies a variety of meanings such as national character, national essence, national substance, state structure and national polity. Kokutai is characterized by imperial reign. The term is discussed in Joseph M. Kitagawa’s *History of Religions (Japanese Kokutai (National Community) History and Myth)*, 1985.

problematical on many levels, particularly in the discussion of national uniqueness and Burch's exceedingly subjective and flattening approach towards Ozu's legacy. Aside from stressing the period of nationalism, this statement lacks additional information and discussions (addressed in Daisuke Miyao's *Aesthetics of Shadow*, 2014) to be credible and justifiable of such claims. Written in the late 1970s, Burch's body of work is until present day, in many ways, well regarded and referenced among many Japanese and foreign scholars. However, one must be extremely careful of relying on any claims that enhance the discourse of cultural 'uniqueness' as it leads to generalisation, Orientalisation and displays a certain level of insufficiency of investigation and critique.

It is true, however, that the importance and desperation felt towards the need of protecting traditional culture and its values were at large in the period of 1930s – 1940s. Many Japanese writers and intellectuals such as Tetsuo Watsuji, Kunio Yanagida and Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, were positioned strongly against "Americanism" and its consequences such as "frenzy promoted by mass production and marketing of cheap thrills, gadgets, and instant gratification", as well as against a cult of 'fast living' and 'eroticism' spread through imported American cinema "leading Japanese minds away from their cultural roots." (Davis, 1997, p.51)

In 1933 Tanizaki, concerned with the impending loss of Japanese 'purity', wrote:

What losses we have suffered, in comparison with the Westerner. The Westerner has been able to move forward in ordered steps, while we have met superior civilization and have had to surrender to it, and we have had to leave a road we have followed for thousands of years... No matter what complaints we may have, Japan has chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but to move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind... (Tanizaki, 1933, pp.15-16)

In spite of a seeming "innocence" and "acceptance", which is displayed in the last sentence of this passage, the statement is, in fact, infused with, what can be argued as, political messages conveyed in a reverse psychological way. The choice of words such as "surrender to superior civilization", "ordered steps", "*had* [must be highlighted as it implies a forceful or undesired act] to leave the road we followed for thousands years", "follow the West" all seem

to be designed to wound the national pride, which is bound to cause agitation among not only right-wing political followers, but also the general public. Circumstantially, the following historical developments gave the opportunity for this particular and many other “cries” of similar nature mongering for the restoration of the past to be heard and met.

In the period of 1930s – early 1940s, consciousness of Japanese cultural identity was growing rapidly and was being incorporated into the new mediums of radio and film. The apparent mass media boost of Japanese values in the political and social spheres has also influenced cinema productions. Cinema became a large stage where the ideals of “Japaneseness” could be expressed. Additionally, as Darrell William Davis notes, “Japan’s occupation of Manchuria in 1931 marked the beginning of a gradual withdrawal from the community of democratic nations, along with a gradual escalation of nationalism and xenophobia.” (Davis, 1997, p.3) Consequently, the period from the late 1930s (to be more precise from the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937) until the WWII defeat in 1945 was characterised by an expansion of the government's participation in cinema production and distribution, by the means of inspection and censorship. The film industry was under direct control of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Media Section of the Imperial Army. The establishment of the 1939 Motion Picture Law gave the authorities all-encompassing power in the industry.

Consequently, both the Home Ministry and the army, which have been heavily subsidizing the film industry, could force out of business any errant movie company; actors could also be fired and directors subjected to harassment.⁹ The authorities not only viewed every film made but also engaged in preproduction script censorship. (Sato, 1982, p.100)

⁹ Fumio Kamei’s *Fighting Soldiers*, 1940 that depicted a tragic side of war led Kamei to losing his position as a film director until the end of the war. Yasujiro Ozu’s 1939 script for *The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice* was set-aside until the end of the war due to authorities’ harassment over the scene treatments.

In the 1940s the censorship was further tightened with the Home Ministry issuing a set of strict instructions¹⁰ concerning the film-making process. The rules were to force the termination of the urban love story and melodrama genres consequently leading to almost exclusive production of “national policy film” (*kokusaku eiga*). (Sato, 1982, p.101)

Films in this period were characterised by the vagueness of the image of the enemy (*Ukata Abe's Flaming Sky* 1940, Tomotaka Tasaka's *Five Scouts* 1938, Kajiro Yamamoto's *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya* 1942, Masahiro Makino's *The Opium War* 1943) and the concentration on the humane side of Japanese soldiers. The films were not intended to galvanize hatred for the enemy (as it can be seen in other war propaganda cinemas like *The U.S.*, which portrayed Japanese soldiers as “slat-eyed Orientals with hideous, barbaric grins” (Sato, 1982, p.101)) since the enemy was hardly ever shown. They were, however, intended to emphasise how to die bravely in the battle. Sato writes, “They created a uniquely Japanese form of cinematic propaganda by treating war as a kind of spiritual training...” (Sato, 1982, p.103) This statement, however, can be arguable as there might be similar approaches in other world cinemas. As far as the spiritual training is concerned, it can be argued that in this period Bushido¹¹ ideology was also infused and utilised in war conduct as well as encouraged through cinema. Gregory Barrett in his book *Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Socio-political and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines* (1989) argues (while discussing the archetype of the Chaste Warrior) that in 1930s with the rise of militarism, Confucian restraints also tightened. He writes: “In Confucian morality sex is not a sin, but amorous escapades are frowned upon because they could lead one to neglect his duty.” (Barrett, 1989, p.47)

According to Bushido, desires were considered as attachments that result in suffering. Thus, the strength (physical and spiritual) and wisdom can only be found in a “desireless” state. Emotions, therefore, are considered as a weakness and an unacceptable trait. In Bushido, in

¹⁰ The instructions included a set of five guidelines as follows:

1. Citizens were to be shown healthy entertainment film with positive themes
2. Screen appearances of satirists and comedians were not to increase
3. Films portraying petty bourgeoisie and the wealthy along with those praising private happiness were prohibited along with scenes of women smoking, cabaret life, frivolous behavior, and dialogues including many foreign words.
4. Films depicting the productive sectors of national life (agriculture) were to be encouraged
5. Preproduction inspection of all scenarios was to be carried out; rewriting was to be ordered if the violations were found. (Sato, 1988: 101)

¹¹ Bushido can be vaguely defined as a Samurai practice (or a code of conduct) that encompasses some of the significant samurai values, such as obligation, loyalty, martial arts mastery, honour and commitment not only to the superiors but also to “death” itself.

order to overcome the fear of death and complete the duty, a Samurai is expected to possess a tranquil selfless state, signified by the complete freedom from the attachments. Reaching the selfless state of *Mu* (nothingness) or *Ku* (the void) requires him to suppress all the weakening sentiments such as passion or sensitivity. Barrett notes, “While such philosophical concepts usually presuppose a nothingness from which everything springs, they can also be used to resign young men to war and death”. (Barrett, 1989, p.50)

Returning to Tadao Sato’s discourse, he makes an additional remark on the scenes of military training in films of the period, which were depicted in a semi-documentary manner, however they left out the brutality of punishment soldiers were condemned to in reality. Sato writes, that the “film had not only ignored the brutality of such training but also its cruel method of eliciting submission.” (Sato, 1982, p.103)

The period also indicates what Darrell William Davis in his book *Picturing Japaneseness. Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (1997) calls a Monumental Style in cinema production which was “permeated by a hieratic, sacramental appropriations of a classical heritage in order to promote an apotheosis of Japanese national identity.” (Davis, 1997, p.45). According to Davis, the film industry was deployed to produce the images and visions of what constitutes the ideal Japanese way of life and conduct. However, aside from standard wartime propaganda films, Monumental Style was also applied in films that presented “Japaneseness” in a more vague and subtle way such as “appropriations of feudal Japanese narratives and aesthetics...” (Davis, 1997, p.2)

Therefore, Japanese cinema of the 1930s portrayed the construction of Japanese identity where nearly ancient native traditions were incorporated and communicated through the medium and technology of modernity. Davis argues that his described Monumental Style “finds ways to incorporate traditional aesthetics into the films, not just as a setting but as basic building blocks of the films’ stylistic patterning.” (Davis, 1997, p.9). This is shown through the articulation of space by the means of long takes, fluid camera movements, locations, set design, the ceremonial portrayal of Japanese family system and so on. Davis uses terms such as spiritual, sacramental and ritualistic to express the thematic features of Monumental Style. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto¹² in his review of *Picturing Japaneseness* sums up,

¹² Professor of Media and Cinema Studies at Waseda University.

“costumes, sets and locations were to emphasize the feudal past as spectacular. Purenness and sacredness is articulated in the form of Bushido and Confucian values.” (Yoshimoto, 1998, p.420)

The strongest point Davis makes in his study, however, is the correlation between the imported medium of classical Western cinema and traditional Japanese ways of interactions, which are characterised by patience, suggestive actions rather than voiced ones, non-verbal communication (lack of dialogues or increased silence), etc.

In technique as well as subject matter the films aim to return the lost advantage of Japanese arts. ...Long takes, long shots, very slow camera movements, highly ceremonial manner of blocking, acting, and set design. The monumental style sets out to transform Japanese tradition from a cultural legacy into a sacrament. Its intentional social mission is propagandistic, yet it is less propagandistic than hieratic. Its textual features, then, show a remarkable adaptation of Western technology to Japanese forms of expression. (Davis, 1997, pp.6-7)

With his analysis, Davis makes a great contribution to the study of Japanese cinema in the pre-war period, Japanese film propaganda as well as film's role in the construction of the national identity of modern Japan. In order to extend Davis's discussion Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto in a review article comments upon a number of issues. Here are two main problems Yoshimoto observes:

- Ambiguity of Monumental Style as a sub-genre of *jidai-geki*

Yoshimoto agrees that the theoretical category of monumental style is sufficient and appropriate for a better understanding of Japanese cinema and the cultural history of modern Japan. However, the exact definition of Monumental Style for Yoshimoto remains ambiguous as the corpus of ten or so (as Davis claims) monumental films of the 1930s are unspecified in the book. Therefore, one could argue that Davis generalises his critique. (Yoshimoto, 1998, p.420)

- Methodology

Yoshimoto comments on a relative lack of Japanese sources utilised in Davis's work and points out his exclusive reliance on the narrow selection of mostly secondary materials in English. Yoshimoto then sympathises with Davis himself, being aware of this problem and trying to solve the issue through his polemical argument on the relationship between film and history, or text and context.

Can textual analysis of film style tell us something about the contextual conditions of stylistic change? Does analysis of film style reveal hitherto unnoticed aspects of historical context? The question implies a reversal of the assumption that historical context (social and intertextual) reveals something about individual artistic texts. Can we also assume the opposite? Does the work performed by artistic texts, like films, reveal something about their historical context that we would not otherwise know? (Davis, 1997, cited in Yoshimoto, 1998, p.420)

This evokes a strong argument that the relation between artistic style and historic events is, often, ambiguous, indirect, assumed or even speculative. However, Yoshimoto argues that despite a brilliant perspective, the detailed analysis of three exemplary monumental films do not seem to successfully demonstrate this new approach to the text/context relationship. And perhaps what is necessary to bridge the gap between text and contexts are the primary historical sources and critical writings on film in Japanese. (Yoshimoto, 1998, p.422)

Being a great supporter and advocate of traditional Japanese aesthetics as well as national 'uniqueness' and its dissimilarity to the West, Tanizaki debated the struggle of unification of a Western medium and Japanese aesthetics and traditions:

One need only compare American, French, and German films to see how greatly nuances in shading and coloration can vary in motion pictures. In the photographic image itself, to say nothing of the acting and the script, there somehow emerge differences in national character. If this is true even when identical equipment, chemicals, and film are used, how much better our own photographic technology might have suited our

complexion, our facial features, our climate, our land. And had we invented the photograph and the radio, how much more faithfully they would reproduce the special character of our voices and our music. Japanese music is above all the music of reticence, of atmosphere. When recorded, or amplified by a loudspeaker, the greater part of its charm is lost. In conversation, too, we prefer the soft voice, the understatement. Most important of all are the pauses. Yet the photograph and radio render these moments of silence utterly lifeless. And so we distort the arts themselves to curry favour for them with the machines. These machines are the inventions of the Westerners, and are, as we might expect, well suited to Western arts. But precisely on this account they put our own arts in great disadvantage. (Tanizaki, 1933, pp.16-17)

I find the above statement greatly problematic. To begin with, it is exceedingly nationalistic and begins to strike the notes of futile self-pity due to the fact that the Japanese did not get a chance to invent a cinematic medium suitable enough to express their “unique” characteristics, without consideration that perhaps experimentation and altered appropriation of that medium could salvage the issue. The thought and statement of this nature distinct with an intended promotion of nationalistic feeling, thus, leads to a large impact on the way in which Japanese culture is read and examined in Japanese and Western scholarly debate. Considering the fact that Tanizaki was only one of many who expressed similar convictions, it is natural for this discourse to contribute vastly to the numerous studies of differentiation of Japan from the rest of the world as the “exotic other”, as a “unique” nation one can only understand if he himself is Japanese (*nihonjinron*), as well as to the ‘mystification’ of cultural patterns. It expresses a sense of purity and of origin, which gets diluted when passed through western medium.

It is evident that change (especially change enforced from outside) is always met with opposition. Therefore, I cannot help but to reflect on the fact that if this change had taken place during a period of relative peace and not coming from the then enemy (The U.S.), there would be a chance of much smoother merging of two or more styles, and a much less forceful mobilisation of nationalistic movements to find expression in culture and film.

Thus, taking into consideration numerous writings on the loss of national identity and

heritage that Tanizaki and many others such as himself grieved about, it can be argued, that the real problem lies not in the event of the import of an alien medium along with its aesthetics (that supposedly showed Japanese arts to great disadvantage) but in the timeframe and circumstances within which that medium was imported. Japanese relationships with the outside world in that timeframe were extremely tense. The period was characterised with the upsurge of fundamentalist nationalism and attempts at restoring monarchical principles. Despite the fact that none of the political groups and extremists who supported the above movements had in the end seized political power, “the climate of assassination, intimidation and propaganda undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown of party government and the disappearance of international liberalism from public discourse”. (Townsend, 2011¹³) The strain in the political field led Japan’s quest for power to the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and an eventual confrontation with the West.

Returning to Davis’s argument, stating that the films loaded with political utility became the carriers of what he calls ‘transitive Japaneseness’, a matter of being Japanese *for* some purpose rather than just being Japanese” (Davis, 1997, p.7). The purpose in this context is war. Thus, the ‘mystification’, hence naturalisation, and enhancement of a need for a purity of Japanese aesthetics came in handy for the purpose of jolting and supporting the war conduct. The films are constructed to show a model of patriotism, of a person who is proud of his heritage and is willing to sacrifice everything for his country. Davis concludes that the monumental style “lays out a space for a specific, essentially religious purpose of inspiring the faithful and fortifying the rectitude of their belief.” (Davis, 1997, p.7).

Davis’ positioning towards the Monumental Style is inclined towards the subject matter of Japan’s intentional propaganda during the time period of an inclination towards rejection of outsiders’ influence (The U.S. or Europe) on Japanese culture and the structure of society. This argument becomes relevant considering that Japan was in the period of war with China and closing in to The Great Pacific War, which means the nationalism would naturally be enhanced during such periods of unrest to encourage the national spirit. However, Daisuke Miyao¹⁴ complicates this study. Miyao’s book *The Aesthetics of Shadow* (2013) is dedicated to explorations of early Japanese film history through the subject of a cinematic medium focusing mainly on lighting technology and methods of its use. Miyao argues that filmmakers

¹³ Dr Susan Townsend. 2011. *Japan’s Quest for Empire 1931-1945*. BBC. Accessed 7 September 2015

¹⁴ Associate Professor of Japanese Cinema Studies at the University of Oregon

at the time were not involved in such cinematic endeavours deliberately or even on a level of awareness. Aside from enhancement of the things “uniquely” national, the mystified Japanese visual style, achieved mostly through lighting techniques, was greatly related to poor equipment quality and very low funding. He, thus, claims that initially Japanese filmmakers were anxious to imitate the “low-key” lighting employed in Hollywood production.

When Japanese cinematographers realized that it would be difficult to achieve such low-key cinematography under the conditions of filmmaking in wartime Japan, they turned to one aspect of Japanese art – praise of shadows, which was easily available, and used it to justify their practices in the name of the “Japanese characteristics in cinematographic technology.” In other words, they strategically connected the aesthetics of shadow to nationalistic discourse. It was not their original goal to formulate “Japanese” cinematography – they wanted to perfectly mimic the low-key cinematography of Hollywood. But they consciously chose to name the aesthetic of shadow Japanese aesthetic. Japan or things Japanese did not occupy the center of their minds, even when these notions appeared to be at the center of their discussions. (Miyao, 2013, p.201)

The problem of underfunding, quality and the limited amount of equipment was severe. Miyao mentions Soyama Naomori (J.O. Studio, Kyoto) who wrote that the Japanese must learn American methods of cinematography, which was, however, impossible due to financial issues. A cinematographer, Ogura Kunji, was also concerned with the diversity and quantity of lighting that was available to them. Consequently, Japanese directors and cinematographers had to find a balance between an ideal cinematography (which many saw in Hollywood) and the reality of restricted items. (Miyao, 2013, p.207)

Midorikawa Michio, the head of the NSC, claimed, “We should observe the beauty of shadows, which appears gracefully in the harmony of [Japanese] architecture and lights.” Midorikawa’s declaration appeared in his essay *Cameraman’s Lives and Kyoyo [cultural knowledge]* (*Kameraman no seikatsu to kyoyo*) in *Cinematography Reader*. (Miyao, 2013, p.207)

Midorikawa's essay was influential among the Japanese cinematographers who turned to the aid of traditional aesthetics to justify their unfulfilled desire to imitate Hollywood-style lighting.

It must be noted that Miyao does not completely disregard the fact that the pre WWII Japanese film industry did produce numerous propaganda films that glorified a Japanese way of life in that period. Neither does he disagree with Davis on the subject matter of Monumental Style. Miyao, however, doubts the scale and extent of this phenomenon of what he calls "institutionalized activity of defining and reconstructing the 'Japaneseness' led by the state." (Miyao, 2013, p.202)

In my personal view, I find both Davis' and Miyao's studies of great value. Both studies make important points with regards to historical film production and processes that impact the creation of styles and techniques, which, one might argue, remained partly persistent beyond a single period of time (1920s – 1940s) and left a legacy for contemporary cinema production.

The period of Monumental Style culminated at the end of World War II with the defeat and complete submission to the American State throughout the period of the American occupation from 1945 to 1952. Thus, the post-war period of Japanese history and culture is indicated by a wavering geopolitical and social position. Therefore, the approach to Japanese cinema after World War II has to be framed within these severe contradictions and exchanges between Japan and America.

With the end of World War II and the defeat, there came an outburst of promotion and distribution of American movies. Promoting Hollywood was considered as a political and economic scheme set out to maximise the financial power and the manipulation of the U.S. government over defeated Japan. Hollywood was advertised as *bunka* (culture), however, not simply any culture, but the highest and the most superior of all. As Hiroshi Kitamura writes, "the best way to understand American culture is American cinema" that was sold as "the fountains of culture and knowledge, as we desire it!" (Kitamura, 2010, p.87) He also adds, that after the defeat "Hollywood representatives repeatedly denounced Japanese cinema as 'vulgar' and 'lowbrow.'" (Kitamura, 2010, p.90)

At the same time, the response of the younger generation to the imported medium was quite affectionate. The youth (both audiences and young filmmakers) felt enlightened and rushed to explore American culture and ideas that were mainly promoted through imported cinema. They were happy to develop a passion for the lifestyles and ethics of what was perceived and presented as a 'superior' nation. According to Kitamura, Japanese movie enthusiasts expressed extraordinary admiration for American cinema, specifically for its 'remedial quality'. Kitamura quotes one of the U.S. movie fans who, in October 1948's survey, wrote that Hollywood films "eliminate our worries in life" and "give us courage" ... the movies would "recover the dreams that are being lost and provide warmth to this cold world". (Kitamura, 2010, p.167)

Tadao Sato argues that in post-war years it was strictly prohibited to criticise America's role in the tragedy, hence "the only way the subject could be broached in film was sentimentally..." (Sato, 1988, p.197) To emphasise his point, Sato brings an example of two films. First is *The Bells of Nagasaki* (*Nagasaki no Kame*, 1950) by Takashi Nagai, which tells a story of a former professor at Nagasaki Medical College who died of radiation-induced leukaemia in 1951; a Catholic who regarded the atomic blast as a heaven-sent trial to be endured. He writes, "The film attempted a faithful portrayal of a human being's resolve in the face of approaching death." (Sato, 1988: 198) The second example is *I'll Never Forget the Song of Nagasaki* (*Nagasaki no Uta wa Wasureji*, 1952) by Tomotaka Tasaka, which Sato describes as "pure sentimental rubbish" that revealed the submissiveness of many Japanese people. The film tells a story of a young girl blinded in the atomic blast who falls in love with an American seeking forgiveness. The story symbolises the pardoning of America – a theme that quickly develops into "shabby submissiveness to one's fate". (Sato, 1988, p.198)



Screenshot 1: Tomotaka Tasaka's *I'll Never Forget the Song of Nagasaki*, 1952

I'll Never Forget the Song of Nagasaki - the film had an ultra right script writer, Tsutomu Sawamura, who had promoted militarism and praised the war effort... who worked with director Tomotaka Tasaka, whose artistic war time masterpieces emphasized the human side of Japanese soldiers. All of a sudden they team up to make a film on love between a Japanese girl and an American soldier. ... The film's sentimental message was that America's guilt in the sufferings of Japanese would make America assume a soft attitude toward Japan. In other words, it is like the petulant wife, who, after being soundly beaten by her husband, feels his love for her even more. In this masochistic way of bringing up the subject of the Bomb, it was thought that America's love for Japan, which does not bear any grudges, would increase. (Sato, 1988, p.201)

At the same time the *rashamen* genre developed. The term was applied to a Japanese woman who comes to be a mistress of a Westerner. Although, the Japanese themselves were making films in a similar genre consequential to the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 – 1945 such as *Vow in the Desert* (*Nessa no Chikai*, 1940), the main protagonist of which was a Japanese engineer building a road from Peking to Mongolia whose lover is a daughter of a rich Chinese man. From her side, the girl tries to convince her people of the Japanese engineer's good intentions.

This love story between a Japanese man from a conquering side and a Chinese woman from the conquered side symbolized the need for cooperation. Moreover, it rationalized events because it allowed the

conqueror to think that because he loved the conquered, no force had been used to bring about submission. The conquered side, however, felt both the physical pain of losing and the psychological pain of serving the conqueror. The old concept of the man conquering the woman in sexual intercourse may also have played a part here, revealing the stronghold of the idea of male dominance despite modern ideas of sexual equality. (Sato, 1988, p.201)

The *rashamen* genre faced a complete fiasco in Japan. The films made “Japanese viewers uneasy, bringing home the parallel that Japan’s relationship with America had probably been that of a geisha and patron”. (Sato, 1988, pp.200-201)

As far as the Samurai drama is concerned, which prevailed in the pre-war period, soon after the war defeat the genre got suppressed by the American Occupation Army (SCAP). According to Donald Richie, SCAP prohibited “films favoring or approving feudal loyalty and direct or indirect approval of suicide” (Richie 1982, p.145). Davis Desser writes, “Necessary to the ‘democratization’ of Japan was a shift from feudal and transcendental values to a focus on the primacy and integrity of the individual. The films produced under the Occupation’s aegis were ‘encouraged’ to reflect this value system.” (Desser, 1988, p.21)

The revival of the genre came with releases of Akira Kurosawa's *Roshomon* in 1950 and *Seven Samurai* in 1954, two of which generated a sub-genre of the Nostalgic Samurai Drama that, up until the end of the 1950s, was one of the major themes in national cinema satisfying the cultural ‘starvation’ that occurred after the defeat. However, by the mid 1960s, the Samurai film production once again declined to a number of approximately ten titles a year.



Screenshot 2: Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, 1954

Ultimately, from a cinematic perspective, both pre- and post-war periods were characterised by the works of directors such as Mikio Naruse, Sadao Yamanaka, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu. The latter would define Japanese cinema in the following two decades and become one of the most influential Japanese film directors acknowledged on an international level as the most 'Japanese' of all Japanese film directors up until the present day. It became a usual practice for Western scholars to fall in admiration for Ozu's work, which are still largely (however not entirely accurately) considered the ultimate representations of the spirit and character of the Japanese people. Thus, David Desser debates the writings of Noel Burch who held high regard for Ozu and his 'uniqueness':

Noel Burch in *To the Distant Observer*, discusses general semiotic aspects of Japanese traditional artistic practice, and then goes on to state that the Japanese cinema reveals fundamental shared aesthetic principles with classical art. What Burch actually then goes on to do is claim a certain "classical" status for certain Japanese directors (Ozu, Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, Oshima) who manifest what he feels are the paradigmatic aspects of Japanese culture in its differences; thus there's a certain tautological character to Burch's thesis. ... If Japanese culture of the twentieth century differs in fundamental ways from Japanese culture of the twelfth century (or earlier), then to claim cinema's manifestation of the older tradition is certainly to make an anomalous, even bizarre, claim. ... It may be that the Japanese cinema of certain period (in Burch's 30s) did initially reproduce the essential characteristics of Japanese traditional art,

but there were later cinematic reactions [New Wave Movement of the 1960 – 1970s] against these films, against the traditional culture. (Desser, 1988, p.14)

Tadao Sato gives detailed demonstration of Ozu's cinematic techniques, which are important to mention in order to draw similarities with the stylistic work of contemporary film directors discussed in the later chapters. Below are Ozu's main cinematic techniques:

- The usual positioning of the camera is just above the floor level (the camera never looks down on the actors)
- The shots are mostly stationary (Ozu almost never used a crane or a dolly)¹⁵
- The arrangement of characters in the same shot appears placed side by side, at the same angle as opposed to face-a-face positioning
- Restriction of movement (actors never walk across the shot and never rapidly appear in the frame)
- Minimisation of profile shots and use of *donden* – a “sudden reverse”
- No cross dissolve shots are used (and eventual abandonment of the fade in and fade out shots)
- Choreographic acting (actors move at the same pace and speak at the same measured rate following Ozu's tempo, orchestrated like puppets)
- No violent action, strong language, or agitated expressions
- “Eyes Behaviour” in the non verbal acting

(Sato, 1988, pp.186-193)

¹⁵ David Desser counter argues this stating that even though Ozu used fewer of dynamic camera movements at the later stages of his career, “pans and dollies are frequent in his films until the mid-1950s and his pre-war films are positively giddy with camera tracks, pans, tilts, and dollies.” (Desser in Phillips and Stringer, 2007: 280)



Screenshot 3: Yasujiro Ozu's An Inn in Tokyo, 1935



Screenshot 4: Yasujiro Ozu's Late Spring, 1949



Screenshot 5: Yasujiro Ozu's Tokyo Story, 1954

By looking at the information stated above one could easily see the individualism and innovation of Ozu's cinema. Ironically, however, it is a fact largely overlooked, that Ozu's cinematic endeavours were initially fully inspired by the American cinema of 1910s and 1920s as well as its techniques. It is evident that Ozu was very much influenced by the international film industry: "he saw countless American silent comedies in Japan and regularly watched American films while overseas in Singapore that had been confiscated by the resident Japanese military." (Marran, 2002, p.166)

Many of Ozu's stylistic patterns illustrated by Sato may also be seen as a typical characteristic of Monumental Style that expresses Japanese heritage and aura during the period of intense nationalistic movements. Davis, however, excludes Ozu in his debates as a representative of the style. While Noel Burch to a large extent denies an influence¹⁶ of a Western/American cinematic style on Ozu's 'uniqueness' and does not weary to praise Ozu's *oeuvre* as supreme achievement only comparable in its contribution to the great artists of the pre-cinematic past.

Harry Harootunian, in the article *Detour to the East: Noel Burch and the task of Japanese Film*. (n.d.), writes:

¹⁶ Burch briefly acknowledges Western (Hollywood) influence on Ozu's much earlier works. However, there are some critiques like Hasumi Shigehiko who renounces Ozu as the most Japanese film director due to the lack of seasonal (one of the biggest Japanese aesthetic component) references in Ozu's films.

At the time he wrote his book, Burch was committed to the program of contributing further to a Marxian aesthetics inaugurated by Brecht and Eisenstein, by taking what has proved to be a momentous “detour to the East.” Yet the detour, dedicated to comparing the modes of Japanese and Western cinema, was a necessary condition for constructing an agenda that might disclose the “ideologically and culturally determined system of representation from which the film industries of Hollywood and elsewhere derived their power and profit.”

An integral part of this program was to provide a history of Japanese cinema that was capable of illustrating how native theory was inscribed in actual artistic and cultural practices and how the post-war drew upon the fund of a pre-war experience of film making that already utilized this tradition by radicalizing it in order to distance itself from the domination of Western exemplars. (Harootunian, n.d.)

The New Wave film director Shohei Imamura was also critical of Ozu’s tenacity of portraying the ‘Japanese spirit’ as it potentially served fascist ideology. Imamura expressed the concern that directors like Ozu were content “to make everyday life simply into an extension of nature itself,” enabling an escape from society into nature, and shifting the focus “from character description of events and peoples into descriptions of natural scenes” (279). (Imamura in Harootunian, n.d.) Thus, the characters have a tendency of becoming the mere decorative elements to the scenes of nature, which can already be detected in the list of Ozu’s titles: *Early Spring*, *Early Summer*, *Late Spring*, *Floating Weeds* etc. While this precise concept of life’s portrayal was and still remains what Western viewers and critiques admire, the audiences and critics in Japan however had “rejected them as too statically sterile and close to nature.” (Harootunian, n.d.)

Taking into consideration both praise and critique, it is my opinion, however, that the truth lies somewhere half way between the two. Ozu’s simple but masterful adaptation of a Western medium with American cinematic styles and techniques and merges those with traditional Japanese costume and architecture has resolved in the creation of what many cinema scholars (like Burch) and critiques since then and continuously refer to as a ‘unique’

Japanese style, which inevitably and unfortunately only enhances the discourse on nationalism and “Japaneseness” (*nihonjinron*) and should be treated with great care. Nevertheless, despite the sterility from the political and social in Ozu’s works, one cannot deny him the position of an *auteur*, whose techniques and subject matters are still largely influential for contemporary film directors such as Hirokazu Koreeda, who I will closely discuss in the following chapter. However, it is vital to detach Ozu’s work from the notions of national ‘uniqueness’ where they are usually placed. One must acknowledge that arguably his work neither represents the Monumental Style nor symbolises what it is to be purely Japanese. It is, however, the embodiment of intelligence and creativity of a man whose work was influenced by foreign imported arts and combined with local culture and surroundings. One must further remember and acknowledge that a great part of Ozu’s work was created in nationalistic political and social environments. Yet, the degree to which it influenced his work is debatable. Thus, I perceive it as most productive to follow a relation to his work which acknowledges, (that there is a strong possibility that) his personality traits and taste preferences (whether (un)determined by the nationalistic or propagandistic ideas on the (sub)conscious level) were the primary factor that influenced his artistic decisions.

Nevertheless, the 1950s were considered to be the Golden Age of Japanese cinema. Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953), Akira Kurosawa's *Roshomon* and *Seven Samurai* (1954), followed by Ishiro Honda's *Godzilla* (1954) and Hiroshi Inagaki's *Samurai Trilogy* (1954 – 1956), all achieved incredible success in the Western market and introduced Japanese cinema onto the global arena.

From a socio-political perspective, however, the Japanese found themselves between two developments at that time. On the one hand, due to the fall of the old order, the regeneration and preservation of the national identity and old values was an important matter specifically for the older generation. At the same time this triggered a number of debates, which mainly, according to Isolde Standish, “grew out of genuine fears that, since the war and defeat, Japanese national identity was being eroded through the importation of Western political concepts of the state, democracy, consumerism, society and morality.” (Standish, 2011, p.83) Therefore, the followers (mostly comprised of political thinkers and academics) of conservatives (Right Wing) have concluded that in order to restrain the scatter of the rioting concepts and reinstate the social congruity was to remove its origins (Left Wing) from the state. Thus, rejecting the capitalist structure and its Left Wing followers, the Right Wing

representatives commenced to create a national reform in order to recover the concept of Kokutai, which in 1970 resolved in the staging of the *coup d'etat* by the military officers whose intentions were to “bring about a new Meiji¹⁷ Restoration and to accomplish this, to restore Japan's soul and spirit.” (Desser, 1988, p.72)

On the other hand, the arrival of American products of the mechanical age – photography and film, along with the cinematic ‘know-how’ – were welcomed by many young and emerging film directors with curiosity and willingness for schooling and rapid exchange of theories and visions. The gap between the West (and the variety of cinematic styles it presented) and Japan began to narrow, as Japan was about to embrace the transnational cinematographic traditions.

On that account, Japan was playing a balancing act between two extremes – the protection of old values and the welcoming of the new ‘democratic’ (related to the post WWII political system) for about a decade. However, with the departure of the American Occupation Army, after a short period of introduction of democratic principles people began to realise that a shift towards liberation would not remain permanent and that “saying goodbye to the old Japan and embracing the democracy imported with the American forces was an illusion” [see chapter two for further clarification] (Katori, 2004, cited in Standish, 2011, p.149). Therefore, the post-occupation betrayal through promises of democratic commitments and ‘American style happiness’ led to a sudden explosion of a nihilistic movement (New Wave in cinema) in the 1960s and 1970s that was largely conducted by youth. David Desser writes, “New Wave movements have been concerned with creating a film content and form capable of revealing the contradictions within Japanese society and with isolating the culture’s increasingly materialist values and its imperialist alliances.” (Desser, 1988, p.4)

As Shunsuke Katori indicates:

As children, they were boys and girls of militarism and were educated to sacrifice one's life in the service of the country. And after defeat, which was unprecedented, society's values changed one hundred and eighty degrees. Yesterday's 'militarism' changed to 'democracy', what had been

¹⁷ Meiji (*Meiji-jidai*) is the period of the reign (1868–1912) of Emperor Mutsuhito of Japan, characterised by Japan’s transition from isolated feudal country to the modern state.

'good' until yesterday became 'bad' and the reverse, what was 'bad' changed to 'good' (Katori, 2004, cited in Standish, 2011, p.149)

The ideals of integrity in pre-war film genres were replaced by cynicism and “popular period filmmakers could neither attack the marriage between sincerity and loyalty, nor orchestrate rebellion in other than fatalistic tones.” (Barrett, 1989, p.41) Thus, cinema production had turned in the direction of independent film production. The major themes explored in the cinema of the time were *yakuza*, youth, love suicide and most importantly, sexual liberation.

The 1960s, I think, were in a way about the body (*nikutai*), they were not about the Party or power politics, the 1960s were, I feel, about the body. (Yoshida, 1971, cited in Standish, 2011, p.79)

This movement was, in fact, similar to any other of the New Wave movements across the world with one notable difference: The Japanese New Wave movement was initiated within the mainstream environment, which is an important fact in the formation of the genre as well as its differentiation from the other such movements worldwide. According to Dessler, aside from the initial works of Hani Susumu, the majority of early New Wave films were produced in the leading commercial film studios like Shichiku¹⁸. He argues that:

It distinguishes the Japanese New Wave from its radical counterparts in France and England, whose New Waves came from the ranks of independent filmmaking or were aided by government subsidies. ... Polish radical cinema of the late '50s, which Japanese film historians and New Wave directors themselves have claimed, was more influential on the early Japanese New Wave than French *nouvelle vague*.¹⁹ (Dessler, 1988, p.6)

Nevertheless, at about the same time in America, France, Great Britain and Japan, the attention turned toward a social group that was generally ignored, let alone considered as a serious obstacle or bother to the state. In the 1950s youth was identified as isolated and in many ways as a repressed social class. In the 1960s, youth came to their rights and began to

¹⁸ The situation changed by the middle of the 1960s when almost every major New Wave director had formed his own production company.

¹⁹ Source: *Sekai No Eiga Sakka 31: Nohon Eigashi* (Film Directors of the World 31: History of Japanese Film) Tokyo: Cinema Jumbo, 1976

establish a stronger place in society. The cinema gave young people a perfect stage for expressing their dissatisfaction and exploring the limitations of the existing social dogmas and regulations. The student movements, the protests against the Vietnam War and so on, gave young directors a stimulus for a rebellion against the political norms as well as the common structure of the society like family and gender politics. Dennis Washburn in his writing about a growing rift in 1950's Japan makes an accurate suggestion that the rise of the industry and an economic miracle, which occurred in the late post-war period, influenced a younger generation to utilise the problem of a dislocation suffered within youth culture as a popular subject for mass entertainment (like novels, films, manga and anime.) (Washburn, 2000, cited in McDonald, 2006, pp.220-221)

Young people of that time became unconcerned with everything that was of value in the past, rejecting it to great extent: the Feudal system, the War, the traditional cults; they were rejecting everything that the older generation still clung to. In other words, youth began to ignore its historical heritage. The period was marked by the emergence of directors such as Nagisa Oshima (*Cruel Story of Youth, Death by Hanging and Night and Fog in Japan*), Shohei Imamura (*The Insect Woman*), Hiroshi Teshigahara (*The Woman in the Dunes*), Masahiro Shinoda (*Double Suicide*), Yoshishige Yoshida (*Eros + Massacre*) and Toshio Matsumoto (*Funeral Parade of Roses*).



Screenshot 6: Shohei Imamura's *The Insect Woman*, 1963



Screenshot 7: Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman In The Dunes*, 1964

All of the new, established directors were determined to find a new cinematic and hereby arguable a new cultural identity, which also meant to go against the long accustomed and respected cinematic style and traditions. As Masahiro Shinoda recalls, "...we [the so-called New Wave directors] did all have one thing in common: the older generation of directors were confident of what they were depicting. The younger generation was not so optimistic, they were suspicious even of themselves" (Shinoda, n.d., cited in Desser, 1988, p.46). Nevertheless, their attention turned toward the exploration of their desires for freedom, love and sex that were repressed in the past, not only by the state and religion but also due to the influence of the Bushido ideology that was very influential during the war period.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari reflect on this kind of repression in their book *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* (1972), explaining that sexuality can be regarded as a powerful force in damaging the initial order of things. They write: "if desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society..." (Deleuze and Guattari 1972, p.126)

One could, however, argue that young people in Japan became strongly aware of Western ideas of romance and yearned for it long before the war and post-occupational period. However, in a context where suffering is considered a respectable trait, people are obliged to subdue their desires and submit to the state; passivity and obedience therefore became a regular way of conduct as "duty became of supreme importance in a militaristic Japan where individual desires were castigated." (Yoshikawa, 1981, cited in Barrett, 1989, p.47)

Consequently, in post-occupational Japan of the 1960s and the 1970s the Western ideas of love and sexuality fully began to ‘flourish’ (even though desire and liberation of old family values was also still negotiated and revolted against in the West). Newfound liberties in love and sex were used as weapons against political forces. In cinema, love suicide (as a form of social revolt) has become a primary Japanese love narrative, therefore, in a sense, also becoming the representation of protest against the society where romantic values were muted.



Screenshot 8: Nagisa Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth*, 1960

Until the present time, the New Wave movement of the 1960s and early 1970s can be considered as the single dramatic change in Japanese society and cinema as well as the time when the cinema of Japan and its modes of representation strongly and openly reflected upon an entangled relationship between the individual and the social structure.

On the general scale of Japanese cinema critique and scholarly debates, there appears to be a considerate lack of scholarly works on the New Wave movement except David Desser's *Eros Plus Massacre* in 1988. It seems to be much less common to refer to or to consider New Wave cinema as a distinctive period in the formation of national, and for that matter a “unique” (traditional), cinematic style. Yet, while being disregarded in these ways, New Wave remains one of the most significant epochs of Japanese cinema in terms of representations of the political, social and cultural struggles. However, even with the increase of independent production and distribution, like any other revolutionary development, the Japanese New Wave was doomed to die out sooner or later. The reason for this may be the fact that “the political goals which gave life to the movement came to seem increasingly out of reach, mirroring the shift in the quality and quantity of political activity at the end of the

decade of 1960s” (Desser, 1988, p.10). In this sense, the Japanese New Wave movement displays some similarity to the events of May 1968, as well as other comparable movements in The U.S. and Europe. Mainstream culture (largely influenced by political and social convictions) there and in Japan was also quick to pronounce the 1960s movements as failures. However, one cannot deny the legacy it left and the possibilities it created for many after, culturally and politically, particularly in terms of gender politics and sexuality.

In Japan, despite the following throw back into the previously occurring struggle of national identity, it is evident that the movement had contributed vastly to the formation of contemporary Japan and its current state of cinema. As far as the scholarly debates are concerned, the extensive period of silence in terms of Japanese avant-garde film critique had been disrupted with the release of three books²⁰ (in English) on the films of the 1960s and the 1970s in 2011, during the time of the Tohoku disaster. As Ryan Cook²¹ suggests, the appearance of these three books at the same time confirms the revived significance of the arts of the 1960s and 1970s period in the current context (Cook, 2012. *Film Quarterly*, University of California Press). While there is no doubt in the renewed interest in this particular era, the effects this will have on contemporary film production (narrative and stylistic) is yet uncertain.

It is essential to note that Japanese cinema audiences reduced rapidly from 1.2 billion in 1960s to 0.2 in the 1980s due to the rise of television.²² This also resulted in the bankruptcy of some of the major film companies like Toei, Shochiku and Toho. Some of which have managed to persist by “specializing in soft-core porno films, called “*roman*” porno, as against the cheaper ‘pink’ films, which have been flourishing since 1960s.” (Sato, 1988, p.244) Some like Shochiku’s director Kinoshita Keisuke attempted to blame the New Wave movement for the state of affairs stating that the film audiences became discouraged by the viewpoints of New Wave directors who “shirked their responsibility to society by making films critical of the culture and highly challenging in their style.”²³ Desser, however, argues this statement by

²⁰ Isolde Standish’s *Politics, Porn and Protest: Japanese Avant-Garde Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s*; Miryam B. Sas’s *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return*, and Steven Ridgely’s *Japanese counterculture: The Antiestablishment Art of Terayama Shuji*.

²¹ PhD Candidate at Yale University and Assistant Professor in Film and Media Studies in Emory College of Art and Science with the research area in Japanese film and cultural history focusing on postwar film and art movements.

²² In 1960, television had begun to make its presence felt in a significant manner; by 1965, it had penetrated approximately 60 percent of all Japanese homes; by 1970, 95 percent of all Japanese homes had television. (8) As attendance fell and theatres closed, film production declined from 547 films in 1960 to 423 films in 1970; by 1978 this number stabilised at 340, the bulk of which were pink movies, *roman porno*, and other sex focused films. (Desser, 1988: 9)

²³ Kinoshita in Personal interview, 26 July 1984, Tokyo, Japan.

confirming, “only 10 percent of the films in any given year in the 1960s could be linked to the New Wave. It is therefore clear that the decline in attendance was due to an overall disenchantment with the cinema, in its competition with television.” (Desser, 1988, p.9)

As Geir Helgesen and Søren Risbjerg Thomsen have noted the “significant historical experiences such as wars and foreign occupations also leave their mark, as do long and prosperous periods of peace.” (Helgesen and Risbjerg, 2006, p.5) In the case of Japan, a long, historical period of peace or to put it more concretely, an extensive period of tranquillity and social compliance have been dominant for centuries until as late as the 1920s and was firmly fixed in the national psyche and behaviour. Ultimately, Japan remains a nation with social, political and cultural elements, which “have behind them long historical antecedents and therefore may be all the more likely to persist into the future” (Reischauer, 2006, p,188). As a result, in spite of its struggles, Japan did managed to retain a balance between the traditional aesthetics and imported Western ones. Chie Nakane writes:

It is Japanese nature [however, speaking of someone’s nature can be extremely mythologising] to accept change with little resistance and, indeed, to welcome and value change; but a superficial change of outlook, as facile as changes in fashion, has not the slightest effect on the firm persistence of the basic nature and core of the personal relations and group dynamics ([ibid 153] Chie Nakane²⁴, n.d, cited qin Helgesen and Risbjerg, 2006, p.196)

In the more recent decades of the 1980s and the 1990s Japan has, once again, found itself between two coexisting social and political realities. On the one hand, it saw a revival of Right-Wing nationalism, urging for the strengthening of traditional Japanese values and patriotism: compulsory respect had to be shown for the national symbols like the flag and anthem in schools, the growth of *jiyu-shikan* (free view of history), which “praises Japan’s conduct before and during World War II for its alleged contribution to the independence of Asian countries” (Ko, 2013, p.19), and so on.

²⁴ Chie Nakane is a vastly respected first female professor emeritus of Social Anthropology at the University of Tokyo as Director of the Institute of Oriental Culture. She is also the first female member of Japan Academy (an organisation founded in 1879 for the purpose of advancing education and science in Japan. It now brings together chief scholars with acclaimed records of academic and scientific achievements.)

The historical revisionists denied the brutal acts of the Japanese army – such as the Nanking Massacre – and the existence of sex slaves, claiming that the former was merely a fable made up by China and the latter, a commercial activity. The Japanese government endorsed such views in 2001 by authorising a new history textbook, compiled by a group, which promoted this *jiyu-shikan*. (Ko, 2013, p.19)

On the other hand, there was also an escalation in the promotion of internationalism. Especially since events like the death of emperor Showa, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Japan's bubble economy Japan has been forced to search for its geopolitical place in a fast globalising world. Tadao Sato comments:

After the defeat in World War II; the hundred-year-old goal of catching up with the West so as not to become a colony is now achieved, but the values and ideals associated with that goal are lost, or uncertain.

American-style democracy lost a lot of credibility due to the Vietnam War and the abnormal increase of crime there in the 1970s. For leftists, both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China became fallen idols in the 1960s and the 1970s. The advanced countries of Western Europe, from which Japan traditionally imported new ideas, new learning, and art forms, no longer exert the same influence. In short, since the Japanese are at a loss for suitable models, they must discover themselves by themselves. The present Japanese cinema has reached the position where people at least recognise that they do not know who they are, and we should watch closely for what they will create next. (Sato, 1988, p.247)

Thus, it becomes clear that approaches to cinema production are intertwined with social and political situations. More importantly, the studies display that film production has been influenced by the urge to intensify nationalism throughout the 1920s to the 1960s as a response to modernisation as well as war and post-war relations between Japan and the U.S. As a result, earlier investigations of Japanese cinema in relation to specific social and political circumstances, provides me with a valid foundation for further analysis of life and death in contemporary Japanese cinema. With my positioning within Japanese film studies being critical of essentialisation and interpretation through the haze of “Japaneseness”, this

analysis will attempt to be wary of processes of ‘mystification’ of patterns of life and death while articulating specific practices, narratives and aesthetic styles.

Therefore, contextual understandings of Monumental Style and Aesthetics of Shadow within the period of the *fabrication of cultural ‘uniqueness’* and their effect on contemporary film examples will be of specific importance to the following chapter – *The Instruments of ‘Mystification.’ Japanese Cinema in the Period of 1990s – 2000s*. The intent is to discover the degree to which the fabrication of cultural ‘uniqueness’ has had an effect on contemporary Japanese cinema in the visual and narrative sense. Has the enhancement of aesthetics of the past influenced cinematic strategies of narrative and style patterns of the 1990s and the 2000s? And if so, how do specific aesthetic traits present in Japan’s film history get referenced and translated through the cinema of that period? Where do the international cinematic practices and techniques stand among these issues? At last: could it be that in the fast-moving, globalising world, the specific way of aesthetically representing life and death in contemporary Japanese cinema continues to be employed to sway the audience from socio-political issues, which are largely concealed through the use of cinematic methods and styles?

Chapter 2

The Instruments of 'Mystification.' Japanese Cinema in the Period of 1990s – 2000s

Part 1

Political Climate

Up until the late 1980s and early 1990s Japan's political and social conditions were characterised by their strong commitment to the partnership with The United States. However, moving further into the 1990s the relationship between the two countries began to turn ambivalent.

In the introductory section of the book - *Japan After Japan. Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present* (2006), Harry Harootunian and Tomiko Yoda give a constructive examination of historical ties and relations between The U.S. and Japan that largely indicates Japan's political, social and cultural conditions from the 1990s onwards.

Harootunian and Yoda comment that the decade was characterised by America's progressive detachment from Japan as a partner or to say more accurately, their subordinate. At the same time, and as a consequence, Japan has been desperately trying to tighten its grip on a partnership that was far from unbiased. The reason for Japan's desire to sustain a relationship of dependency appeared to be due to an unwillingness to face a distorted past (Japan's conduct during the war such as the Nanking Massacre, the case of the comfort women etc.), which, once released from under the protector's umbrella was expected to effect and problematise Japan's modern development and international relations.

If the Japanese are always perplexed when foreigners, and especially Asians, constantly demand of them an account of their conduct in the war, it is because they were permitted by The U.S. military occupation to retain their pre-war historical experience and make it a fundamental part of a new post-war order, unlike the Germans who were forced to confront and question it as a condition of shedding but not forgetting it. (Harootunian

and Yoda, 2006, p.2)

Christopher Goto-Jones (whose critique will be discussed in more detail below) adds that there were many claims that the Japanese “have not come to ‘terms with their past’ because of their privileged position under U.S. patronage during the Cold War”:

Since 1947, Japan’s foreign policy had been tame and low profile, and its orientation towards security issues had been guided by the famous ‘peace closure’ of its constitution, which meant that it had not engaged in any significant military activity and was ostensibly forbidden from doing so. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty had effectively insulated Japan from the need to think too seriously about its role in the ‘high politics’ of the international system. (Goto-Jones, 2009, p.125)

The position of Japan, therefore, as America’s subordinate expressed Japan’s readiness to respond and comply with the orders of the coloniser (who from his side was sheltering and protecting Japan from the rest of the world during the extended post-war period) instantaneously providing funds and human resources (working personnel, army recruits etc.). However, moving into the new century, events such as 9/11, the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq had finally confirmed to Japan “that their status as America’s “partner” had always been an empty fiction.” (Harootunian and Yoda, 2006, p.2) Harootunian and Yoda argue that America’s international politics pertaining to the above mentioned incidents and their aftermath had precipitated within the Japanese nation the despairing memories of occupation, enforced Americanism and an antagonistic history since the end of WWII.

Consequently, this triggered agitations from both Right and Left Japanese political parties. The Left wing followers were mostly concerned with the termination of the inclusion of democratic values into Japanese society, which was promised to Japan after the defeat and the occupation years. While from the Right wing, there was a rejection of the continuation of a life under the colonial power as well as proclamations of The U.S.’ policies and reformations of Japan as a way of Americanisation of the war (a perception of The U.S.’ post-war position and actions as a victorious superior which is enforcing its own dogmas), which also meant the “denial of both Japan’s recent history and a further proscription against it in the future.” (Harootunian and Yoda, 2006, p.4)

In their discussion, Harootunian and Yoda bring up an example of the political extremist, Nishibe Susumu who openly encouraged the return to anti-Americanism as a way of detaching Japan from The U.S. and its interferences.

“America,” Nishibe remarked in a discussion with patriotic cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinari, is a “barbaric civilisation” that worships the “holy trinity of Americanism, globalisation, and vulgarism.” Standing at the centre of the world, it casts its long shadow over a “puny” Japan, a “fumbling country”, whose existence has been exiled to its periphery. His solution calls for a new form of “Japanism” (not really different from its 1930s predecessor) that would explain to the Japanese why they have been so blinded to the American problem, thereby, offer them a way to become Japanese again. (Nishibe, n.d, cited in Harootunian and Yoda, 2006, p,5)

Another person who was enforcing Japan’s demands for respect and equality with The U.S. was Tokyo’s chief executive Ishihara Shintaro²⁵, who believed in Japan’s capacity to regulate its own political, economic and social directions without America’s control. Despite many opinions in favour of detaching Japan from American power, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, following the long-established life of a dependent country, promptly fulfilled “the demands of the Bush II administration to join the coalition in the Iraq war and this time to send military personnel instead of mere cash.” (Harootunian and Yoda, 2006, p.5) Thus, for the time being, leaving Japan in the dual position where oppositional inclinations and governmental actions clashed.

Another central scholarly publication that creates a well-focused and concise study of contemporary Japanese history, politics, economy and culture is Christopher Goto-Jones' *Modern Japan. A Very Short Introduction* (2009). Here Goto-Jones touches upon issues such as: defining Japanese modernity, the historical continuation (pre-war Japan and post-war Japan) and the balance between the ancient and the modern. In his closing chapter

²⁵ Ishihara Shintarō (born 30th September 1932, Kōbe, Japan), Japanese writer and politician, who served as governor of Tokyo from 1999 - 2012. (Source: Tao, A. *Ishihara Shintaro. Japanese Writer and Politician*. Encyclopaedia Britannica) Shintaro’s controversial politics were signified by extensive nationalism, anti-Americanism, as well as warmongering with relation to China.

Overcoming Denial: Contemporary Japan's Quest for Normalcy, Goto-Jones creates an additional insight on Japan in the 1990s from a rather psychological perspective. He begins with a brief history of Japan's condition after the atomic bombings that displayed anti-militarism and pacifism; he then follows on to the argument that Japan has not been able to overcome the “scars of the past.” (Goto-Jones 2009, p.130)

Goto-Jones refers to the intellectual Norihiro Kato, who diagnosed Japan's post-war illness as schizophrenia (adopting the views of 1970s' psychologist Kishida Shu) that is signified by the split personality into an inner (“private Japan” that accepted the “democratisation” imposed by The U.S.) and outer self (“public Japan” that still followed a nationalistic self-image and elements of imperialism).

For Kato (1997), Goto-Jones writes: “... Japan had been placed in an impossible position, between the need to become democratic and the realisation that democracy was being imposed by the former enemy.” (Goto-Jones, 2009, p.130) This argument refers back to the first chapter and Davis' discussion of the Monumental Style and the rejection of the importation of cinema as a Western medium that contained too much foreign influence and could potentially corrupt the ‘purity’ of Japanese culture and societal structure. Hence, the core of the problem remained identical. In the same way that Kato argued the dilemma of an implementation of democracy to Japanese society, the import and enforcement of cinematic techniques from outside can be debated. The issue, however, lies in Japan's wounded ego of a country that lost the war and fell to become a “servant” to the original enemy. This argument, of course, gets more complicated when taking into consideration the aforementioned historical developments such as Japan's former willingness to be “protected” by The U.S. (in spite of the fact that it came at the cost of complete submission), as well as a continuing strong desire from many to establish a genuine democratic society and culture that can only be realised with the help (enforcement) of The U.S.

In his essay *Haisengo-ron (On Post-Defeat, 1997)*, Kato began one of the most significant debates of the 1990s – *rekishi shutai ronso* (the debate over the historical subject), which Goto-Jones sums up as:

Japan's schizophrenic condition had prevented post-war Japan from fully developing a coherent and modern historical subjectivity with which it

could face its own wartime past – neither the public Japan nor private Japan had been able to negotiate honestly or wholly with the actual events of Japan’s past, including the atrocities committed by it during the war. (Goto-Jones, 2009, p.131)

Donald Richie in his article on the film director Imamura Shohei addresses similar issues pointing out a dissimilarity between “public” (‘official’) Japan and the “private” (‘real’) one from the artistic perspective expressed through the cinematic medium. The ‘official’ version (that is demonstrated in the films of Yasujiro Ozu) he claims, refers to the “world of the Noh theatre and the tea ceremony, the subservient kimono-clad women, the feudality of exquisitely graded degrees of social standing, and approved virtues such as fidelity, loyalty, devotion.” (Richie, 1983, p.8) Richie argues that this version is also supported by Japanese society since it is how the society likes to view itself, whether it be true or not. Simultaneously, he believes that this is also the exported version of Japan, the version that the outside world is familiar with. Containing a great amount of veracity to this argument, the concept of an “exported version of Japan” also becomes an important element in the discourse on ‘mystification’ of cinema and enhancement of Japanese national ‘uniqueness.’ It can be argued that the majority of Japanese films that are exported to the West and also selected by the international film circuit are those that embody and encourage what are perceived as traditional Japanese aesthetics and Oriental mysticism, i.e. they fulfil certain criteria of being defined as ‘Japanese.’ The ‘mystification’ is, therefore, also sustained through this process, which will be brought to attention in the last part of this chapter in the example from film director, Naomi Kawase.

Harootunian’s and Goto-Jones’ approaches in negotiating Japan’s political history is a useful platform from which to argue against and refer to the study of culture and cinematic patterns. The latter argues that the political developments of the 1990s and 2000s, along with the betrayal of the establishment of democratic principles, have pushed Japan back into a side of their life that Japanese society believed to be slowly disappearing due to factors such as globalisation and urban capitalism. Culture, along with cinema production, once again became “complicit in this preservation of fantastical rural Japan, somehow preserved from the forces of modernity and held in the condition of a pristine and mythical past.” (Goto-Jones, 2009, p.149) Thus, this ‘mythical past’ and ‘fantastical rural Japan’ has become the leading motif in most aspects of Japanese cinema production.

In a political sense, Goto-Jones refers to Japan's period of the 1990s as a "lost decade". For the purpose of looking at the realm of culture, and in particular cinema production, my interest stretches further into the period from 1990s-2010s. While, when looking at cinematic production, it would be a great disservice to completely agree with the term "lost decade" as it implies wastefulness, at the same time, and due to significant repetitions of the cinematic patterns (which play on the relation between the past and present, life and death while deploying aesthetics of the past), the term does contain a partial truth. However, instead of 'loss' one might argue a certain cinematic 'paralysis', which is defined by the political, social and cultural conditions in which cinema is produced. It can also be argued that the films belonging to the 'paralysis' period avoid addressing the social and political issues of the present, which stronger provokes a sense of longing for the 'mythical past' or in other words – nostalgia for the preceding decades. It also must be noted that nostalgia presents itself in two ways – the 'national nostalgia' that was felt among the nation during this complicated historical period, and 'personal nostalgia' that is evoked through the films' structure and targets individuals.

Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) addresses the complex and ambiguous nature of nostalgia. Her definition of it stands as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy." (Boym, 2001, XIII)

It is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of a time that plagues the human condition. (Boym, 2001, XV)

Various concepts of traditional Japanese aesthetics that closely relate to nature and the passage of time then expressed through the cinematic examples, show a powerful capability of evoking nostalgia and deriving a cinematic strength from it. However, nostalgia may refer to the past or a fantasy of the past as much as it does to the present and the future. As Boym

argues, “fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future.” (Boym, 2001: XVI) The past acts by, “inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality.” (Bergson, H. in Boym, 2001: 50) Thus, the progression of time and a certain inability to move away from the past presents a concept of time which is not linear but where the present is always imbedded within the vitality of the past.

It was frequently argued that not being able to let go of the past indicates a popular Japanese trait, which became a key discourse among a large number of notable Japanese cinema scholars, such as Donald Richie (1971), Noel Burch (1979) as well as more contemporary scholars like Keiko McDonald (2006) and Nina Cornyetz (2007), many of whom argued that such development and historic recognition reflects distinctive Japanese traits of welcoming and accepting the past as a part of contemporary life. This, again, implies a ‘unique’ understanding of history, not as a linear process of continuous development, but rather as a deviating course that often enhances a reminiscence for the preceding periods. It also suggests Japanese resistance to change, argued by Chie Nakane and referenced in the first chapter.

Therefore, in many scholarly (both Western and especially Japanese [also related to *nihonjinron*]) works on Japanese culture and cinema, the non-linear concept of time has been mistakenly attributed to Japan as a ‘unique’ characteristic. To avoid falling into this trap one must acknowledge that, the same concept (possibly modified depending on the context of occurrence) can be also located in other nations or cultural contexts, which suffered dramatic historical upheavals, such as revolutions (The October Revolution in Russia and later dissolution of the Soviet Union), wars and occupation (Rapid Modernisation and Post WWII American Occupation in Japan) as well as the colonial regiments (British colonisation of Hong Kong), which also affected these nation’s cinematic traditions. Therefore, as Boym suggests, almost always the tragic and destructive experiences “preclude a rosy reconstruction of the past” (Boym, 2001, p.28), which is not exclusive to a single nation.

Furthermore, some scholars (especially those of the past, such as Donald Richie and Noel Burch) came to justify and explain this non-linear way of existence through Japanese

people's connection to the main aesthetic principles of the past: *aware*, *yugen* or *wabi-sabi*.²⁶ Those principles when expressed in cinematic works bring out a sense of what some scholars and critics referred to as an Oriental awe and while socio-political issues are faintly implied, it rather focuses spectator's attention to a stylistic mysticism of the past that consequently enhances notions of national 'purity' and 'uniqueness.'

This approach is, however, quite problematic, especially when applied to the subject of cinema. It is evident that contemporary film directors all over the world are often deeply influenced by the past. However, what remains unconsidered is that the past in Japanese cinema does not exist as a pure Japanese form. The past that exists represents the medium and techniques that were imported from the West and the number of film directors who were, in fact, largely influenced by the cinema of the West, rather than their own cultural traditions, as analysed in the first chapter of the thesis. It must be noted, that this does not eradicate the cross-fertilisation factor, as Japanese cinema in its own right has had an influence on other world cinemas.

As Professor Keisuke Kitano²⁷ suggests²⁸, this leads to an inevitable conclusion that the pure Japanese past, or the aesthetics and values of that past, can only be located in pre-historic art forms such as painting, ancient poetry, theatre or religion. Thus, Kitano openly supports the idea that the 'uniqueness' of Japanese cinema has been vastly fabricated and enhanced by the visual language of cinema throughout time. Consequentially, the films which use mystifying visual and narrative techniques, and scholars who fall into the trap of 'mystification' and fail in delivering an anti-Orientalist critique both contribute to the fabrication of Japanese 'uniqueness.'

Moreover, Kitano adds to the discourse on the problem of preserving what is "uniquely" Japanese after the import of cinema from the West (and then encountered once again in the period of 1990s-2000s). The imported Western medium has been processed and modified to convey the distinctiveness of the Japanese nation. For instance, this can be seen in the use of lighting and shadows in cinema to add depth and mystery, and therefore differentiate it from

²⁶ *Aware* is a strong emotive sense of the sad and beautiful transience of all things. *Yugen* is a profound mystery. *Wabi-sabi* is commonly translated as the beauty of imperfection. Each is a complex term in its linguistic embodiment. For further reference, refer to *The Source of Japanese Tradition* by Wm. Theodore De Barry, 2001.

²⁷ College of Image Arts & Sciences at Ritsumeikan University of Kyoto

²⁸ The material was gathered at Professor Kitano's lecture attended at Birkbeck College on the 30th April 2013. It must be noted that the material was a work in progress at the time and still remains in the stage of development.

Western cinema. This, of course, worked to the benefit of the Japanese state during the period of the 1930s when Monumental Style was developed. At the same time, as was discussed in Chapter 1, Daisuke Miyao has already criticised this position expressing the idea that such appropriation of a medium, was due to underfunding and low equipment quality rather than due to the propagandistic approach of film directors.

Kitano continues his argument stating that Japanese cinema developed in distinction to preceding cultural forms such as theatre, painting or writing, as well as in distinction to cinematic forms attached to the West (specifically American cinema post WWII, which at the time of American occupation was promoted as superior to Japanese cinema). Thus, concluding that Japanese cinema has managed to differentiate itself from traditional Japanese cultural forms (i.e. theatre, painting) as well as from Western cinema. As a consequence, through the use of certain compositions and techniques (whether created purposely as Davis and Kitano argue, or as a matter of technical necessity as Miyao suggests) as well as through the reading of the cinema from the position of “sacred [Oriental] alterity” (as Peter N. Dale argues) cinema became mystified as a “unique other”. Incidentally, the veil of this fabricated ‘mysticism’ was never fully lifted and continued to prevail, which later and even in present day influences and misguides cinematic critique.

Following this discussion, it becomes evident that there are three major instruments in film production, which can mistakenly lead to creating a sense of Japanese originality and enhance the discourse of national ‘mysticism’ and ‘uniqueness’:

- The non-linear concept of time that can potentially evoke nostalgia (also related to the ambivalent political conditions) and usually expressed through the film’s narrative structure by placing the representations of past and present and life and death as a uniform notion.
- The aesthetics and philosophical modes of the past expressed through a cinematic visual style.
- The exportation of Japanese films that fulfil the criteria of Japanese ‘mysticism’ and ‘uniqueness.’

The following part of the chapter is divided into two sections: *Cinematic Examples of the mid-1990s* and *Cinematic Examples of 2010s*. In these sections I will critically investigate

arguments of repetition and influence of pre-contemporary – religious, philosophical and aesthetic – motives towards cinematic patterns as well as the non-linear concept of time (expressed through both the representations of life and death as a unified notion and the narratives that evoke nostalgia) through a close reading of contemporary (focusing on the mid 1990s²⁹) drama fiction film examples: Hirokazu Koreeda’s *Maboroshi* (1995) and Shunji Iwai’s *Love Letter* (1995) in the first section; and the indie film example of Naomi Kawase’s *Hanezu* (2011) in the second section.

The cinematic examples chosen contain the narratives and cinematic styles of film production, which can be read through the lens of ‘mystification’ and individually feed into the discourse on national ‘uniqueness.’ Through the analysis of the films, I will attempt to locate what pre-contemporary (pre 1980s) aesthetic, cultural and cinematic devices had influenced the film production. How do these films relate to previously established cinematic methods and how do they differ? What are the films’ approach to the non-linear concept of time and the relation to the representations of death and life? And how do they feed into the analytical critique on the subject matter of “Japaneseness”? I will argue how the above-mentioned mystifying ‘traps’ are used to potentially naturalise chosen film examples as ‘uniquely’ Japanese and therefore create an alert for a de-essentialised reading.

Part 2

Section 1: Cinematic examples of the mid-1990s: *Maboroshi & Love Letter*

Both *Maboroshi* and *Love Letter* were the first feature length works for both film directors (Hirokazu Koreeda and Shunji Iwai) who at the time of production and release were relatively unknown in the cinema industry, however, very soon became vastly influential. Both films had a powerful response and obtained various film nominations and awards in Japan and internationally. It is my belief that both films are two of the few most suitable representations of Japanese drama cinema from the period of mid 1990s, which David Desser, in his essay “The Imagination of the Transcendent: Kore-eda Hirokazu’s *Maboroshi*” (published in the book *Japanese Cinema: Text and Contexts* edited by Dr Alastair Phillips

²⁹ Aside from the drama genre, the decade of the 1990s was also signified by the rise of animation with Studio Ghibli (*Whisper of the Heart*, 1995; *Princess Mononoke*, 1997) as a leader, science fiction (*Godzilla*, 1995) and gangster-themed films from Takashi Kitano (*Kids Return*, 1996; *Fireworks*, 1997) – genres, which I cannot attend to within the scope of this thesis.

and Julian Stringer)³⁰, argues was predominated by the “stylistic and cinematic concerns” of “disappearances, suicides, and murder which lead to a sense of profound loss, alienation, and hopelessness...” (Desser, 2007, p.275) Thus, *Maboroshi* and *Love Letter* contain valuable visual and narrative information for the examination of the cinematic landscape pertaining to the genre and the particular time frame I address here.

Maboroshi - Phantom Light

The subject of *Demystifying Japanese Uniqueness. Representations of Life and Death in Contemporary Japanese Fiction Cinema* was initially precipitated by a cinematic example of *Maboroshi* (Original title: *Maboroshi no Hikari* and translated as Phantom Light), a film directed by Hirokazu Koreeda³¹ and released in 1995. Based on the work of Akutagawa Prize-winning writer Teru Miyamoto, the film reflects upon a personal tragedy, yet also raises universal questions on the interconnectedness of life and death, rather than seeing those as opposites. Therefore, the following thorough investigations of the films are a reflection upon the nature of representations of life/present and death/past and future expressed by the means of certain cinematic patterns and techniques (some of which were commonly used in Japanese cinema of an earlier period) that express and enhance mysticism.

Therefore, in the following part of the thesis, I will address parameters exemplary for representations of life and death as translated through the medium of filmmaking. I will look at techniques of representations that are not only occurring due to the current historical, political and cultural conditions, but are also substantially influenced by legacies of cinematic techniques.

Let us look at *Maboroshi* in more detail. The main character of the film is Yumiko played by Makiko Esumi. The story begins when Yumiko's grandmother leaves the family saying that she is determined to die in her hometown. Framed in a wide shot, the scene takes place on a bridge, representing the transition from life to death. Unable to stop her grandmother from

³⁰ Alastair Phillips is Associate Professor in Film Studies and Head of Department at Warwick University. Julian Stringer is Associate Professor in Film and Television Studies at University of Nottingham.

³¹ Graduated from Waseda University in 1987 Hirokazu Koreeda then became an assistant director at T.V. Man Union (an independent TV production company). Koreeda began directing films in 1991 focusing on documentaries. *Maboroshi* was his first fiction feature film.

going away, Yumiko carries a sense of guilt that will continue to haunt her.



Screenshot 9: Yumiko is trying to stop her grandmother from leaving.

Next we meet Yumiko when she is in her twenties. She is happily married to Ikuo (Tadanobu Asano) and has recently given birth to a boy. In almost all sequences, Ikuo appears slightly distant. On the one hand, this may seem like ominous behaviour. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as a character's trait of being naturally reserved. Thus, nothing plainly foreshadows tragedy, aside from a short scene in which Ikuo mentions to his wife that a topknot of an ex-sumo fighter at his workplace depresses him. What is it about the topknot that is so unsettling for Ikuo? The spectator is left uncertain of the reasons and the extent to which it affects his frame of mind. In the next scene Ikuo leaves for work as usual, while Yumiko sees him off with joyful smiles – “this long shot may portend Ikuo’s fate in the way it recalls the opening scene of Yumiko’s grandmother similarly walking away from the camera toward an empty urban horizon.” (Desser, 2007, p.282) The same evening, she finds out that Ikuo was killed by a passing train while he was walking on the tracks. Due to the short but subtle build up to the event, Ikuo's suicide appears sudden and without obvious reason, leaving the spectator puzzled and triggering many questions.



Screenshot 10: Yumiko watches Ikuo walking to work for the last time before his death.



Screenshot 11: Yumiko after she found out about Ikuo's death.



Screenshot 12: Yumiko after Ikuo's death.

Five years pass and Yumiko agrees to an arranged marriage with a widower Tamio (Akira Emoto) who lives with his daughter in a small, isolated fishermen's village in the Noto

Peninsula. Yumiko and her son move there to start their lives anew. She is extremely welcomed by her new husband and his family, their children get along like siblings; within a short space of time, a relationship between Yumiko and Tamio also begins to develop warmly and harmoniously. *Maboroshi* shows numerous scenes that reflect peaceful family life, sometimes showing joy and happiness through scenes such as Yumiko and Tamio after they made love or the whole family eating watermelon on a veranda on a sunny day. Presented in warm, bright lighting, Koreeda gives the audience images of life and peace. For the time being, the unsettling question of death has left the picture. This course continues to prevail until Yumiko travels back to Osaka where the memories of the past, that she seemingly had managed to abandon, begin to threaten her again. After meeting and talking to people they both used to know, the question that was subdued but continued to persist in Yumiko's consciousness rises once more with a newfound intensity - why was Ikuo walking on the tracks?



Screenshot 13: Yumiko and her new family.

After spending several days in Osaka, Yumiko goes back to her new family. However, her frame of mind has changed. She appears distant and reserved while undergoing the struggle of understanding her past. Her appearance begins to resemble that of Ikuo before he committed suicide. Could it be that she is also thinking of joining him or is she simply trying to comprehend the meaning of death and what part it plays in her life?

Another scene occurs in which an old fisherwoman (well-known and respected by the whole town) goes out to catch crabs in the open sea before an advancing storm. Yumiko is scared and anxious about the situation that begins to remind the spectator of her late grandmother

who left and never came back. The repetition in her life advances a ghostly, haunting feeling. Once more Yumiko is dealing with the possibility of disappearance and loss of a kind that she cannot comprehend. It can be assumed after what happened to her first husband, that Yumiko is well aware of the suddenness and uncertainty it involves, therefore, she fears it.

The scenes are presented in dark lighting, which sometimes even reduces the visibility of the environments and the actors to the minimum or, as in the setting shown below (screenshot 14) – a room is lit up with a powerful light source that intensifies the darkness in the corners.

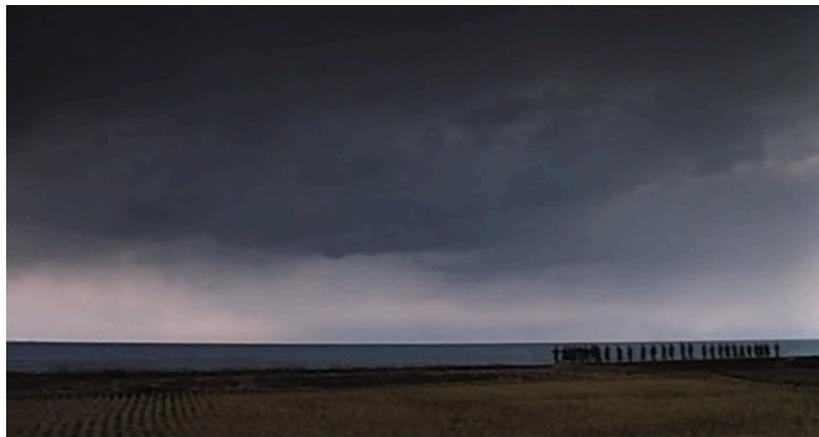


Screenshot 14: Yumiko and her husband Tamio waiting to hear the news about the fisherwoman who went out to sea during the storm.

The film ends with Yumiko following a local funeral procession in the location of magnificent seaside where “the ‘mysterious lights’ of the title (*Maboroshi no hikari*) reach out to grab her.” (Desser, 2007, p.276) The scene also becomes a catalyst for finally voicing her inner struggles. When Tamio goes to pick her up, she cries out to him: “I just don’t understand... it just goes around and around in my head!” He offers her an answer that ultimately brings her no closer to a resolution. He speaks of a phantom light that lures sailors away from the safe paths at sea and to their death. While this explanation may not give a full solution to Yumiko's contemplations, it does contain a certain amount of comfort and a call for acceptance. She offers no reply to Tamio’s words and stays quiet. This open and obscure ending naturally leads to speculation and wondering whether this is the closest point Yumiko will ever come to understanding the reasons for Ikuo’s death.

Maboroshi tells us that sometimes death or the momentous turns life takes are simply unanswerable, yet are open to various forms of portrayal and interpretation. Moreover,

through a narrative of what appears as a personal trauma and tragedy, Koreeda raises larger existential questions on death as well as life, or of death being consistent with life as a memory, as a shadow, as well as past prevailing in the present. This notion is supported by the character of Ikuo who is never fully present but not absent either. He is “never fully there when alive, he is never entirely absent after his death.” (Lippit, 2005, p.138) The film also articulates the above-mentioned questions through the use of visual aesthetics, which can be perceived as bewildering, however, demand an understanding of Japanese cultural traditions and contextual approaches towards the negotiation of those in order to decrease interpretations of oriental ‘mysticism’ and Japanese cultural ‘uniqueness’.



Screenshot 15: Yumiko following a funeral procession.



Screenshot 16: Tamio tells Yumiko a story about the “phantom light”.

To put it more concretely, the cinematic aesthetics, which I would like to outline, transport the above philosophical and cultural concepts of life and death. First, the film uses extensive wide shots and there is a lack of close-ups, reflecting upon the nature of a human as an insignificant or decorative (as was expressed by Shohei in relation to Ozu’s cinematic works)

part in the environment that he/she gets to occupy as well as him/her being submissive to the conditions of nature. Second, the film works with a circular structure of the narrative, often shown through the change of seasons or a wide variety of images that represent transition, like trains, bridges, tunnels, etc.

Lastly, it is the admiration for subtlety and restraint that is shown through the pace of the editing, subtle lighting and minimal movements of the characters. Due to the fact that many of these aesthetic choices and techniques were used in the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu (see Chapter 1), it can be argued that Ozu's methods directly influenced Koreeda's *Maboroshi* and to say more, could even appear as a deliberate strategy on the part of Koreeda as Desser argues. This return to Ozu, consequently, as a range of cinema critics came to indicate, pays homage to traditional Japanese ways of filmmaking and aesthetics, hence, fulfilling the criteria of being quintessentially 'Japanese'. Or does it?

In order to explain the portrayal of the mysterious and unknown in *Maboroshi*, it would be a common practice to rely on the comparison of the film with the directors and cinematic works of the Golden Age of Japanese cinema, which came to be addressed or read (through various scholarly materials) from the perspective of national 'uniqueness'. It is true that *Maboroshi* does reflect the influence of Japanese film masters such as Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi or Kobayashi Masaki and could be seen to cling to a nostalgia felt for the (imagined) past during the decade (1990s) as was expressed in the beginning of the chapter.

Koreeda paints a very different image of Japan to what it was at the time of the film's production. The film is void of urbanism as a component of technological progression. The images presented are strikingly rural and are reminiscent of the old rustic Japan. As Desser argues: "The use [perhaps due to a sense of 'national nostalgia'] of rural landscapes in contemporary films is striking for the sense of loss such landscapes already cause in their audience, given the over-whelmingly urban nature of contemporary Japanese society." (Desser, 2007, p.276) The construction of space is almost absent of human life. The slow pacing of the film demands a particular attention from the side of the spectator. Most scenes are framed in long, wide shots, therefore the spectator never gets to catch a full glimpse of the characters' expressions; story telling does not take place through a character's expressed emotions but through lighting, colour and landscape. In the style of Yasujiro Ozu, as Roger Ebert notes: "The camera, for example, is often placed at the eye level of someone kneeling

on a *tatami* mat. Shots begin or end on empty rooms. Characters speak while seated side by side, not looking at one another. There are many long shots and few close ups; the camera does not move, but regards.” (Ebert, 1997, cited in Desser, 2007, p.280) Moreover, the non-verbal behaviour (the lack of dialogue) is largely present, too. All these techniques are certainly reminiscent and pay homage to the auteur, which makes it very hard to resist a comparison between the two directors. However, lest one forgets, it has already been established that it would be a mistake to consider Ozu as an ultimate representative of ‘pure’ Japanese cinema and cinematic aesthetics. Let us look at Koreeda’s *Maboroshi* with relation to the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu.

Christine L. Marran³² argues similarly in her article “Tracking the transcendental: Kore'eda Hirokazu's *Maboroshi*” (2002). In her article, Marran references the film critic Hasumi Shigehiko, the writer of *Sunny Skies* that is considered to be one of the most acclaimed essays on the ‘Japanification’ of Yasujiro Ozu. The title of the essay speaks for itself – Hasumi comments that in Ozu’s cinema there is forceful consistency of clear, bright skies. This eradicates a seasonal metaphor that is considered to be one of the most important principles of the Japanese aesthetical domain.

If there are no seasons in Ozu, Hasumi asks, then how might we understand or position Ozu as a Japanese filmmaker when Japanese aesthetics rely so heavily on seasonal metaphor? (Hasumi, 1997, cited in Marran, 2002, p.167)

Marran continues:

This is developed in the contrast, for example, of the oceanic surface that suggests extraordinary depth and shallowness like the shallow, marshy rice paddy reflecting the infinite sky. We are in the same sort of territory with Koreeda as we are with Ozu in that there is nothing that makes this film as aesthetically related to anything Japanese except for a kind of obeisance that it seems to pay to Ozu who is consistently, and erroneously, framed specifically as a ‘Japanese’ director. (Marran, 2002, p.167)

³² Christine L. Marran is an associate professor in Japanese literature and cultural studies at the University of Minnesota.

She then concludes that the portrayal of the mysterious and the unknown in *Maboroshi* should not be explained in any terms other than existentialist ones. What Marran means is perhaps that, in the attempt of clarifying the mysterious nature of *Maboroshi*, one should not draw any aesthetic or cultural cross-references with the preceding directors or cinematic styles. While, there may be no objections to the failure of a comparison between Koreeda and Ozu from the perspective of “Japanism”, as we have now established that neither of the directors should fall under such category. At the same time, it would be a disregard to claim that there is almost nothing about *Maboroshi* that relates to anything Japanese. It can be argued that there are segments in *Maboroshi*'s film narrative that can be related to a heritage of a capability of appreciating the quintessence of life and death linked to contextual aesthetic consciousness rooted in philosophy and religion. Such aesthetic consciousness is expressed through the interactions between the human and the environment as well as expressions of: the fleetingness of nature; transitions (from one environment to another); transcendence (an experience of an inexplicable calling that Ikuo has possibly experienced); acceptance; and admiration of the impermanence (the realisation of the fleeting nature of life and finding beauty in such an instance). Thus, it is vital to acknowledge, that those are the motives that are familiar (but not exclusively so) to Japanese cinema production or Japanese culture in general and should be traced back in order to obtain a richer understanding of the film, yet without reducing its analytical critique to a mere question of alleged ‘uniqueness’.

As far as the non-linear concept of time is concerned, *Maboroshi* does not dwell on the moment of tragedy, but rather melancholy continues to exist inside the character that is trying to live with the fact of death within her, with a shadow that will continue to be a part of her life. *Maboroshi* embeds the past in the narrative (Ikuo's presence) and in the image (in the effect of the landscapes and nature's manifestations). This does not necessarily evoke nostalgic sensations, but creates a different temporality where past, present and future collapse and exist with each other. The story never offers clear answers, instead it asks for acceptance. Therefore, the combination of pre-contemporary visual techniques and the cryptic narrative causes the film to linger over the spectator as a shadow, bemusing and mesmerising. The film then becomes excessively mystified and ‘Japanised’ leading the audience and the film's critics into the exotic world of the ‘sacred alterity’. As much as Ozu has been marked as the ultimate Japanese filmmaker, this is how *Maboroshi* (and Koreeda) also fall into this category.

By the late 1980s, Ozu's position as an 'international auteur' and one of history's great film directors had been established through lengthy debates in film journals, books by Richie and Bordwell [both translated into Japanese] [etc.]. In Japan, Ozu was the New Wave filmmakers' emblem for everything wrong with Japanese cinema. However, in the 1980s his reputation was resurrected, and he swiftly became canonized as one of their greatest directors... (Nornes and Yeh, 1994, cited in Dessler, 2007, p.281)

Returning to Marran's argument, towards the end of her article she also references a commentary from William LaFleur³³ who remarks on the intensive role of light in *Maboroshi* claiming the subordinate nature of the characters in comparison to the role of light and darkness in the film.

We are teased by the sense of light as symbolic of a transcendental entity. But the interplay of light and shadow disables the use of light as symbolic, of healing and hope. The interplay of light and dark create a *maboroshi* – a phantom, a hallucination, a mirage. Rather, it is within the weaving of light and darkness that consolation lies. The human figures are the excess to the scene rather than the subject of a focused light. There is no particular correlation of light or darkness with the diegetic world of the film. (Marran, 2002, p.167)

Hence, the light and darkness are directly relevant to the diegesis of the film. *Maboroshi* is a visually tranquil examination of loss and grief portrayed through the imagery of widely framed compositions, static camera, and a contrast between light and darkness. Hirokazu Koreeda demonstrates an ability to express the heroine's internal conflict without a single close-up. On the contrary, the film is dominated by the wide-angle shots of rural landscapes (which according to LaFleur draw too much attention to directorial intent) that nearly consume the characters. Therefore, individual emotions, internal conflicts and transitions of the narrative are not revealed through facial expressions. Instead, they are expressed through

³³ William LaFleur is a professor of Japanese studies in the department of East Asian languages and civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania

the various “aesthetic tools”, of which lighting (or darkness) is the principal. It is through the use of surroundings (the landscapes, traditional houses and quiet streets) as well as the interplay between light and darkness that we get to experience the character's feelings, her inner landscape and the development of the narrative events, as Koreeda explains in an interview for the online publication IndieWire.com³⁴:

The way I envisioned the film was not to show Yumiko’s change of emotion through narration, or to explain her feelings through close-ups. I constructed every scene in this film not for the purpose of telling her story, but to invite the audience to feel the light, the sound and the darkness that Yumiko was feeling at that moment. I wanted to portray the change within her by depicting the changes of light and shadow that surrounded her. The lighting and the composition of the shots were not intended to tell the story, but to evoke Yumiko’s interior landscape. (Koreeda, 1996)

It can be argued that, the strongest aesthetic instrument used in the film that creates a sense of mysticism and can enhance “Japanism” is lighting or, more accurately, darkness and shadows.

Light pulses and pulsates in *Maboroshi*, adding a type of liminal vitality to the film, a phantom light. Although a dark film, a film about darkness, nearly invisible and impenetrable, *Maboroshi* establishes a dark luminosity. It follows the logic of Tanizaki’s shadow – a darkness that is posited, illuminated in the dark by the other darkness. (Lippit, 2005, p.141)

Thus, there is value in bringing to mind Junichiro Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows* (1933) in which he speaks of his nation's ancestors who were forced to live in dark places and who eventually came to discover beauty in that darkness. Thus, he voices the urge for Japan to remain true to this ‘unique’ nature.

I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be

³⁴ Interview for IndieWire.com on 05.09.1996 [accessed on 03.04.2014].

somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved. I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows that we are losing. (Tanizaki, 1933, p.63)

This, of course, is also debatable and does not apply exclusively to the Japanese nation. However, if one was to support such claims of shadows as the ultimate representation of “Japanism”, then Koreeda’s lighting choices do fulfil Tanizaki’s urging of preservation of the “world of shadows” in the cinematic medium. Therefore, if the film is read and translated by taking this argument as a guideline, then through this the ‘mystification’ and “Japaneseness” is sustained. Darkness, however, as a visual sensation (a lack of clarity), in its essence always creates a mystery, an unknown and hardly perceptible reality. That sensation when paired with (read with reference to) Tanizaki’s (and such) debates on nationalistic longing, greatly contributes to the ‘mystification’ of cinema and to the discourse on its ‘uniqueness’, therefore, should either be avoided or analysed more thoroughly.

To conclude, *Maboroshi* was a great success, especially internationally³⁵. A variety of film articles and reviews commented on the film’s exuberance and motif and compared it to films of the Golden Age of Japanese Cinema and Ozu in particular. Nevertheless, *Maboroshi*’s positioning as constituted by a legacy of Golden Age Japanese Cinema and traditional aesthetics is unstable. There is a certain division of contexts that is present. As was mentioned earlier, *Maboroshi* is a film that undoubtedly contains a great amount of visual techniques of preceding film directors such as Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi. However, this does not automatically imply “Japanism” of the film (as potentially *Maboroshi* also contains the traces of Taiwanese New Wave cinema as was suggested by David Desser in *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*), as was argued by Marran.

A connection between life and death portrayed through the family narratives would remain Koreeda’s principle element in his further film productions. Later in the 2000s he creates several films exploring the entangled relationships within a family where death, abandonment and past remain present. For instance, *Still Walking* (2008) portrays 24 hours in the life of a family who came together to honour the death of the eldest son who drowned fifteen years

³⁵ In 1995 the film was selected for the competition at the Venice Film Festival and won the prize for best cinematography (Masao Nakabori). The same year it won the Dragons and Tigers Award at Vancouver International Film Festival and Best Feature at Chicago International Film Festival.

ago. Unlike *Maboroshi*, which visually echoed Ozu's cinema, *Still Walking*, on the other hand, shows a very close imitation of Ozu's cinematic style most vividly expressed through the bright sunshine lighting that is present throughout the film.

Hirokazu Koreeda thus steadily continues to create films focused on themes of family relations and connections to the past (expressed through a continuous presence of death narratives), echoing a variety of visual techniques of pre-contemporary film directors. He has eventually become one of the most influential contemporary film directors. It is debatable, whether the obvious influence of Japan's earlier cinema was a major contributing factor that helped the director to rise to popularity in Japan and abroad. However, the probability of this theory is very high and there are two reasons for it. Firstly, the nostalgia felt towards what can be considered "classical" Japanese culture was extremely present in that period of time in Japan. Secondly, the visual techniques that were largely present in earlier Japanese cinema periods, and that came to be mystified as an exotic "other", were and still are favoured and praised not only among international audiences but also a variety of cinema critics and scholars. This also relates to one of the earlier mentioned components in enhancement of Oriental mysticism and national 'uniqueness' through the distribution and promotion of the cinematic works that answer to alleged criteria of "Japaneseness".

Love Letter

Another example of a cinematic narrative that contains an interconnection between life and death as well as past and present, which can be interpreted as 'mystified', is Shunji Iwai's³⁶ *Love Letter* (1995). Released in the same year as *Maboroshi* these two films share many similarities in terms of narrative, style and visual techniques, as well as several significant differences. Together with *Maboroshi*, *Love Letter*'s narrative focuses on the theme of loss and the ways of coping with the fact of death being a part of one's life. Accordingly, *Love Letter* conveys a strong connection to the past (the dead) or the past being a part of the present as well as death being a part of life (rather than its opposite), which is expressed through one of the leading protagonists and her inability to let go of her dead fiancé. On the other hand, this relationship between life and death and the non-linear concept of time in

³⁶ Graduated from Yokohama National University in 1987, Shunji Iwai began his career in the entertainment industry as a music video and television drama director, one of which (*Fireworks*) received an award for Best Newcomer from the Japanese Director's Association. After receiving recognition, he moved on to directing bigger film projects.

Love Letter is induced with a stronger sense of nostalgia (unlike in *Maboroshi*) for the past and is portrayed by employing a series of flashbacks, which the second leading protagonist experiences. Therefore, this adds another dimension to a sense of a non-linear time continuum increasing the ‘mysticism’.

The film opens up with a scene of a memorial ceremony held two years after the main protagonist Hiroko Watanabe loses her fiancé, Itsuki Fujii in a mountain climbing accident. The scene is set in winter and the surroundings are completely covered in snow. The natural environment is presented in its most tranquil state, which one could argue accentuates a presence of death and hereby reflects the narrative as well as the character’s inner landscape as was also seen in *Maboroshi*.

After the ceremony Hiroko travels to her dead fiancé’s parents’ house where she sees his graduation book and finds an old address where the family used to reside in the past but which, according to his mother, no longer exists as a highway was built in its place. Still unable to cope with the loss, Hiroko copies the address and sends a letter addressing it to her dead fiancé, Itsuki Fujii. A few days later, to Hiroko’s great surprise, she receives a reply from “another world”.

For a while Hiroko is set to believe that the answers are coming from heaven, until it is revealed that the sender of the letters is a woman who shares a strong resemblance to Hiroko and who has exactly the same name as Hiroko’s dead partner. Later on it is also disclosed that both male and female Itsukis used to be high school classmates and due to sharing the same name had to bare mockery and jokes from their other classmates for a very long time.

The film continues with splitting the narrative into two main parallel storylines of Hiroko and female Itsuki who are both dealing with the past and death in different ways. The director, Iwai, presents numerous scenes of Hiroko visiting her friend Akiba, who is in love with her and has an intention of proposing. He also helps her to resolve the mystery of the letters. While female Itsuki lives with her mother and grandfather in a big house and tries to fight a prolonged cold, which is incidentally identical to the reason why her father passed away (the illness developed into pneumonia). Thus, death follows and lives within both characters.

The narrative is constantly broken up with shots from female Itsuki’s past through

flashbacks, mostly focusing on her school years and her relationship with her name double through which the audience begins to understand that male Itsuki most likely had feelings for her. At the same time, Hiroko fears that the only reason he chose her as his wife was simply due to their striking resemblance. Iwai also presents several scenes of female Itsuki's father's death and funeral. Here the visual analogy of death is introduced – a dead dragonfly frozen under the ice that Itsuki finds on the way home from his funeral – for example. The scenes from the past (flashbacks) allow audiences to rediscover the past along with the main protagonist, however, also provoke feelings of nostalgia.

The film reaches its climax when Hiroko and Akiba travel to the mountains. They stay in their friend's house, from which the mountain that took Itsuki's life is visible. After screaming at the mountain and sending a message to Itsuki, Akiba encourages Hiroko to do the same. Still clinging to the idea that the letters she was receiving were from her deceased fiancé, Hiroko screams out the sentences from the first letter. It can be argued that the director uses the analogy of the mountain, that represents the spirit of Itsuki, in relation to the ancient Japanese believe that the spirits of the deceased rest at the foot of the mountains. This heritage will be explored in detail further below through the films of Naomi Kawase.



Screenshot 17: Hiroko in front of the mountain where Itsuki died.

The culmination occurs when the narrative starts repeating itself and Itsuki gives in to her cold and collapses with high fever, as her father did in the past. At this moment, a snowstorm is advancing, making it impossible for cars to move. The environment turns into a white noise fury, reflecting the dire situation of lives being endangered. However, due to the grandfathers' efforts (who carries his granddaughter through the storm), Itsuki is delivered to the hospital on time and survives. This 'loop' created through the repetition of narratives (life fates) intensifies the link between the past and present, life and death and between the living

and their ancestors. Moreover, this implies an expression of national ‘uniqueness’ and will be further explored in the next section.

As far as the narrative and visual techniques are concerned both *Maboroshi* and *Love Letter* share certain features and both present firm connection for the past not only in the form of story telling, but also in some modes of representation. Both films begin with the representation of loss. In *Maboroshi* – Yumiko’s grandmother leaving to die in her hometown; in *Love Letter* – Itsuki’s memorial service. Both continue with the tragedy of death that is encountered by the women. The two films have an open ending that can be considered somewhat hopeful yet at the same time induces the feeling of sadness and death being inexplicable but a constant in life.

Similarly to *Maboroshi*, nature plays a leading role in *Love letter*. And despite the fact *Love Letter*’s narrative continues throughout one season (winter) and only comes to spring in the very last minutes of the film, this cyclical presentation (more consistent in *Maboroshi*) emphasises the changing emotional states of the protagonists. Snow, light and shadows are strategically employed to support the story and the feelings they intend to invoke. In *Love Letter*, the film begins with wide shots of snow-covered hills in dark and cold blue light. As the narrative slowly progresses it moves on to brighter winter shots symbolising the development of the story and minor changes within the characters. It then concludes with the first signs of spring.



Screenshot 18: *Love Letter*’s opening scenes

Additionally, *Love Letter* also presents many elements of what can be translated as points of transition – bicycles, tunnels and train. The last specifically plays an important part in the formation of the narrative, as it is used as a device to ‘transport’ the protagonist to the point

of the narrative's climax.

There are two major points of difference between these two examples. Firstly, it is the visual techniques employed by the directors. Despite the fact that *Love Letter* presents numerous wide and medium shots with the camera placed on the floor level, it is also infused with close-ups (while *Maboroshi* has almost none), and shots that are more complex in nature (faster paced, more actors in one shot, etc.) In this sense, *Maboroshi* can be considered a closer imitation of the cinema of the preceding decades while *Love Letter* shows bigger Hollywood influence. This faster-paced style is enhanced by the locations Iwai chose for his main character. While Hiroko is almost always presented in a traditional Japanese house (seated on a *tatami* floor when reading the letters for instance), Itsuki, on the other hand, resides in an American-style house. And even though the place has a few touches of a Japanese traditional house, like sliding doors and *tatami* floors in some of the rooms, Itsuki's room is extremely Westernised and shows a more contemporary Japan. Finally, the most important element is a red mail box outside the house (from which Itsuki collects the letters from her "deceased fiancé"), which is an American design and is frequently seen in the majority of American movies of the 1990s, yet almost never in Japanese films (even though they do exist in Japan) even in the following years.



Screenshot 19

Above: Itsuki in her Western-style room.

Below: A traditional American-style red mailbox outside her house.

To conclude, taking aside the debate of both national and foreign aesthetic influences within the two examples of film, it is evident that both are united through a similar theme that effectively contributes to the reading of ‘mystification’ – the presence of death, the past and memory that is gone but not nearly forgotten – the non-linear time. While *Maboroshi* focuses on bringing the past and present (life and death) together through contemplative sceneries, nature glorification and silent communications, *Love Letter* does so through the narrative of the ‘correspondence with the dead’ and series of flashbacks. Therefore, *Maboroshi*’s nostalgic presence is not the key element in film structure and can only be found in directorial choices through a potential influence of the cinema aesthetics of the Golden Age. While, in *Love Letter*, nostalgia begins to subtly appear in the structure of the film. Arguably, this can be traced back to the political and social conditions and attains further connotations such as the subtle desperation felt towards the loss of the world that has been rapidly consumed, almost destroyed with time – “It is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams...” (Boym, 2001: XV) Thus, when such narratives are analysed (through scholarly works and cinema critics) and promoted (through international festivals and distribution companies) as distinctly ‘Japanese’ they, consequentially, enhance mysticism and provide for the discourse on *nihonjinron*. Mistakenly so, as it was mentioned in the opening part of the chapter, to avoid falling into this trap of ‘sacred alterity’, one must remember that, the similar concepts can be located in other nations or cultural contexts.

Part 2

Section 2: Cinematic examples of the 2010s - *Hanezu*

The following part of this chapter will investigate how the cinematic landscape has progressed from the 1990s to the 2010s. It will look into locating the development of novel visual techniques and narrative formations through the analysis of the similarities and differences with the preceding decade. I will continue to argue that the persistence and promotion of certain cinematic methods of representation and narrative structure enhances the idea of “Japaneseness” as well as contributes to the ‘mystification’ of cinema. This will

be done on the example of indie film director Naomi Kawase³⁷ and her film *Hanezu* (2011).

Hanezu

Hanezu is an independent art house film; a slow-paced cinematic poem that weaves together many of the traditional Japanese folklore themes such as: myths and legends; a human connection to nature (that is also used to express emotions or effects) and to the spirits of one's ancestors; a mediation between past and present; fate. It shows the narratives of life that are inescapably repeated; melancholia; death as a result of suffering; and the cyclical nature of life. By using ancient history through poems from the 8th century, *Hanezu* becomes a powerful representation of contemporary films that deploy traditional beliefs and aesthetic philosophies rather than cinematic techniques of the past. It also subtly suggests the subject of impermanence or perishability.

Despite great reception across the world (with numerous Cannes Film Festival nominations and victories), the film works of Naomi Kawase circulate, within Japan, rather in the independent art house cinema sector and are more appealing to Japanese indie film-educated audiences, rather than the general public. Starting out as a documentary film director, Kawase's fiction work (from the period of 2003 until the present day) illustrates an intermixture between both documentary and fiction, through which she has become an inspiration to many other film directors in Japan and across the globe, as well as one of the most influential representatives of Japanese art house cinema of the contemporary time period.

The origins of Kawase's cinematic practice are in an autobiographical documentary film genre that she began to explore in the late 1980s – early 1990s. Kawase's career entered the international cinematic arena in 1997 with the film *Moe No Suzaku*, mentioned earlier. Even though *Moe No Suzaku* was a fiction film it was inspired by documentary filmmaking familiar to Kawase. The narrative of the film commented on critical social issues such as family collapse, isolation and the decline of intimacy in family relationship and bonds. In the following years of her career, Kawase continued to explore similar themes, however, the divide between fiction and documentary style filmmaking expressed in her work grew wider,

³⁷ Kawase graduated in 1989 from the Visual Art College Osaka (previously known as Osaka School Of Photography), began a filmmaking practice as a short film director of the autobiographical documentary genre later moving on to fictional cinema.

while a divide between the representations of the present and the past in her films with the critical subject of social issues eventually becoming hardly perceptible or completely absent. Let us investigate Kawase's technique closer.

As Rie Karatsu³⁸ writes:

Kawase makes films that are idiosyncratic and that obscure the boundaries between fiction and reality. On the one hand, her work is inspired by the traditional documentary style realism. The majority of her films focus on social issues, and record subjects with lesser cultural status. ... On the other hand, Kawase's works self-reflectively explore the cinematic apparatus. Although they lack a definite political commitment to progressive social change, they challenge cinematic illusionism. (Karatsu, 2009, p.168)

Within the context of Japan Kawase's cinematic technique is novel, neither resembling the cinema of earlier periods (1950s-1970s) nor the style of the previously explored examples of the 1990s. Her use of amateur actors, the lack of rehearsals and shooting chronologically are some of the significant elements Kawase has established as her signature working technique, which relate her work to documentary film making. With reference to Kawase's *Mogari No Mori* (2003), Rie Karatsu continues:

For Kawase, shooting the film in the order of scenes stated in the script is an absolute condition for her filmmaking, which enables her to record the actors' subtle changes in raw emotion. This is evident in the way Kawase shot the scene in which Machiko and Shigeki run off into the forest [in *Mogari No Mori*, 2003]. Instead of asking the actors to rehearse the scene, she made the actors go into the forest for the first time. The impact of her *jundori* style contains both fiction and documentary. On the one hand, it is fictional in that the narrative is predetermined; on the other hand, shooting chronologically maintains the integrity of time and space, and is also more realistic for the cast and crew. (Karatsu, 2009, p.173)

³⁸ Rie Karatsu is a lecturer in Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Nagasaki, Japan.

Thus, Kawase constructs a new documentary realism approach through which she strives to redefine filmmaking practice and re-establishes a relationship between the characters and the audience by allowing a more intimate communication between the characters and the spectator.

Kawase's visual language as well as the narrative themes play a major part in the 'mystification' of portrayed reality, which at the same time leads the audience and critics away from that actual reality into the nearly spiritual realms. As well as in *Maboroshi* or *Love Letter*, this is achieved by the insertion of elements of the past and death and synthesising them with narratives of current occurrences. This is exemplified in the majority of Kawase's works throughout the years, such as *Shara* (2003), *Mogari No Mori* (2007), *Hanezu* (2011) as well as her latest work *Still The Water* (2014). Let us investigate such synthesis as portrayed and arguably celebrated in *Hanezu* in which the representations of life, death and the past are situated side by side rather than one being more privileged than the other, creating a narrative structure that firstly references a non-linear time concept, enhances the reminiscence for the historical past and traditions and also influences the perception of Japanese cinema as greatly Orientalised on the international cinema arena.

The title *Hanezu* translates as a shade of red that was used in *Manyoshu* poetry³⁹. The film is set in Asuka, a village in Nara Prefecture that was an ancient capital of Japan. The narrative presents the complicated affair of two people that forces them to reconsider their relationship with their parents, reconnect to the memories of their late grandparents and locate their position in the present, as well as in the past. *Hanezu* is a 'boiling pot' that mediates between supreme nature and sullied humanity, between the ancient past⁴⁰, the recent past and the complex present, uniting life and death as a single organism and leading to a sense of Japanese mysticism, as I will argue below.

The film opens with images of mud and stones on a conveyor belt, in a location that is yet unknown. After this the film shifts to shots of mountains in the blue morning light creating a sensation of coldness. A male voice-over reads out a passage from the *Manyoshu* poem *Three*

³⁹ *Manyoshu*, translated as "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves", is the oldest existing Japanese collection of poetry dating back to 759AD.

⁴⁰ Unlike *Maboroshi* and *Love Letter*, which were exploring the relationship between the present and the recent past, Kawase additionally brings in an ambitious element of the ancient past and ancient Japanese mythology into the present dimensions.

Mountains written by Emperor Tenji⁴¹, at the time known as the crown prince Naka no Oe. The poem speaks of the myth of rivalry between Mount Kagu and Mount Miminashi for the love of Mount Unebi. Written in the 8th century, the poem remarks that since ‘the age of the gods’⁴², a rivalry for a woman was already a practice between spirits and humans alike. *Hanezu*’s narrative is a direct interpretation of the poem – a love triangle. This main theme unites and leads all the additional sub narratives, such as the character’s psychological and commemorative connection to their dead relatives. Thus, through the narrative structure of the opening shots, Naomi Kawase introduces to the spectator a cinematic device for ‘time travelling’ and at the same time enhances the notion of an unbreakable connection to the preceding.

<i>Kaguyama wa</i>	Kagu Mountain,
<i>Unebi o oshi to</i>	Was in love with Unebi,
<i>Miminashi to</i>	And with Miminashi,
<i>Aiarasoiki</i>	Quarrelled over her.
<i>Kamiyo yori</i>	Since the age of the gods,
<i>Kaku ni art rash</i>	Things have been this way, it seems.
<i>Inishie mo</i>	Since in ancient times,
<i>Shika ni are koso</i>	Such already was the way,
<i>Utsusemi mo</i>	We mortals too,
<i>Tsuma o</i>	It seems,
<i>Arasou dashiki</i>	Quarrel over our wives.

⁴¹ Emperor Tenji (天智天皇 Tenji-tenho), the 38th monarch of Japan reigning from 661 – 671.

⁴² The Age Of The Gods (神代 Kamiyo or Jindai) is, according to Japanese mythology, a period preceding the succession of Emperor Jimmu (神武天皇 Jimmu-tenho), supposedly the first emperor of Japan.



Screenshot 20: *Hanezu*'s opening scene of the three mountains.

The opening mountain scene continues with a shot of the rising sun; a female voice-over begins to read a passage from another poem from *Manyoshu*, written by Empress Jito⁴³, translated in the film with English subtitles as follows:

It is said that a burning fire can be kept in a bag.
Alas, we will not be able to meet. Yet, if it is said that a burning fire can
be taken away in a bag. And when in this way I want to take away your
soul. Does this mean that we will not be able to meet?

After the opening shot in which Kawase establishes a connection to the ancient past, the narrative moves on to the present day. Kawase establishes the main protagonist of the film – Kayoko (Hako Oshima). Kayoko is first introduced to the spectator through the scene (mostly consisting of close-ups) of her dying a white scarf. The water is brilliant red, bearing a resemblance to blood.

Kayoko leads a seemingly normal life with her devoted lover, Tetsuya (Tetsuya Akikawa). Yet Kayoko expresses a distance in her connection with Tetsuya. Thus, the audience quickly realises that she is unhappy in this relationship. Additionally, Kawase presents numerous shots of a bird's cage in their house that acts as a metaphor for Kayoko being trapped in this relationship as if trapped in a prison.

⁴³ Empress Jito (持統天皇 Jito-tenho), a daughter of Emperor Tenji, the 41st monarch in Japan reigning from 868 – 697.



Screenshot 21: Kayoko is dyeing a white fabric red.



Screenshot 22: The bird's cage in Kayoko and Tetsuya's house.

Simultaneously, Kayoko is in a secret relationship with Takumi (Tota Komizu), a wood craftsman who creates sculptures based on local myths and religion and lives in a house located so close to nature that birds have made a nest in the ceiling (a powerful counter image to the bird's cage in Kayoko and Tetsuya's house). Kayoko is also carrying Takumi's child of which she notifies him in the early scenes of the film. A pregnancy (the unborn child) presents an allegory for life often present in the films of Kawase (the same allegory was presented in *Shara*, 2003). And as soon as a fact of 'life' (in the form of a soon-to-be-born child) enters the narrative, the connection to the past and death also begins to increase. This, consequently, also represents a circular nature of existence; a constant interplay of life and death.

The main narrative of the film begins to get interrupted with cut-away shots of what looks like a dead body (through the close ups, however, we cannot tell who it is, yet we presume that it must be either of the two main protagonists – Takumi or Tetsuya) lying in the forest's

cave while insects are crawling over him, his face is being caressed with a woman's hand (presumably Kayoko). The shots are accompanied with a heavy, frightful breathing.

As the narrative progresses, Kayoko and Takumi travel to visit their families and learn some of their dead relatives' history. Takumi's grandfather died at the age of 25 (younger than Takumi's current age) soon after he returned from the war. Meanwhile, Kayoko's mother reveals a story of her late grandmother who fell in love with another man (presumably Takumi's grandfather) but couldn't go against her parent's will and married another person (Kayoko's grandfather). She also mentions that Kayoko bears a strong resemblance to her grandmother. Through these scenes Kawase presents an inevitable bond and connection between a person and their ancestors to the point of exact physical and psychological (character) resemblance. This urges a reminiscence and honouring of the memory of your preceding relatives and sets a theme of spiritual connection between the living and the dead.



Screenshot 23: An insect crawling over the man's face.



Screenshot 24: A flashback scene of Takumi's father leaving for war.

In the following scenes of the film the past begins to increasingly unify with the present. Leaving the graveyard, Takumi encounters his late grandfather in his military uniform. He then sees a young boy; presumably his father when he was a child but it may alternatively be a vision of his future son. A longer scene of Takumi's late grandfather follows, set in the time of war it gives a glimpse of the crucial events that happened in the past and shaped the lives of Kayoko and Takumi's parents as well as their own.

A sign reads: "With time my heart takes in all the shades of red". This subtly creates a connection with all the metaphors occurring in the visual narrative of the film. Some of them are more obscure; some of them are more obvious in a sense that they represent death and suffering such as Tetsuya's suicide. He is shown lying in a bath tub completely covered in water stained with crimson red blood.



Screenshot 25: Tetsuya's suicide.

Red also represents a concept of blood relation that runs throughout the film's narrative. This is exemplified in the scene when Kayoko lies to Takumi about her abortion. Hearing the news he grips a knife blade with his bare hands until they bleed inflicting self-harm. The dripping blood from his hands can be interpreted as a symbol of death and the loss of his blood relation (his unborn child).

Cyclical time is evoked through the reoccurring scenes of dawn and sunset, linking to the processes of death and rebirth enhanced by dramatised shades of red. The bathtub shot above

is accompanied by the female voice over reading a poem by Empress Jito. It is believed that she composed the poem after the death of her husband, Emperor Tenmu⁴⁴.

Even a flaming fire can be snatched,
Wrapped and put in a bag -
Do they not say so?
But they say not that they know
How I may meet my Lord again!



Screenshot 26: A shot of the sunset over the mountains.

Additionally, Kawase continues to bring back the images of the mountains with the voice-over reading a passage from *Three Mountains*, which in this film ends with the death of one of them (hence, the allegory of a dead man in the cave).

The film ends with Takumi walking away from the town; his late grandfather is walking along his side. The scene is extremely symbolic and once again shows an ingrained connection to the past that is repeated. Thus, Kawase brings the present and past, life and death together in several different ways: through the series of flashbacks (like in *Love Letter*), through the manifestations of nature (like in *Maboroshi*), and additionally by the means of the voice-over and by placing life and death in a single frame walking alongside each other (Screenshot 27).

⁴⁴ Emperor Tenmu (天武天皇 Tenmu-tenho), the 40th monarch of Japan, reigning from 672 – 686.



Screenshot 27: Takumi is walking alongside his dead grandfather.

The film ends as it started with images of mud and stones on a conveyor belt from an archaeological site. The film wraps up with an end title informing us that the site in question is Asuka, an ancient capital of Japan in the 6th and 7th centuries. Up until the present day its history remains a mystery. An on-screen epilogue appears stating that the director dedicates her film to the many spirits of unnamed souls that used to live there, which plays a final accord and confirms the main narrative of spiritual bond with, and honouring of, the ancestral.

The themes of ancestors, blood relations, family, and generations as well as the death of loved ones are vital in Naomi Kawase's life and work. In an interview for the online publication *Meniscus* conducted by Christopher Bourne, Kawase states: "It's when a person leaves this world that you understand more clearly your connection to that person". She continues:

So I often feel a sense of foreboding, because when that generation disappears, a part of me will disappear with it. We gain so much of our sense of self through our parents, and most of us have that connection of life that flows from our grandparents and our parents through to us... We spend so much of our time in modern society worrying about the here and now. It's through having the experience of witnessing a loved one die or go through the stages of dying that we can reflect on the inner soul and be connected to the afterlife.

(Kawase, 2008)

Her comments are reminiscent of traditional Japanese notions of impermanence. According to Donald Keene, impermanence is a word frequently applied in the studies of Japanese cultural aesthetics. It suggests the inevitability of extinction and of death. However, it also suggests ‘immortality’. To put it more concretely, immortality is to be found through nature's way of living and dying. Permanence is rarely sought. Instead, it is found in the opposite way through the celebration of temporality. The most lucid example of impermanence is the great Shinto shrine of Ise, dedicated to the ancestor of the imperial family, the sun and universe goddess Amaterasu. Made of regular wood, the great shrine of Ise is the most ancient in Japan. Paradoxically, it is also the newest. The shrine is destroyed and identically rebuilt anew on the neighbouring grounds every twenty years in order to avoid the corrosion of materials. This demonstrates the awareness of the fleeting nature of existence, which is glorified through the continuous destruction and restoration of one of the most sacred religious assemblies. Consequently, in Japan the permanence of a form is expressed not in the construction materials (stone or marble) that transcend change and time, but in the sense of being transient and also in the practice of having to rebuild.

This uncertainty and fragility of human existence, which Kawase expresses in her work and interviews, is identified as an essential condition of the emotion that has a power to move or also of a thing of beauty. A Japanese author and Buddhist monk, Yoshida Kenko wrote in his *Essays In Idleness*⁴⁵, “If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in this world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is uncertainty.” (Kenko, 1330-1332, cited in Hume, 1995, p. 39) The frailty of human existence is also recognised as an important condition of beauty. Junichiro Tanizaki in his essay *In Praise Of Shadows*, mentioned in the previous part of the chapter, writes: “The quality that we call beauty... must always grow from the realities of life.” (Tanizaki, 1933, p.70) One of life’s realities is its ephemerality; everything will eventually become extinct. Thus, beauty also lies in the acceptance of death and extinction as an inseparable part of life and its realities. To accept it fully means not to simply come to an agreement with the event or idea of death but to also see its beauty. For instance, cherry blossoms are more beautiful not when they are fully blossomed but rather when their petals begin to drop, a sign that it is time for them to die⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ *Essays In Idleness* (徒然草 *Tsurezuregusa*) is a collection of essays written by the Japanese monk Yoshida Kenko between 1330 – 1332.

⁴⁶ Yoshido Kenko’s *Essays in Idleness*, Section 137 (1330 – 1332).

Consequentially, it appears that the true meaning of beauty is to be found in the moment of transience when life and death come together as close as they possibly can. Following this logic, all the film examples presented in this chapter, to an extent, reflect this beauty.

Thus despite a fairly novel and contemporary technique of filmmaking, Naomi Kawase's cinema is substantially inspired not only by the past, but also by the ancient traditions and philosophies, which makes *Hanezu* (and her other films) even more past-oriented than it was seen in the examples from the 1990s. This is shown through the narrative and visual editing in which the past and present are represented as intermixed and existing not in a linear process of continuous development, but in a deviating course that also shows the director's urge to resurrect the past.

It should be added, that *Hanezu*'s and most of Kawase's films' similarity to the earlier film examples such as *Maboroshi* and *Love Letter* is in the infusion of symbolism presented through (the scenes of) nature. This shows a common practice of Japanese filmmakers of filling the narratives with a brilliant magnitude of nature. This dedication to nature and to the portrayal of seasons is considered to be truly and ultimately the most Japanese of all Japanese characteristics, as claimed by the film critic Hasumi Shigehiko mentioned earlier. However, it can be argued that despite the fact that the scenes of nature create a supportive atmosphere for the narrative and also enhance the emotions of the characters they also, more often than not, sway the audience from the obvious and from the 'reality' of life conjuring a 'mystification' of the national cinema. Consequently, elements of social and political issues become not only subtly implied (rather than explicitly shown) but also in many cases, almost completely succumbed by the visuals of nature's intensity. The films of this style remain of a personal and existential nature in which the social and political issues are hardly perceived, or in general appear secondary such as extreme personal detachment or difficulty in conveying one's feelings displayed through the non-verbal behaviour that was present in *Maboroshi*.

The non-verbal communication has been expressed and advocated as a common and 'unique' characteristic of the Japanese character for decades in the discourse on "Japaneseness". The example of this type of communication is greatly present in *Hanezu* and *Maboroshi* (particularly in the early scenes with Ikuo). Peter N. Dale, however, addresses the issue of non-verbal communication from a perspective of *nihonjinron* (Japaneseness) and points out that the myth of silence "mystifies the problematical aspects of family structure in Japan, and

of social communication in a ‘family-structured’ society.” (Dale, 1986, p.113) This type of mystification, therefore, leads to the enhancement of alleged ‘uniqueness’ and extends the gap between Japanese and Western mindsets. Dale continues with his argument stating that “Westerners, likewise [the Japanese], are not more garrulous, as Tanizaki, Watanabe, Suzuki and so many others assert, for what we are discussing ‘is not just a question of more talk, but of talk of a particular kind’, an open discourse.” (Dale, 1986, p.113) He then references Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘whereof one can speak, thereof one must be silent’, which the writers mentioned above seem to have been using as a model for communication. At the same time Dale urges to examine the socio-political reasons for this verbal restraint. Dale concludes the debate with a provocative statement, the veracity of which can be argued, however, it gives much to ponder on:

The irony remains that far from being ‘unique’, the reticent anti-discourse ascribed to the Japanese by the *nihonjinron* appears akin to a speech style that, in Western terms, is associated with the cultural consequences of poverty and intellectual deprivation. Writers in the *nihonjinron* genre assume the right to gabble endlessly in this void, a ‘public’ jargon of authenticity, while arrogantly refusing a voice to the silent majority whose reticence they so profitably exploit.

(Dale, 1986, p.113)

Returning to the argument of silent communication in cinematic examples, it can be argued that above all else these types of dialogues render the films open to conflict and in a delicate way imply a repression and submission, frequently reducing the works to mere philosophical and mystical expressions of life’s inevitabilities like loss, suffering and death. Through the construction of the narratives in which the boundaries between the past, the present and dreams are blurred within one image, the political or social edges are either absent or very subtly implied. Therefore creating a complex cinematic form in which majorly ethereal themes are being privileged over social and political ones, moving the audience to bewilderment as can be seen in *Hanezu*.

To conclude, starting off as a documentary film director in the early 1990s, Kawase later moves on to fiction cinema and becomes an internationally acclaimed film director in the 2000s, praised for her filmmaking method that combines documentary and fiction. As

mentioned earlier, the themes explored in Kawase's cinema remain excessively existential; almost always focusing on death (more concretely its correlation with life), loss, memory and a reincarnation of traditions that Kawase expresses longing for. As noted in Rie Karatsu's article "Questions for a Women's Cinema: Fact, Fiction and Memory in the Films of Naomi Kawase" (2009), Karatsu explained [while speaking in the context of *Mogari No Mori*]:

... her attempt to lay out what is fading in contemporary Japan and in the Japanese people. She wanted to visualize the elements that she thought represented Japanese culture and its people - values that have been previously cherished and had now begun to diminish. (Karatsu, 2009, p.173)

Once again we come back to the issue of Japan's 'mythical past' and a question of the preservation of a fading national essence, of "Japanism." This, therefore, brings to the surface a strong characteristic and unsolvable issue present in these chosen examples of Japanese contemporary cinema – a non-linear understanding of time, an urge for the resurrection of past values (whatever they might be) and aesthetics, which according to Kawase are vanishing. This is expressed throughout many examples of Japanese cinema, in some cases more, in some less, and in some cases making it into an *auteur* style upon which international viewers, critics and scholars often regrettably judge Japanese cinema from a perspective of 'uniqueness' or mystified "Orientalism" as those are the kind of films which are favoured among international film festivals and become representatives of (real) Japanese cinema. Therefore, we arrive at the final matter in the analysis of 'mystification' of Japanese cinema.

Despite continued presence in world leading film festivals, Kawase's films do, however also receive negative feedback for their aspects of Orientalisation. In 2011, Asia film critic Maggie Lee observed in relation to *Hanezu*:

In fact, the more Kawase strives for Oriental mysticism, the more everything strains under the weight of having to symbolise something. Nowhere is this more so than random scenes of excavations, which the epilogue suggests has something to do with the film's location being the cradle of the Japanese race — a pompous yet tenuous way of forcing her

small human drama into a context so epic as the birth of the nation.⁴⁷ (Lee, 2011)

Kawase's recent works *Still The Water* in 2014 and the latest *An*⁴⁸ in 2015 (that was selected to be opening at Un Certain Regard at Cannes Film Festival 2015) also gained criticism of a similar nature. Over an extensive period of time, Kawase has continued to present films of similar character – filled with discoveries of the meaning of life and death, nature worshipping and the strife for the recollection of the past – themes, which Kawase has certainly become excellent at, yet which no longer possess novelty, but become a “pompous philosophizing in the indulgently mannerist style”, as Lee states⁴⁹.

Despite the validity of criticism, Kawase's popularity amongst international film festivals (especially in the West) remains unchanged. Adam Cook in his article for *Indiewire*⁵⁰ in May 2015 raises the simple question – “Why does Cannes Film Festival Keep Programming Naomi Kawase's Movies?” Due to which reasons are Kawase's films so popular in the Western film festival market? Could it be due to their continuous portrayal of “Orientalised” traditions that Western audiences and critics came to admire and perceive as the reflection of the mystical Japanese world? As it is precisely with these elements Japanese cinema first entered the international film market and won the appreciation of audiences – a form that is recognisable and recognisably Japanese, i.e. perceived as such. Therefore, it can be argued, that the problem lays not in Kawase (or for that matter any other Japanese film director who calls upon similar methods), whose genuineness (in spite of obvious drawbacks) I do not doubt, but in the distributors of international significance who encourage only this type of cinematic entries and of critics and scholars who invigorate the style from the perspective of mythical national ‘uniqueness’. Hence, the vicious circle of ‘mystification’ and “Japaneseness” remains sustained.

⁴⁷ Lee, M. 2011. Hanezu: *Cannes 2011 Review*. The Hollywood Reporter. [Accessed on 7 September 2015]

⁴⁸ Bradshaw, P. 2015 *An Review – Naomi Kawase's Dessert-Filled Film is Too Insipid to Swallow*. The Guardian. [Accessed on 30 June 2015]

⁴⁹ Lee, M. 2014 *Film Review: Still the Water*. *The Variety*. [Accessed on 12 May 2015]

⁵⁰ Cook, A. 2015 *Why Does Cannes Film Festival Keep Programming Naomi Kawase's Movies?* *Indiewire*. [Accessed on 30 June 2015]

Conclusion

As it stands, the Japanese cinematic landscape in the period of 1990s-2010s is characterised by three major arguments:

1. The use of cinematic patterns, which lead to ‘mystifications’ regarding their representations of past and present or life and death – a non-linear concept of time, as well as a concealment of socio-political issues. A phenomenon, which arguably, influences readings of Japanese films through aspects and as examples of cultural ‘uniqueness’.
2. The above being connected to a sense of nostalgia for disappearing aesthetics and values of the past linked to Japan’s negotiation of its long-term dependency on The U.S.
3. International distribution and promotion of films, which fulfil the standards of being quintessentially ‘Japanese’.

As Peter N. Dale writes in his book *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*:

The more distant the country, the greater is the temptation to extend the submerged landscape of private fantasy into the hearsay reaches of an exotic geography, to populate it with creatures of the imagination whose existence is otherwise rendered improbable by the dulling pressures of a known and banal reality. (Dale, 1986, p.1)

And the “banal reality” of Japanese political, social and cultural landscapes since the 1930s can be summarised in the single most significant factor – a pressure of political and cultural polarities or an extensive battle, which eventually comprises an effort of strengthening economic and political ties with the West (particularly The U.S.) on the one hand whilst distancing Japan from the West in the cultural sense in the pursuit of demonstrating self worth and the boosting of a national essence, on the other hand. Peter N. Dale adds, “In complex societies like Japan, the ‘indigenous’ version of how that world is perceived is often

deeply coloured by ideological interests” (Dale, 1986, p.7), which also relates to the earlier mentioned subject matter of instability between a “private” and a “public” Japan.

From an economic perspective, however, the period from 1990s–2010s displays a vast degree of political and social content despite the burst of Japan’s economic “bubble” in the 1990s. With the technological progress Japan had become one of the world’s leading economies in a record-holding short period of time. Inevitably, the overpowering progress of modern Japan has led to monumental changes in life’s structure characterised by unpreventable and firm reductions of traditional ways of living (lessening the human connection to nature, to ancestors and to aesthetics of the past). Consequently, the reaction to these fast-moving changes often resulted in an aspiration for the resurrection of the past that was dying. Hence, all the film examples presented are united through the theme of linking oneself with the past expressed through the presence of death.

Thus, in spite of international influence and development of new techniques and approaches to filmmaking (as well as development of life itself that makes it unrecognisable to the past), many of the notable Japanese film directors seem to have continued to “look backwards into the future.”⁵¹ This also stimulates cinematic patterns to lead to a mystification and contributed to the concept of Japanese ‘uniqueness’ in cinema studies that on the contrary should be eliminated as it leads to generalisations and limits the cinematic critique to a matter of inevitable acceptance of transcendental (that masterfully conceals social and political issues) making it problematic to create a de-essentialised analysis.

At the same time, an extensive period of a political and social climate signified by polarities mentioned above arguably resulted in the development of a thematic ‘paralysis’ that is expressed in the lack of variance in cinematic patterns and narratives in fiction film examples in Japanese cinema of the 1990s–2010s. However, on 11th March 2011 an event occurred that shook Japan to the very core. Tohoku earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0 (the strongest ever recorded) triggered tsunami waves reaching the height of 40.5 metres causing a death toll of 15,891 people and severe structural damage across north-eastern Japan. The incident also resulted in level 7 (highest on the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale) meltdowns at three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex, causing

⁵¹ A remark expressed by Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto in the context of his approach to creative process (Salazar, 2008).

high levels of radiation and mass evacuation of the area. The disaster created a major humanitarian and economic crisis, the aftermaths of which are largely existent to the present day. It is evident that the events of this magnitude (post Auschwitz, post WWII, post 9/11, post Chernobyl) often have or can have an effect on artistic and creative productions. Thus, the following chapter of the thesis will explore the landscape of Japanese cinema pre 3.11 with references to major disasters and attempt to analyse any major changes or developments in Japanese drama film genre post 3.11.

Chapter 3

Japanese Cinema and the significance of the disasters

The following chapter is dedicated to the analysis of three major areas:

1. Japanese Cinema pre 3.11 tragedies of the past and the cinematic response.
2. *Himizu* – the “extraordinary reality”. Examination of the first fiction film on the subject matter of 3.11
3. Japanese Cinema post 3.11. Survey of the cinematic landscape

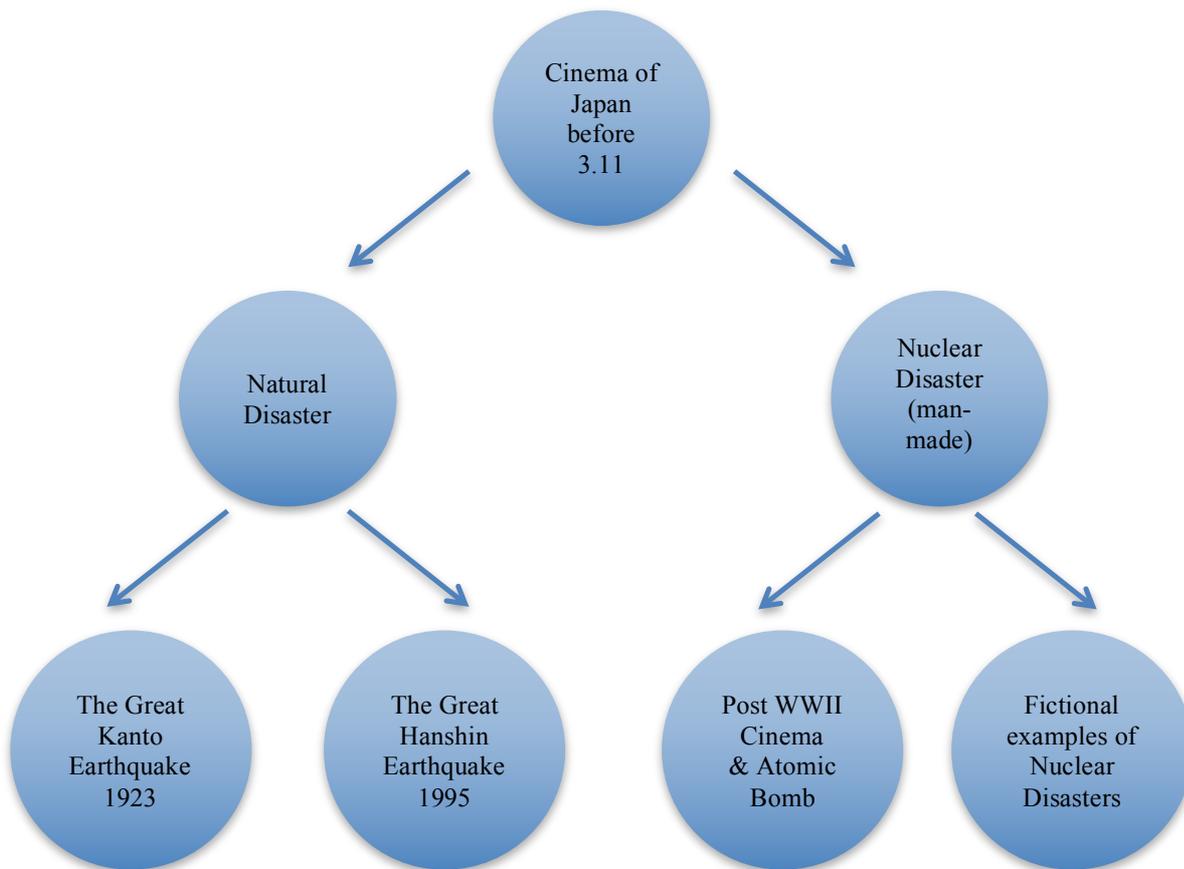
The questions to be analysed are:

- The effect the events of this magnitude have on the artistic and creative productions (discussed with relation to prior adversities such as WWII, The Great Kanto Earthquake and The Great Hanshin Earthquake).
- What happens to the thematic ‘paralysis’ (expressed in the second chapter) of cinema patterns when humanity is faced with the destruction of 3.11 magnitude?
- Does the approach to aesthetic representations of nostalgia, connection to nature, as well as life and death change due to the new circumstances?
- Does the landscape of social problems and family relations change from hardly implied to openly expressed and encouraged?
- Does the issue of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘mystification’ of cinematic patterns still stand?

Part 1

Japanese Cinema Pre Tohoku Disaster of 3.11 | The great tragedies of the past and the cinematic response.

Diagram 1



1. *Tenken* (heavenly punishment) for the degeneration of Japanese race to which cinema supposedly contributed.
 2. Decline in film production and distribution/ reallocation of major film studios.
 3. Government's interference in exhibition.
 4. Moralising cinema (critique of corruption, luxury and materialism).

1. Not depicted in cinema, even though the incident had provoked political criticism due to Japanese authorities' failure to provide an effective response to the disaster.
 2. Discourse on "Japaneseness" occurs in relation to both authoritarian and people's responses to the tragedy – "behavioural ideology" (term: Befu, 1980)

1. Censoring of cinema during the U.S. occupation
 2. Politicising (Nationalising) cinema in post occupation period – Japan largely being portrayed as a victim of war. A concept of "selective memory" is introduced. (Example: *Rhapsody in August* by Akira Kurosawa, 1991)

1. More present in science fiction and anime cinema. The processes of post-nuclear radiation, contamination and destruction are expressed through futuristic motives. (Example: *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988)

As can be seen in Diagram 1 Japanese cinema pre the 3.11 disaster has undergone three major tragedies: two natural (The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and The Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995) and one man-made – namely, nuclear (The WWII Atomic Bombing). Each of these calamities comprises a set of specifications (summarised in the table) that in one way or another affected national cinema.

While 3.11 represents both a natural and man-made catastrophe it is imperative to draw points of comparisons between 3.11 and the preceding incidents in order to obtain a sufficient understanding of how Japanese cinema production reacts to disasters of this magnitude. The object of this exercise is to locate the cases of similarities and differences (social, cultural and cinematic). This will be done through the analysis of the following:

- 3.11 and The Great Kanto Earthquake (1923)
- 3.11 and WWII Atomic Bombings (1945)
- 3.11 and The Great Hanshin Earthquake (1995)

The Great Kanto Earthquake

The earthquake struck on 1st September 1923 on Japan's main island of Honshu. With a magnitude of 7.9 on the MMS, the earthquake caused significant damage to Tokyo, Yokohama and several surrounding prefectures of the Kanto region with the number of casualties rising to nearly 143,000.

The destruction of Tokyo greatly affected the production, reception and distribution of cinema, which at that point was still in the process of formation. Before the quake, all of the major studios (including Nikkatsu and Shochiku) were located in Tokyo. The disaster resulted in the studios' relocations and the division of labour between Tokyo and Kyoto. While Tokyo became a centre for drama and comedy productions of the present time (Shochiku), Kyoto operated as a set for period dramas (Nikkatsu and Makino studios). Aside from relocation of the major film studios, the industry had to face a significant loss of

cinemas which greatly undermined cinema consumption.⁵²

As Alex Bates, in his essay *The Wrath of Heaven: The Great Kanto Earthquake and Japanese Cinema*, writes, “Beyond the considerable effort required to repair and rebuild theatres, the industry had to grapple with the government’s interference in exhibition. On 3rd September martial law was imposed on the disaster area and consequently all “entertainment” was prohibited.” (Bates, 2015, p. 51) However, by the efforts of studio executives, the ban was lifted on 25th September. Nevertheless, the films that “destabilized the populace” remained solely forbidden. (Bates, 2015, 51)

As Gennifer Weisenfeld explains, in her book *Imaging Disaster. Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan’s Great Earthquake of 1923*, from the pre-modern period (which she defines as the years prior to 1600s) until the 19th century, the majority of Japanese people interpreted the natural disasters as a “result of imbalances in the five elements of nature caused by social impurities directly linked to human behaviour...” (Weisenfeld, 2012, p.14) It is likely that this reasoning has evolved over time. However, in 1923 when the greatest disaster in Japanese history up to that date struck, similar arguments surfaced once again.

In the effort to make sense of the tragedy, a major theme emerged – *tenken* (heavenly punishment). The concept of *tenken* proclaimed the ideas that the disaster occurred due to moral degeneration and the corruption of Japanese people. It also declared that the return to tenacity would be imperative to reconstruction. Many insisted that cinema was one of the reasons for the moral decline.

Alex Bates references several political and religious thinkers who supported the concept of *tenken*. One of these supporters was an industrialist Shibusawa Eiichi (also known as the father of Japanese capitalism).

Tokyo has become a demon of chaos, normal life has been abandoned, morals have deteriorated from laxity, the five filial relationships of Confucius can no longer be seen, and immorality is rampant. (Shibusawa, n.d, cited in Bates, 2015, p.49)

⁵² *Japan Times* reported that Asakusa lost 37 major theatres.

Shibusawa's idea eventually gained the emperor's approval and was explicated in the Imperial household's official pronouncement "Strengthening the National Spirit":

In recent years much progress has been made in science and human wisdom. At the same time, frivolous and extravagant habits have set in, and even rash and extreme tendencies are not unknown. If these habits and tendencies are not checked now, the future of the country, we fear, is dark, the disaster which [sic] befell the Japanese nation being very severe. (Fujisawa Morihiko and Office, B.o.S.A.H. 1926: frontpiece) (56)

Christian thinker Uchimura Kanzo and Tenrikyo priest Okutani Fumitomo⁵³ were less vague in their statements:

Look at the theatres and the department stores and the frivolous men and women who frequent them [...] If this is Japan then I would be embarrassed to have been born here. Japan before the earthquake, especially Tokyo, was the kind of place in which the righteous could not endure." (Kanzo, 1983, cited in Bates, 2015, pp.56-57)

Other critics like Horie Kiichi (Keio University economist) were more reluctant to implement religious causes for the devastation, and instead made the case of a supposed lack of productivity and money squandering of cinema. (Bates, 2015, p.58)

With the outbreak of criticism (along with governmental interference), which targeted cinema as one of the reasons for the "divine punishment", the film industry had to adjust to the harsh conditions in order to survive and validate itself as a beneficial medium capable of influencing society and its progression in positive and ethical ways. Thus, cinema production quickly adapted to the moral discourse proving its own functionality and contribution to the motivation and bettering of society in times of devastation.

Shochiku's *Facing Death* was subtle critique of city corruption and

⁵³ Okutani Fumitomo linked national corruption directly to the entertainment districts. The destruction of the areas of Asakusa and Ginza while "residential" areas were preserved was used as a proof for the statements.

materialism, but did not reference class difference directly. Other films more explicitly depicted the earthquake⁵⁴ as an awakening for those who had been “infected” with materialism in the heady years leading up to the disaster (*Juichiji gojuhappon / Two minutes to Noon* by Shimazu Yasujiro, 1923 and *Haikyo no naka / Amid the Ruins* by Kenji Mizoguchi 1923). Both films reflected the trend against materialism and luxury in heavenly punishment discourse, but two films explicitly invoked *tenken*. (Bates, 2015, pp. 62-63)

As Tokyo’s reconstruction from an old 19th-century city to a completely modern one was underway, the cinema also began to adapt to new conditions as well as develop new styles and techniques with closer resemblance to Hollywood cinema. Bates mentions Anderson and Richie:

One of the reasons that more advanced films were acceptable at all was that the earthquake and its resultant confusion had upset the industry to the extent that many of the old concepts were relinquished and completely new methods and ideas were adopted.” (Anderson and Richie, 1983, cited in Bates, 2015, p.54)

Thus, this shows that the major cinematic reaction to the Great Kanto Earthquake was its adaptation to the discourse of *tenken* in order to sustain itself as an important cultural medium. While this particular cinematic development of adaptation to the moral discourse is not present in the cinematic developments post 3.11, one similarity does present itself – a minimal reappearance of *tenken* or “heavenly punishment” within society.

At the press conference held on 11th March 2011, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro stressed the importance of karma by stating:

The identity of Japanese people is greed. This tsunami represents a good opportunity to cleanse this greed (J. *gayoku*), and one we must avail ourselves of. Indeed, I think this is divine punishment (J. *tenbatsu*)... It

⁵⁴ Before the end of 1923 at least 11 fiction films were released that dealt with the earthquake directly, however, almost none were preserved. (Bates, 2015: 58)

may be harsh for the victims to hear, but I want you to take it down and report it.” (Shintaro, 2011, cited in Starrs, 2014, p.71)

However, this statement received widespread protest, leading Shintaro to disclaim his argument. And even though the discourses on the applicability of religion, revival of the religious practices and the rise of the “nationalist vigour that is embedded in millenarian beliefs of destruction and resurrection...” (Rots, 2011, cited in Starrs, 2014, p.24) did occur in the post 3.11 social realm, no cinematic examples on these themes are yet present.

WWII and the Nuclear Bomb

The stages of Japanese cinema development in the period of WWII have already been commented upon in Chapter 1 of the thesis. In the period post the Hiroshima & Nagasaki atomic bombings and the war defeat, Japanese cinema has been characterised by two major periods: The U.S. Occupation and the Post Occupation period. As cinema during the occupation was subjected to strict censorship (see Chapter 1 for more sufficient analysis) and ‘reconstruction’ of values, Post Occupation Japan was much more concerned with the revival of old history and traditions. Later, however, cinema did see the rise of controversy (and to an extent politicising) within film examples that referenced the subject of the atomic disaster. It was also signified by the occurrence of what many academics refer to as a concept of “selective memory”, which was also significant in this period, as I will expand on below.

In the essay “The Extremes of Innocence: Kurosawa’s Dreams and Rhapsodies”, Linda C. Ehrlich references the critic Yomota Inuhiko⁵⁵, who comments on the subject of selective amnesia and lessening of the impact of atomic bombing in cinema while referring to Akira Kurosawa’s *Dreams*⁵⁶ (1990) and *Rhapsody in August*⁵⁷ (1991), which “were submitted to overseas film festivals like antique objects and were treated with respect, not as fresh, living films but as offerings to the altar.” (Ehrlich, 1996, p.13) This refers to Yomota’s argument on

⁵⁵ *Transformation and Stagnation: Japanese Cinema in the 1990s*, Art & Text, Number 40, 1991, pp.47-7.

⁵⁶ Directed by Akira Kurosawa, the film is comprised of the collection of short episodes based upon the director’s dreams. *Dreams* was funded by Warner Bros and screened at 1990 Cannes Film Festival (non-competition).

⁵⁷ Directed by Akira Kurosawa, the film reflects on the generations’ response to the atomic bombing of Japan. It centres on an elderly *hibakusha* (a Japanese term for the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic disaster) who lost her husband in Nagasaki bombing with Richard Gere making an appearance. The film was selected as the Japanese entry for the Best Foreign Language Film for the 64th Academy Awards but was not accepted.

Japanese cinema of the 1990s becoming stagnant “with the age of the maestros virtually over.” (Yomota, 1991, cited in Ehrlich, 1996, p.13)

The scene of Gere’s apology [for the atomic bombing] caused a lot of controversy. Many critics, myself included, thought Kurosawa chauvinistic in his portrayal of the Japanese as victims of the war, while ignoring the brutal actions of the Japanese and whitewashing them with cheap humanist sentiment.” (Yomota, 1991, cited in Ehrlich, 1996, p.13)

In an interview with Hirano Kyoko of the Japanese Society, Kurosawa stated: “we have to exorcise the essential evil in human nature rather than presenting concrete solutions to problems or directly depicting social problems.” (Kurosawa, 1986, p. 140) The statement in itself displays a level of escapism and disinclination to face the issues that make up the reality of the time. Kurosawa rather chooses to focus on the intangible evil as a consistent part of human nature leaving out the potential to alter reality (or that nature’s evil), which could have been done by making a more valiant cinematic statement.

In case one should mistake the message of *Rhapsody in August*, however, Kurosawa makes sure to have the grandmother state explicitly that it is war itself which is bad, and that she no longer feels a marked dislike (nor any special affection) for Americans. In their attempts to oversimplify a complex historical event, *Dreams* and *Rhapsody in August* (like Imamura’s *Black Rain* that preceded it) skirt related issues of Japanese responsibility for its own wartime behaviour. This selective memory of the suffering of World War II, and of the complexities of ‘innocence’ detracts from the equally important reminders of the horrors of a nuclear attack. (Ehrlich, 1996, p.172)

Therefore, Ehrlich concludes, that *Dreams* and *Rhapsody in August* are the “opportunities missed – not so much cinematic opportunities, but opportunities for a voice respected throughout the world to present images of the effects of war that are at once penetrating and extensive.” (Ehrlich, 1996, pp.171-172)

Considering the information presented above with particular emphasis on the periods that

followed the atomic disaster, it becomes problematic to compare this particular incident with the 3.11 disaster due to two main reasons. Firstly, while this is arguable in a historic sense, Japanese positioning within the context of the atomic bombing is of a victim and bearer of suffering inflicted by the outsiders. Secondly, it is the period of intense emphasis on resurrection of Japanese tradition that was subdued and neglected in the years of U.S. invasion. Thus, it is vital to acknowledge that there is no outsider that one can put the blame on for the nuclear side of the 3.11 tragedy. Nor is Japan experiencing the foreign subjugation in present time.

Consequently the case of the post WWII nuclear blast does not correspond entirely with the situation of 3.11, yet some similarities may occur such as:

- Both, in their nature, were nuclear disasters and both caused a great distress to the national spirit and psyche.
- According to Aike P. Rots⁵⁸, as well as a revival of older traditions post the WWII occupation, Japan has also encountered a revival of religious practices, nostalgic notions and traditional cultures in the post 3.11 period, which would relate to the outbreak of nostalgia after the WWII atomic bomb. However, this return to nostalgia is not distinctly evident in the cinematic context of post 3.11 as of yet. (Rots in Starrs, 2014)
- An issue of re-occurrence of “selective memory” that is not yet proven and will take much more time to shape, but has a potential of repetition; the current indicator of which could be a lack of national distribution of the films that deal directly with the subject of the nuclear threat and contamination such as Sion Sono’s *The Land of Hope* (2012). The nuclear themes of the 3.11 disaster in fictional cinema are either non-present or greatly subdued. This can relate to the process of *iyasu* (healing), which will be mentioned again in the following part of the chapter. However, it also evokes an occurrence of “selective memory.”

The Great Hanshin Earthquake

⁵⁸ *Shinto Responses to the Disaster of 2011*

The Great Hanshin Earthquake or Kobe earthquake struck on 17th January 1995 in the southern part of Hyogo Prefecture. It measured 6.9 on the MMS. The final death toll rose to nearly 6,000 people, with more than 27,000 injured, approximately 300,000 made temporarily homeless, and over 100,000 buildings either destroyed or damaged. (Sassa, 1995, p.137) The Japanese government and authorities had displayed a slow and ineffective response in time of the catastrophe, for which they were heavily criticised in Japan as well as abroad.

In the essay “The Great Hanshin Earthquake: The Japanese Response”, Eamon McCafferty illustrates and examines the reactions to the event from both governmental and public perspectives while detecting “the subtle codes, cues and expectations”, which are pointing out the issue of “Japaneseness”. The key feature of which, in time of the Hanshin disaster, became a ‘groupism’ and hierarchical structure spread throughout society – “the members are expected to conform to the norms of their group and preserve harmony within by avoiding conflicts. Implicit of this is a concern for others before oneself.” (McCafferty, 2002, p.138) Such groups exist within all levels of Japanese society (i.e. any work communities, local/neighbour communities and so on). In the time of disaster and national struggle, ‘groupism’ can be an important and contributing factor in dealing with the tragedy. However, it may also brutally alienate an individual who dares to stand against it as expressed in some of the post 3.11 cinematic works like *Odakaya/Odakaya Nichijou* directed by Nobuteru Uchida (2012) and *The Land of Hope* directed by Sion Soni (2012), which will be presented in more detail in the Conclusion of the thesis.

The significance of governmental authorities’ failure to respond effectively to the disaster, according to McCafferty, lies precisely in the rigidity of the bureaucratic structure within which actions were more focused on gaining the official approval for aid actions rather than attending to the immediate needs of the victims.

- As of 25th January 1995, of the 52 countries, as well as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the European Union (EU), that had offered help, 14 had been accepted (*Tokyo’s Response to Offers*, 1995⁵⁹)
- The Hyogo Prefecture government reportedly declined offers of help from several other

⁵⁹ Tokyo’s Response to Offers of Help Draws Fire. (1995, January 27). *The Japan Times*, p. 4.

Japanese prefectures, saying that they were not prepared to accept medical teams. Similarly, a French medical team was informed that they would not be allowed to help survivors because their doctors were not licensed under Japanese law.

- The England-based International Rescue Corps (IRC) were unable to receive prompt permission to enter Japan, facing heavy bureaucratic resistance. They finally were requested by the Japanese government to attend relief duties on the morning of Saturday, 21st January, nearly four days after the earthquake.
- Naval vessels carrying food and other relief equipment were prevented from docking at Kobe port for several hours, because workers at the dock had not received any official orders to receive them. (*Faith*, 1995⁶⁰)

At the same time the response of the victims was dignified and ordered – “not only were they praised for their “characteristically Japanese” conduct, but they also were criticized (within the communities and by higher ranked/authoritarian organizations) when it was seen to be lacking.” (McCafferty, 2002, p.142) The vitality of ‘groupism’ and communal spirit (as well as emphasised dependence) was a major subject matter during the crisis.

The need for order was even used as an excuse for slow response to foreign offers of assistance by a foreign ministry official, who said: “Some people may say that the government should have invited the rescue teams in anyway. But it is important to first identify how and where foreign rescue teams can operate in detail, otherwise more confusion would arise after their arrival” (*Tokyo’s Response to Offers*, 1995, cited in McCafferty, 2002, p.143)

McCafferty quotes a reporter T. Watanabe who in 1995 stated:

The response of its officials and workers, victims and volunteers, mirrors the strengths and weaknesses of Japanese society itself. The disaster has illuminated the national psyche – a complex emotional tapestry of shame and pride, of dependence and fatalism, of the celebrated ability to endure

⁶⁰ “Faith in the Authorities Fades.” (1995, January 21-22). *Financial Times* (Asian Edition), p. 9.

the unendurable.⁶¹ (Watanabe, 1995)

That ability to “endure the unendurable” in dignified and disciplined manner was also shown to the outside world as well as enhanced through the local media. The comparisons between Japan’s response to disaster with how the “rest of them [rest of the world]” addresses similar situations was largely present in Japanese media, therefore, contributing to the concept of Japanese ‘uniqueness’. (McCafferty, 2002, p.144) It also affects how outsiders perceive the Japanese. In the film examples of 3.11 this becomes evident. The manner in which the preservation of harmony within the group must be sustained (via avoiding conflicts) in some cases can lead to a “disaster” of its own. Thus, some films such as above-mentioned *Odakaya/Odakaya Nichijou* (2012) portray the ugly side of Japanese ‘groupism’, the one that is neither shown to the outside world in the media coverage, nor easily admitted within Japan itself.

Despite great distress along with the political and social issues, which the Hanshin earthquake has brought up, there were no major cinematic reactions to the calamity. No major and internationally known Japanese movie directors had taken on the opportunity to express the events in their fiction works. The stronger response has occurred within the documentary and the television domain. In 2010, in celebration of the 15th anniversary of the Great Hanshin earthquake, the television drama *Sono Machi no Kodomo (The Town’s Children)* was released and gained huge success among the public, while also winning the 36th Hoso Bunka Foundation⁶² prize.

The drama tells a story of two Hanshin survivors Mika and Yuji who meet by chance in Kobe prior to the earthquake’s 15th memorial convention. Even though both protagonists were just kids when the disaster struck, they both still carry traumatic memories that do not subside. The drama eventually was re-edited into a full-length feature film of the same title and was released in January 2011 only two months before the 3.11 struck.

⁶¹ On 15th August 1945 after Japan’s defeat in WWII, Emperor Showa delivered an official speech (*The Imperial Rescript of Surrender*) urging Japanese people to ‘endure the unendurable.’

⁶² The Hoso Bunka Foundation is an independent non-profit organisation that aims to promote the cultural and technological development of broadcasting. It was established by Japan’s public service broadcaster, NHK-Japan Broadcasting Corporation, in February 1974.

Since there are no other significant fiction films as well as written material on the subject matter of cinema post Hanshin disaster that could be located, any reasons for this deficiency would be highly speculative. The causes for the lack of material are more obvious when it comes to comparison between the Hanshin and Kanto earthquakes; however, they become slightly more obscure in case of a comparison between the Hanshin and Tohoku disaster. While the Great Kanto Earthquake occurred at the time of Japan's entering into the post-modern stages as a member of the global sector with the cinematic medium only recently introduced, it is highly probable that the timing as well as geography of the incident had played a big role in the formation of cinematic reactions. Thus, there are a number of reasons why the Great Hanshin Earthquake did not trigger a bigger cinematic reaction in comparison to both the Great Kanto Earthquake and Tohoku Disaster, some of which could be:

- The so-called Lost Decade of the 1990s – the period of the collapse of Japan's bubble economy; the bankruptcies and suspensions of several major film companies.
- Geography and the death toll. While Kanto earthquake had greatly affected the Tokyo region, which was a centre for culture production, Hanshin affected the city of Kobe, which is only the sixth-largest city in Japan. Additionally, the death toll of the Great Hanshin Earthquake (~6,000) is significantly smaller in comparison to Tohoku disaster (~16,000) and even more so in comparison to the Great Kanto earthquake (~143,000).
- The Great Hanshin Earthquake associates strictly with the natural disaster context while the disaster of 3.11 represents a mixture of natural and man-made disasters introducing, or re-introducing, the nuclear element into the cultural discourse. 3.11, thus, has also been a chance to revisit the trauma of nuclear devastation of WWII.

Thus, it is evident that there are various points of reference and similarities between 3.11 and the preceding disasters, which help to shape an understanding of the cultural and cinematic responses in times of such adversities. However, there are also a great number of key dissimilarities that make it harder to rely entirely on a critique of comparison. I argue that the particular nature of the 3.11 disaster has created a novel landscape in which cultural patterns are at the least re-thought, at times re-established but also altered. The time of the “paralysis” (which was defined by the economical, political, social, as well as cultural parameters) that had prevailed for over two decades has now plummeted. The period of what can be

considered normality has changed to what Japanese film director Sion Sono calls the time of “extraordinary reality.” The second part of this chapter will therefore examine the earliest cinematic reactions to 3.11 through the example of Sion Sono’s *Himizu* (2011). It will strive to locate the shift to “extraordinary reality” within the cinematic patterns, address the aesthetic treatment of the nuclear disaster that was 3.11, as well as discuss the cinematic presence of the ‘social problem.’ The last part of the chapter will look into surveying the further developments in Japanese cinema after the 3.11 incident.

Part 2

Himizu – The “Extraordinary Reality”

There are about ten major fiction works that directly or implicatively target the theme of 3.11 since its occurrence. Among those, there is one that deserves particular attention and will be discussed in the following section – *Himizu*.

Directed by Sion Sono⁶³, the film is a direct and heartbreaking portrayal of post-tsunami Japan. Filming took place in May; only two months after the tsunami struck and features powerful images of destroyed Ishinomaki city in Miyagi Prefecture. It should be noted that the film is an adaptation of 2001–2003 Minoru Furuya’s *manga* of the same name. The script was already complete when the disaster of 3.11 struck which subsequently provoked Sono to make alterations and incorporate the disaster in the screenplay. In a 2011 interview for *The Independent*, Sono states, “I had already written the script and was forced to change it. Whether to shoot footage of the area was something I struggled with because many there lost their lives and many have still not been found.” He continues, “It was supposed to be a light romance. When I began to rewrite the script, I was asked not to write an apocalyptic film but I couldn’t stop.” (Sono, 2011) He also expressed a concern about filming a fiction movie in the area of devastation so soon after the events took place, “I had to be careful about filming.

⁶³ A film director, writer and a poet who started his film career in the mid 1980s with a series of short films, eventually gaining recognition for his feature work *The Room* (1992) for which he received a Special Jury Prize at Tokyo Sundance Film Festival. He gained further international acknowledgement with his film *Love Exposure* (2008), eventually becoming a cult director.

Many people said it would be better not to shoot there. But I thought drama makers should not refrain from shooting when documentary makers do it there... I struggled, but I thought I would regret it my whole life if I didn't go there that time.” (Sono, 2011)

Set against the background of the disaster's aftermaths, the story revolves around two fourteen year old school kids (Sumida and Keiko) who are forced to live in a degraded environment and, according to Hiroko Furukawa, “describes the never-ending collapse of normality.” (Sono, 2011, cited in Furukawa and Denison, 2015, p.236) The case of normality or, at least, what was considered normality prior to 3.11, becomes one of the key elements of the film according to the film critics and the director. This is expressed through Sumida's yearning for being 'normal', which is arguably an extremely common desire of people who have been forced to live in times of severe devastations such as war or natural cataclysm. The reflection on this subject is, according to the director, what pushed him to rewrite the original script. He states, “After March '11, Japan has to be considered unstable. I believe our days of normality have ended and we have entered a stage where “beyond the norm” appears to be never-ending.” (Sono, 2011, cited in Furukawa and Denison, 2015, p.236)

Himizu embodies many elements vital for the discussion and shaping of the effect the disaster had on contemporary Japanese cinema. Those elements are:

- Direct representation of the post-disaster landscape and environment
- The psychological trauma that 3.11 created in the national psyche
- The issue of malfunctioning family relationships (which were vaguely present in Japanese cinema prior to 3.11, but appear with stronger emphasis in *Himizu*)
- The issue of youth and nihilism
- A shift of consciousness through an encouragement of life and hope (as will be explained below.)

The film opens with a wide shot of a schoolgirl, Keiko, reciting a poem by Francoise Villon – *All Things Except Myself I Know*⁶⁴ – in the rain.

⁶⁴ A ballade written by the late 15th-century poet Francois Villon (1431-1463)

I know flies in milk
Specks against white
I know, I know it
I know a man by his clothes
Even I know that much
I know fair weather from foul
I know that
I know the apple by the tree
That I know
I know who labors and who loafers
I know all
All save myself



Screenshot 28: Keiko is reciting the poem. The images of the disaster are intercut into images of Keiko.

It then moves on to tracking shots of the tragic scenes of the tsunami destruction accompanied by Mozart's *Requiem*. As Elsa Niskanen argues, the tracking shots “have been associated, throughout film history, with the contemplation of memory of trauma, as in the films of Alain Resnais and Andrei Tarkovski.” (Niskanen, 2015, p.244) The scene creates an apocalyptic sensation. The sky is grey and the wind is strong, which strengthens a dark and daunting atmosphere. It is a vast space of wreckage – houses, cars, trees; everything that once

was a city is now wiped to the ground. No signs of life are present except the few who are walking among the ruins in terror and astonishment. They are alive, yet their presence there is ghost-like. One of the characters present in the field of destruction is a fourteen-year-old boy, Sumida. He finds an old washing machine. He opens it and finds a gun inside. He picks it up and points it to his head. The shot fires and the screen turns black. Was it a dream, or was it reality?

Sumida wakes up to the news playing on television about radioactivity in the Tohoku region. His mother (who will eventually leave him with only a note saying “have a nice life” and a few banknotes) is sleeping on the floor next to him. He goes out and sees the same washing machine. However, it is empty. Sumida and his mother live in a boathouse; on its premises a couple of tents are situated where several victims of 3.11 live together after losing their own homes in the tsunami. They address Sumida as a friend and go for an evening run together. At the same time Keiko is waiting in her room for Sumida to run by her house. We then find out they are classmates and Keiko has a strong obsession with him.

At school, during a class, the teacher addresses the students stating that this is the first time in a generation that Japan has encountered a catastrophe of such magnitude. However, based on previous historical experiences like earthquakes and wars, he claims that the Japanese will rise again. Sumida responds, “Not everyone will rise.” The teacher urges him to fight, to be one of a kind, to triumph over ordinariness. But Sumida’s biggest objection is wanting to be ordinary, to lead a normal life, which Keiko supports, as her dream is to marry a man she loves and live simply and happily, protecting each other.

Sumida comes back from school to find that his “neighbours” (most of whom are middle aged or older men) have decorated his boathouse with lights – a kind gesture to thank a young man for the support he has shown them. An older man, Shozo who used to be a big company’s owner, seems to be a natural leader of the group. He laughs, jumps and dances trying to keep his and his friends’ spirits high. Everyone aside from Sumida is in a good mood, enjoying beer and laughter when a man appears (Sumida’s father) and violently beats him up asking for money. Sumida’s friends make a petty attempt to stop him with words, but do not interfere. Once he is gone the gathering turns bitter. The words about killing, death, disappearance and the loss that was brought on by 3.11 are spoken. The scene is constantly interfered with a cut-away shot of part of a house stuck in the middle of the river – a reminder

of things lost. The “normality” that house represents is now floating adrift. While watching the river Shozo’s face shows pain and fright, then a dream-like (or rather nightmare) sequence of destruction fields appears again. The hard cuts between the reality and the memories of destruction create a sharp effect on the viewer, which feels like watching a nightmare and waking up to a reality that is not far from a nightmare as well.



Screenshot 29: The scene of the river.

At night Sumida’s father comes again and tries to steal money. They get into a violent argument that ends with Sumida’s father telling his son to die. The confession is shocking and unimaginable for Sumida as well as for the audience.

The next day after school, in the heavy rain, Keiko approaches Sumida. They talk and walk back home together under one umbrella. Interrupted by the river Shozo, Keiko is accidentally pushed down the hill. She rolls in the tall grass, referencing the body’s inclination to return to its original source. She then goes back to Sumida’s house to change clothes and approaches him with small talk then forcefully reciting *All Things Except Myself I Know* in his face. They end up having a physical fight, which seems like neither of them wanting it but it seems that for Sumida the only way to deal with the wounds of constant physical abuse is to inflict pain on someone weaker than himself. Keiko begins to collect rocks, which represent a grudge against him saying once her pockets are full she will start hurling them at him. Despite those grudges Keiko loves Sumida and starts helping him to run a boathouse, however, they continue to physically abuse each other.

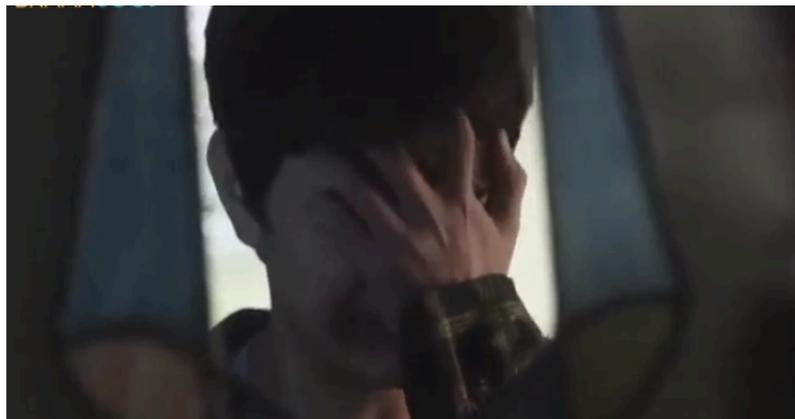
Soon, a scene occurs in which Keiko goes back home (from the looks of which, her family is wealthy) to collect money she saved in a piggy bank. Her mother then tries to take the money from her for a *Pachinko* game. The situation turns violent. Keiko’s mother physically and

verbally abuses her daughter and then shows her the gallows her parents have been building for her to commit suicide on, in order for them to collect insurance money as apparently her father got the family into debts. The scene and narrative are excruciating and portray a frightful side to a family relationship that was largely unaddressed and hidden in the previous decades of Japanese cinema. The director Sono draws here an equation between parental abuse and the government's negligence towards the residents of Fukushima. "Sono directs challenging questions against those socially and morally responsible for the welfare of the family and the nation". (Niskanen, 2015, p.240) The family violence seems both a displacement of anger against the government to deprive people of sufficient help as well as the disaster, which becomes a catalyst to bring out anger and violence within the family, which was possibly subdued within cinematic narratives before. Thus, acknowledging the violence and destruction of 3.11 then also allowed the acknowledgement of violence within so called 'normality' and harmony in family life.

After Sumida's mother leaves him, Shozo aspires to help Sumida financially but doesn't know how. On a fateful day he sees a pickpocket (Teruhiko) in town and approaches him asking him to teach him how to steal. Teruhiko takes him to his place and proposes a 10 million yen theft from a *yakuza*. Unable to commit to the plan, Shozo leaves Teruhiko's place. However, later the loan sharks appear in Sumida's boathouse in search for his father who owned them money. They end up violently beating up both Sumida and Shozo, who happened to be a witness. Thus, Shozo has no choice but to accept Teruhiko's proposal of theft. They break into a thug's house (a large swastika poster hangs on the wall) in an attempt to locate the money, however, the owner comes back early. The television commentator discusses Japan's nuclear issues referencing WWII conduct. "He attempts to explain the reasons why the Japanese on consensus have not abandoned nuclear power like many other countries. The fascist thug shouts back at the screen: "You stupid, nuclear is the best!" The scene makes an explicit reference to the connections between the extreme Right and the construction industry and big business – it is a known fact that *yakuza*-hired clean up crews have been used at Fukushima Dai-ichi." (Niskanen, 2015, p.241) Soon, the fight breaks out and the thug ends up being murdered. Now "Hitler" (what Teruhiko calls him) must be buried. Shozo is frightened and in a near catatonic state, yet he goes along with the situation. While watching Teruhiko digging the grave, Shozo's condition worsens. Teruhiko then frightens Shozo to keep a secret and hits him twice with a shovel. Shozo to his own surprise also responds with a hit on Teruhiko's nape, takes less than half of the stolen money and

leaves. Here, the point of curiosity occurs, as even though Shozo has become an accomplice to the theft and murder, as well as making a physical offence, he does not go as far as taking all the stolen money, thus preserving some of his deeply damaged conscience.

Sion Sono then presents the first sunny day. Keiko has ordered flyers to promote the boathouse and is happily distributing them among the citizens. Few customers come to rent a boat. For a minute the situation seems nearly idyllic. However, Sumida's father appears again and beats him up. As a response Sumida picks up a brick and prepares to hit his father but stops it in mid-air, not being able to carry out the murder. The dramatic scene unfolds of Sumida watching his bruised reflection in the mirror and he starts weeping. *Requiem* plays in the background. At the same time Keiko comes back home to find her parents painting the gallows red and putting up colourful lights around it, which shows the extent of psychological drama rising.



Screenshot 30: Sumida is weeping after being violently abused by his father.



Screenshot 31: Keiko finds her parents decorating the gallows they built for her.

The turning point happens one night when Sumida's father comes back and asks him to die again. He is drunk and thinks this is the first time he has said these words to his son. With a chuckle Sumida's father thanks him. He is happy for being able to get rid of the burden, as the words that have been on his mind for a long time are "finally" spoken. He also apologises several times while holding Sumida's face, concluding with "I wish you never existed. Sorry." Being pushed to the limit, Sumida follows his father and finally hits him with the brick. Two hollow dooming thumps are heard and after some struggling Sumida's father finally collapses dead. Sumida, ready to throw another hit, stops as he realises what happened. He starts yelling at his dead father: "Why did you make me do this?" A more dramatised scene follows as Sumida is trying to dig the grave in the muddy ground. Both Sumida and the corpse are completely covered in dirt. Sumida falls into the grave he is digging while screaming and writhing from devastation. Only lit by a dull street lamp, for a second both father and son looks like corpses. Sono presents an extremely challenging setting. According to Eija Niskanen⁶⁵, the murder of Sumida's father can be viewed as a "passionate condemnation of the ruling class as a clarion call for the younger generation to save Japan from self-destruction." (Niskanen, 2015, p.241)



Screenshot 32: Sumida's father tells his son that he wished he never existed.

⁶⁵ Eija Niskanen is a film writer and Ph.D. candidate on the Japanese anime industry and style at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Communication Arts with the area of interest in East Asian and South East Asian cinema, world animation as well as documentary film.



Screenshot 33: Sumida in the grave that he dug for his father after murdering him.

Sumida spends a night at home covered in mud, which symbolically represents the filth that penetrates his soul after the murder – suggesting that his exterior is just as dirty and dark as his interior state. In the morning he washes himself in the river cleansing a part of his “sin.” He then puts the kitchen knife in a paper bag and goes on the street. His first stop is the *yakuza*’s loan company. In front of the door his mind wonders and imagines an ambush of the place during which he stabs several men before getting shot. As the gun fires, Sumida returns to “reality” and enters the company where he is told that his friend (Shozo) has already paid off the debt. Through the loan shark’s memory flashbacks we watch Shozo on his knees begging for them to take the money explaining that it is for the future, that he already died in the tsunami, but Sumida is someone worth investing in. These words confirm the ghost-like feeling with which Shozo is shown in the opening scenes on the disaster site. In a narrative sense his character is alive but appears as a phantom.



Screenshot 34: Shozo’s ghostly appearance on the site of destruction.

The film then takes on a new narrative. Being damaged and feeling a strong sense of guilt, Sumida still strives to be a respectful adult and help society, thus embarking on a do-gooder

trip seeking out hooligans, criminals and other lowlifes with an intention to punish them to cleanse society.

Thus, Sumida walks around the town with a knife placed in his white paper bag encountering several psychologically damaged people as well as criminals. A series of sharply intercut scenes occur: an attempt of a knife assault on an innocent street singer whose song was about love; a group of thugs are having a discussion and thanking God for the earthquake as it presented them a chance to steal cars and break into the ATM machines; a young woman steps out to throw out the rubbish in her underwear with the words “cunt” written all over her body and chains around her ankles; a woman getting stabbed on a bus by a young man who refused to give up his seat for her pregnant daughter. As throughout the film, using abrupt sharp cuts, Sono presents a chain of devastating events of psychological unrest, killings and assaults – a sequence of nightmares from which one cannot wake up, as the reality is just as hellish as the dream.



Screenshot 35: Sumida after the murder of his father



Screenshot 36: Sumida approaches the river to wash off the dirt.



Screenshot 37: The knife he begins to carry in the paper bag.

Keiko continues to visit Sumida's boathouse and they continue to get into violent arguments. At one point Sono presents a scene of another rainy day, however, the sun's beams are also present. Faint rays of hope become apparent. Keiko carries a big transparent umbrella and wears a red dress that contrasts beautifully with her black hair.



Screenshot 38: Keiko during another visit to Sumida's boathouse

As she approaches Sumida, the rain suddenly subsides and it becomes sunny. He recites *All Things Except Myself I Know* to her and confesses the details of his father's murder. She nods in agreement while crying; the *Requiem* music begins. She kisses him and proposes to get married. She then tells him to go to the police and redeem himself before he can start anew and truly help people, as he desires. However, the darkness within Sumida overtakes him once more. The thoughts of suicide are impending and the gun now really lies at the bottom of Sumida's washing machine (it was earlier given to him as "gift" by a *yakuza* boss) waiting to be used. Sono once again presents a dream sequence using tracking shots of the tsunami aftermaths where Sumida points the gun to his temple and waves goodbye to one of his "neighbours." A heavy, dark rain is pouring again. There's no trace of sunshine left.

The climax of the film occurs when Sumida comes back home to find that his friends including Keiko have painted and decorated his boathouse in bright, lovely colours. They have a small party during which they dance and laugh and this is the first time in the whole film we see Sumida smile. The group then stands in line to say their goodbyes and leaves. Their departure is ghostly which for a second makes us doubt their entire existence. At the same time, it shows a mild optimism towards a new beginning.



Screenshot 39: Sumida's decorated boathouse



Screenshot 40: The first smile on Sumida's face.



Screenshot 41: Sumida and Keiko saying goodbye to the “neighbours”.

Keiko stays behind and tells Sumida that he can't kill himself because if he does she won't be able to go on living either. They lay on the floor surrounded by candles as Keiko paints a picture of their future together as a family. Even though Sumida cries struggling to believe it, she encourages him to imagine it knowing that this image will help him carry on living.



Screenshot 42: Keiko and Sumida on the floor surrounded by candles.

However, he wakes up at dawn, collects the gun from where it is hidden and enters the river. All is suggestive of his decision to end his life instead of facing the struggles of living. He holds up the gun and fires three times in the air before putting it against his temple. The sound of the shot appears when the scene cuts. Keiko wakes up to the noise and walks out predicting the worst. The *Requiem* is playing again. Keiko starts throwing her grudge stones into the river assuming that he lies dead at the bottom of it. However, Sono gives a sudden twist in what looked like a predictable narration. Suddenly Sumida walks out of the water. As both him and Keiko run down the road to the police station, she screams the words of encouragement to him: “Sumida, Ganbatte [Don't give up]! Live! Have a dream!” She repeats “Ganbatte” several times. He then also starts screaming “Sumida, Ganbatte!” The words, which he addresses to himself, fall over the images of the river, the drowned house and the tsunami destruction site, thus, calling out to all the victims of the Tohoku. Ganbatte!

Thus, even though *Himizu*'s final scene displays hope and encouragement, the film does not answer to the post 3.11 *iyasu*⁶⁶. Neither does it manifest a sense of peace or spiritual

⁶⁶ *Iyasu* represents media texts used for 'healing' purposes in times of national struggles. The concept first occurred in the

satisfaction. Yet what it does manifest is a sense of faint and bitter hope. Without a doubt, it is difficult to overwrite nearly two hours of continuous cruelty (verbal and physical), murder, and pure insanity with a few final minutes of encouragement. Nevertheless, the change and hope are present. To an extent, a different approach to storytelling is also visible. Up until the very last minutes of the film the spectator is led to expect a suicidal ending, which, at the same time, would reflect a common element of the narrative structure of Japanese cinema pre 3.11 as well as reflect one of the leading elements in Sion Sono's previous works (*Noriko's Dinner Table*, 2005; *Suicide Club*, 2008). In the earlier traditions of cinematic narrative treatment, one could have expected for Sumida to indeed die, by committing suicide. The cherry blossoms would have bloomed again and he would be revived in the memories of Keiko, who would continue living but never forget a troubled boy she loved. Sumida would have continued to live in her memories and be immortalised in her bittersweet nostalgia. However, the film does not emphasise an element of the past and nostalgia, which could only be mildly sensed through the characters of the outcasts living by Sumida's boathouse. I would argue that no aestheticisation or mystification is present as Sono gives no overwhelming nature shots, no silent communication, which would have enhanced the beautification and mysticism of tragedy and death. On the contrary, *Himizu* is an honest representation of 'ugliness', of a broken present – expressed interestingly in a somewhat 'broken' aesthetic through the use of a handheld camera and a rough, jumping editing style too.

In an interview for *Variety* in September 2011, Sono commented on the differences between the film and the original source (manga) as the manga series were, in fact, more discouraging than the film. "Every scene changed drastically. The original manga had no hope in it but after March '11, I didn't think I should make a film with no hope. I felt that I had to convey it in the film." In an interview for *Electric Sheep*⁶⁷ in June 2012, he develops the argument stating: "The manga is more depressing, because it was written in a more peaceful time. Now we're not living in a peaceful time; we're not secure enough to show these depressing things." (Sono, 2012) This statement, therefore, justifies an extensive presence of tragic

1990s as the *iyashi-kei* (healing-type) texts. Mark Hariston has defined these texts as 'anything (an artwork, a piece of music, a person, even a scenic view) that creates a sense of peace and spiritual satisfaction' (Hariston, 2008: 257). The concept of 'healing' after the 3.11 disasters became closely entangled with consumption and the production of visual and textual cultures in which any disturbing or traumatising material was either removed or subdued. (Furakawa, 2015: 230)

⁶⁷ *Electric Sheep* is an online magazine with a focus on cult cinema.

narratives in the earlier periods of Japanese cinema with the fact that they were created in a peaceful time. It also supports the argument of cinematic “paralysis” in the 1990s – 2010s expressed through the repetition of the cinematic patterns explored in the previous chapter.

Being the first, as well as an extremely powerful, film that dealt directly with the catastrophe of 3.11, *Himizu* “functions as a mediator between those who have been suffering from the calamity and the audience who have not experienced it, as well as showing reality through a filter of fiction.” (Furukawa and Denison, 2015, p.236) The film received a lot of attention at the 68th Venice International Film Festival, where it took part in the main competition. The film displays a psychological trauma, a violent transition from the norm to the extraordinary and brings out the issue of a severe malfunctioning of family relationships. It also triggers a shift of consciousness. The evidence, which support that shift, can be located in the cinematic developments of the post 3.11 period, dealing with the narratives of human (family and friendship) relations from more positive and hopeful perspectives, producing a look towards the future and the living rather than the past and the dead. However, how long (if at all) that shift will prevail is still unclear.

Part 3

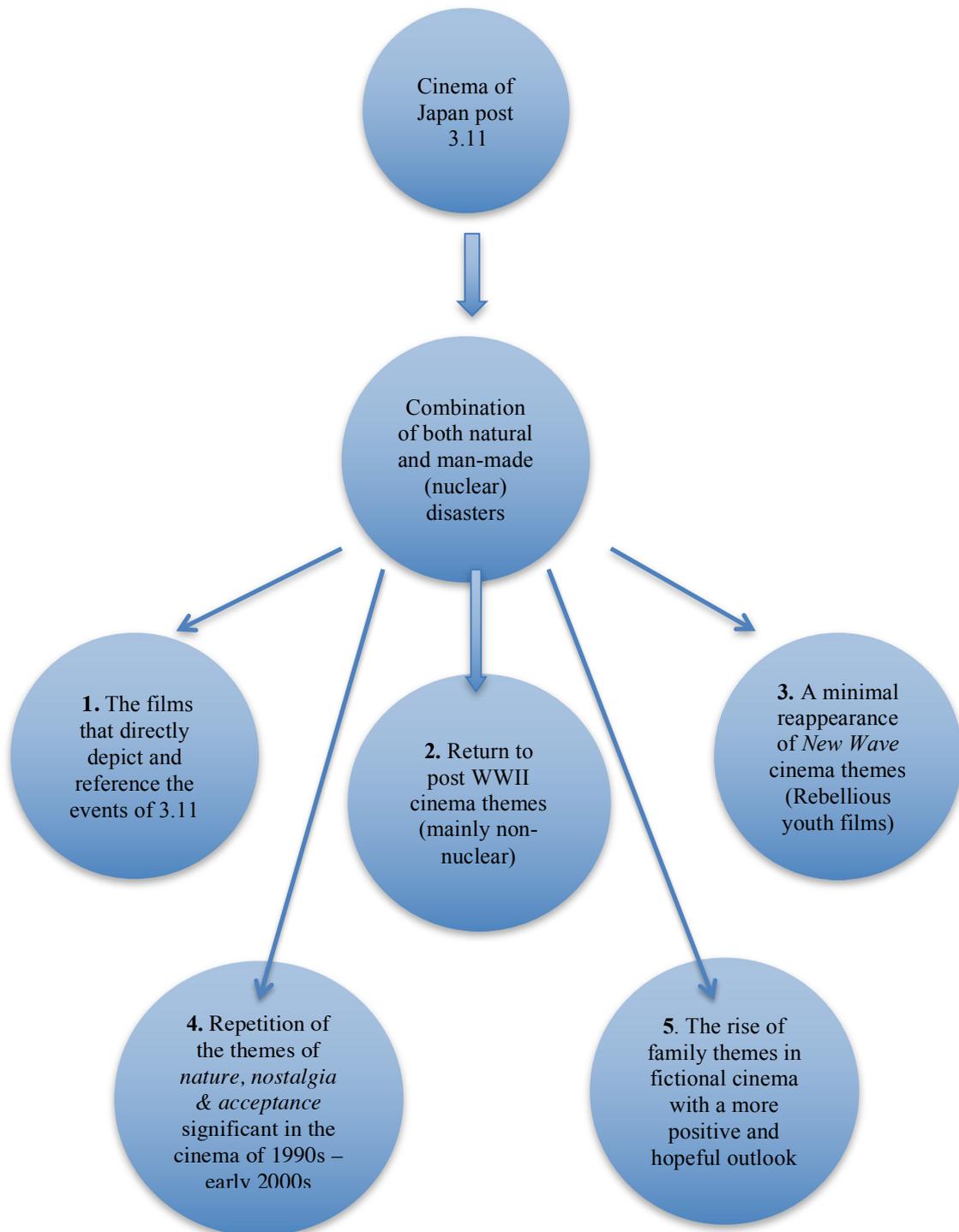
Japanese Cinema Post Tohoku Disaster | A Cinematic Landscape in the period from 2011 – 2015

In the years after 3.11 Japanese cinema has begun to proceed in several different directions. While there are still many cinematic examples that follow the preceding patterns of film production and narratives, there are also significant changes within the cinematic landscape, which arguably were inevitable to appear due to the magnitude of the disaster and the effect it produced on Japanese society. This part of the chapter is dedicated to the reflections upon the changes within Japanese cinema in the last four years.

Since there is a considerable lack of critical writings on the developments of Japanese cinema in the post 3.11 period (with many still being in the making and not yet published), it becomes important to rely on the survey and examination of recent film examples in order to outline and point to occurring new patterns. Upon the information collected through

numerous film viewings, web streamings, as well as databases, articles and reviews of the most notable Japanese films of various genres released between 2011 (post Tohoku) and 2015, I was able to create an analytical account of the cinematic landscape in Japan post 3.11 summarised in Diagram 2, presented below. It is important to acknowledge that each film that was surveyed in order to trace a larger image of Japanese cinema in the last four years (with its similarities and differences to earlier periods and their cinema productions) are complex explorations of various personal, social and cultural issues and each of them would deserve an extended analysis, which is not possible within the scope of this thesis. Therefore, only a few, which belong to the more prominent categories, will be referenced closely. It also must be noted that some of the films have displayed (through the visual and the narrative styles) the aspects of more than a single group or genre as suggested below. For detailed information on the films listed please refer to Appendix 1.

Diagram 2



As per Diagram 2, the post 3.11 cinematic landscape has shown five major directions, which are consequential to the Tohoku disaster.

1. The fictional films directly depicting or referencing the events of 3.11 (especially from a nuclear threat perspective).
2. A return to WWII cinema narrative, which was hardly present in the cinema of pre 3.11.
3. A mild reappearance of new wave cinematic themes.
4. The rise of the narratives that encourage family and friendship displayed in a more positive and hopeful manner.
5. The films that follow previously established cinematic patterns.

Below I examine these emerging cinematic directions more closely albeit not exhaustively.

Cinema of 3.11 – direct portrayal.

The number of fiction film examples, which directly explore the theme of 3.11 is limited in comparison to documentary works of which there are many. The situation is also complicated by the fact that some of the films had to face the struggle of distribution, especially in Japan due to rigorous censorship. As I have concluded after detailed analysis, *Himizu* was the first and a very powerful representation of life after the disaster in fiction cinema, which additionally commented on a number of important issues such as the malfunctioning of the family as an institution, social drama and psychological trauma of single individuals as well as the nation as a whole.

Further films that addressed the theme of psychological traumas consequential to a national disaster were *River* directed by Riuichi Hiroki and *Since Then/Are Kara* directed by Makoto Shinozaki, both released in 2012. While *River* is based on another tragic incident (Akihabara Massacre⁶⁸), the film is an expression of loss and the difficulty to go back to ‘normality’ after experiencing a terrible trauma, which relates back to 3.11. *Since Then*, however, is a direct reflection of life soon after 3.11 that tells a story of a couple in which a man from Tohoku has

⁶⁸ Akihabara Massacre is mass murder incident that took place in Akihabara shopping district on 8th June 2008. A man drove a truck into a crowd killing three people and injuring two; he then stabbed twelve people killing four and injuring eight.

been hospitalised with a nervous breakdown after the disaster struck and is no longer able to face his girlfriend who lives in a different town. The film tackles the issue of lovers' struggle to preserve their relationship under the tragic conditions.

Aside from a vast number of personal, social and political issues, one of the most dangerous aftermath caused by 3.11 is the threat of nuclear radiation – a problem that until present day stands as a major predicament in Japan. In spite of the severity of nuclear risk, the Japanese government, in order not to create chaos among the citizens, vastly downplays the true danger radiation imposes. While some (the majority of the population) choose to believe the officials, others (the minority) take the matter more sceptically opposing the notion and significance of Japanese 'groupism' explored in the first part of the chapter. This opposition, therefore, creates a subject matter of social drama. Nobuteru Uchida explores this issue in his film *Odakaya/Odakaya Nichijou* (2012) in which the main protagonist Saeko begins to obsess about radioactivity and the damage it could cause to her daughter. She purchases a Geiger counter and measures the radiation levels at the day-care centre that the child attends. This causes an infuriation of the staff and the other mothers who try to ignore and downplay the threat of radiation.

A similar theme is conveyed in Sion Sono's *The Land of Hope* (2012) in which one of the protagonists Izumi also comes to obsess about the threats of radiation and its effects on her unborn child causing a local disturbance and her eventual rejection from the surrounding community.



Screenshot 43: Izumi is wearing a contamination suit while walking outside.

Elja Niskanen writes, “While the *The Land of Hope* addressed such bullying and intimidation as a side issue, in *Odayaka* it becomes the main focus of the plot. The film exposes the ugly

side of the Japanese nation during and after 3.11, a stark reality that was ignored in the foreign media in favour of positive stories about the stoicism, calmness, and law-abiding behaviour of the Japanese people in the face of the disaster.” (Niskanen, 2015, p.244) *The Land of Hope* will be examined more closely in the conclusion of this thesis.

Niskanen’s statement relates back to McCafferty’s *The Great Hanshin Earthquake: The Japanese Response* and the concept of ‘groupism’. As was investigated earlier through the reading of the essay, the concept of Japanese ‘groupism’ expressed in the past consequential to the disaster, vastly contributes to enhancement of the discourse of Japanese ‘uniqueness’. Thus, if such type of national cohesion can be considered a direct expression of what constitutes being ‘uniquely’ Japanese then the aforementioned films certainly reject that notion and present a very different angle on the subject matter of the post-traumatic environment expressed through the cinematic medium. This, therefore, shows the first obvious modification of Japanese cinema post 3.11 in the fiction drama film genre and in a sense de-mystifies or reveals Japan from a key perspective – the downside of supposedly honourable and forbearing group behaviour (also greatly promoted through Western media) and the rejection of the compliant acceptance (that can often be seen in past cinematic examples) of the way things are.

Reappearance of WWII narratives.

The occurrence of WWII narratives in the post-Tohoku cinematic space is an important factor, especially considering that the war genre had not had many appearances apart from the actual (post) WWII period. The release of approximately five titles targeting the theme in the course of less than five years can be considered an outbreak and a revival of the genre on a larger scale. The released films (here I include animation) serve as a reminder of the dreadful past that was faced and overcome. As Japan rose from the greatest nuclear tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war defeat and the occupation, the films look at the past in order to face the present and stimulate the courage and reassurance that Japan will rise once more.

Special attention in relation to 3.11 should be paid to an animated film – *From Up On Poppy Hill*⁶⁹ produced by Studio Ghibli and directed by Goro Miyazaki⁷⁰, which tells a story of a group of teenagers striving to save their school’s clubhouse (a historical landmark) from demolition in the post-war/occupation period. The release of the film (16th July 2011) coincided with the events of 3.11 during which Studio Ghibli’s director – Hayao Miyazaki – became a vital presence as explained below.

The production of *From Up On Poppy Hill* began prior to the event of 3.11, however, unlike many other productions was not put on stop as the incident occurred. During the press conference regarding the release of the animation’s theme song (*Ue Wo Muite Aruko (I Shall Walk Looking Up)*), Miyazaki clarifies that the reasons for the continuation of production was to make Ghibli’s staff members empathise with the disaster victims (*Yomiuri* online, 2011; Sada, 2011).

The film’s narrative is set in the years prior to the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, only over a decade after the U.S. occupation. The themes of WWII are greatly present throughout the film (both the main protagonists’ fathers have served and died at war), which are portrayed through the memories of the characters and their parents as well as through the images of post war restoration of normal life. Through this work Miyazaki has created a connection between the animation narrative and the 3.11 events and reminded of the difficulties that were faced and defeated.

From Up On Poppy Hill was screened (prior to its release date) to the victims of the Tohoku disaster in order to raise the national spirit and begin the process of psychological healing (*iyasu*) for local communities. Even though the film does not entirely focus nor promote national ‘groupism’ (as a subject of national ‘uniqueness’), it suggests a positive side of this concept, which is people being united while facing difficult times. The film was seen as a great encouragement to overcome suffering and, without limiting it to the Japanese nation alone, can be easily related to by the members of any other nation, particularly those who

⁶⁹ Despite the main focus of this thesis being a fiction film genre, I have chosen to include an animation film example in this section. The reason for this is that animations play a major role in contemporary Japanese visual cultures and it also became one of the key mediums in overcoming the struggles of 3.11 crisis.

⁷⁰ Japanese film director and landscaper. He is the son of producer and animator Hayao Miyazaki and a co-founder of Studio Ghibli.

have also experienced war, occupation and their aftermaths.

Our archipelago has suffered from typhoons, earthquakes and tsunami over and over again. Nevertheless, this archipelago is blessed with rich nature. Even though there are great difficulties and sorrow, it is worth making efforts to make it more beautiful... We don't need to despair... I am determined not to take a step backward and not to leave this land.... I am making a new production⁷¹. It is not easy to work as hard as I wish due to my age. I don't know if I am able to keep making films as I did before. Conditions will change as time passes. Yet, I will fight against adversity. (Miyazaki, 2011, cited in Yomiuri, 2011, online)

The narratives of family and friendship encouraged and directed towards the future and the living

After the Tohoku disaster the cinema of Japan had a sudden surge of family and friendship narratives presented in a fresh optimistic and at times even comical manner. The narratives and references of death and nostalgia are dramatically lessened (or expressed in a less melancholic way) in these examples. The importance of family and friendship preservation is endorsed while the warmth, hope and aspiration for life displayed in these films portrays a novel side of Japanese contemporary fiction genre in comparison to the films of a similar nature pre 3.11, which underlined the themes of loss, misfortunes, death and lack of open communication in a much more persistent (continuous throughout the whole film without coming to a conclusive ending) sorrowful manner.

Such novel notions can be seen in Ryota Nakano's *Capturing Dad* (2013) in which a mother instructs her two daughters to visit their father (who left them when they were little) before he dies and take a photo with him. When the girls arrive to their destination they learn that their father has passed away. They face the complications of legal issues from their relatives; meet their little half-brother and create a bond with him; as well as restore a connection with

⁷¹ A WWII-themed animated film *The Wind Rises* (released in July 2013), tells a story of Jiro Horikoshi whose lifelong love of flight inspires him to become a successful aviation engineer. His career includes the creation of the A-6M World War II fighter plane.

their mother. The comical and openhearted manner in which the director portrays the girls' journey is a definite transformation. The atmosphere at the father's is dramatically lightened as the youngest sister follows through on her mother's request and takes a photo of her dad but in a state of ashes after the cremation. This is followed up with her also taking a small piece of his bone left in the ashes as a way of reconnecting her family with the father who left them years ago.



Screenshot 44: The youngest daughter is taking a photo of her father's ashes surrounded by the rest of the family members.

A new element of comedy was also introduced in Hirokazu Koreeda's *Like Father Like Son* (2013). The film tells a story of Ryota who suddenly learns that his biological son was exchanged at birth with the boy he has been raising, and he must make a life-altering decision between his two sons. The work comments on differences of upbringing and the meaning of family bonds both biological and emotional. In spite of a general feel for the film that is powerful and soul stirring, Koreeda presents a number of 'laugh-out-loud' narrative elements expressed through the differences in interactions between two families (fathers in particular). Additionally, the film is completely void of any death (sub) narratives, which almost never occurred in Koreeda's work before. In his latest film *Our Little Sister* (2015), he once again presents a theme of family relations and bonding bringing back a supporting narrative of death, yet keeping some elements of comedy and a general positive, future-oriented outlook. The films comment upon the subject of family, friendship, father-son relationship, sisterhood as well as a relationship between a person and his past and how important it is to let it go in order to appreciate a gift of present and move on to the future freely.

It is essential to note that the films in this category still contain a lot of traces of the previously established cinematic patterns; therefore, this group and the next one are in some

ways interconnected. However, a crucial difference is evident. Even though the representations of past and death are still present in most of the films, they appear as subordinate narratives, which are brought to a closure without allowing them to become a leading component of the film structure as it was seen in the earlier examples of Maboroshi, *Love Letter* or *Hanezu*. It does not allow the audience to dwell upon the tragedy nor to move into the realm of Orientalism too much as often happened previously, while the nostalgic references are also reduced. It can be argued that the factor of closure is crucial as ceasing the death narratives while the film progresses and shifting the focus towards the development of hope and positivity prevents the mystification among the spectators. That said, it could be argued that this then also avoids the political, the implications of the disaster and the continuous nuclear threat of 3.11. However, the answer to this problem is unclear and remains entirely up to how Japanese people, cultural activists as well as political authorities would choose to proceed further in keeping the matter of 3.11 present and being resolved. Nevertheless, the severity of 3.11 has triggered a shift in the culture strong enough to finally move away from the cinematic “paralysis” of the 1990s and 2000s. Therefore, the 3.11 disaster remains acknowledged through the very appearance of that shift.

The repetition of previously established cinematic patterns.

Regardless of an extensive number of films with future and living-oriented narratives, which were released after the Tohoku disaster, there was also a number of works that followed previously established and popular cinematic patterns (analysed in the second chapter), which explored the notions of loss, death, nostalgia, traditional beliefs and nature glorifications in a mystified manner. Two major and internationally acclaimed films that followed the pre-3.11 cinematic tradition were Naomi Kawase’s *Still The Water* (2014) and Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Journey to the Shore* (2015).

Still The Water tells a story of two adolescents, Kaito and Kyoko, who learn to become adults by experiencing the interwoven cycles of life, death, love as well as family bonds on a subtropical island of Amami where traditions about nature prevail. Despite a slightly more hopeful and less ambiguous plot in comparison to *Hanezu*, the film still follows Kawase's style precisely as the narrative is overloaded with an extensive presence of death and natural admirations – nature is presented in a beautified manner as one of the film’s characters.

Journey to the Shore tells a story of Yusuke who after three years of disappearance comes

back home to his wife Mizuki as a ghost stating that he died at sea on Toyama. He then invites her to go on a journey with him to meet people who showed him kindness while he was travelling back home. The film ends with a reference to the Japanese Buddhist ritual of *O-higan* held to pray for the enlightenment of souls transitioning to the other world.

It must be noted again that *Still The Water* was chosen as an official competition entry in 2014 at the Cannes Film Festival, while *Journey to the Shore* was also recognised by the festival producers and was screened in the *Un Certain Regard* section at 2015 Cannes Film Festival. This refers back to what was argued in the second chapter of the thesis on the popularity and encouragement of the mystified (Orientalised) cinematic narratives in the West sustaining the notion of “Japaneseness.”

Conclusion

As Japan’s leading historian on the disasters, Kitahara Itoko has emphasised:

The study of disaster should not be just a historical chronicling of damage and loss; it should be an interdisciplinary exploration of the dialectical relationship between destruction and reconstruction in the context of social formations. Disaster is a defining feature of Japan’s cultural landscape, and, consequently, the country’s general belief system has integrated the cyclicity of destruction and renewal. (Kitahara, 2006, cited in Weisenfeld, 2013, pp. 13-14)

Chris Marker in his documentary *Sans Soleil* made a similar comment after experiencing his first earthquake while in Japan: “Poetry is born of insecurity: wandering Jews, quaking Japanese; by living on a rug that jesting nature is ever ready to pull out from under them, they’ve got into the habit of moving about in a world of appearances: fragile, fleeting, revocable, of trains that fly from planet to planet, of samurai fighting in an immutable past. That’s called the impermanence of things.” (Marker, 1983) Even though, this comment can fall under a mystified portrayal of reality from a European perspective, it is still valid. However, this approach can only be strictly applied to the natural disasters. On the contrary,

Tohoku represents a mixture of natural (earthquake, tsunami) and man-made (nuclear) disasters, thus, complicating the matter. As it raised various debates on nuclear power, 3.11 became an event of vast political and social magnitude.

After nearly five years since the calamity struck, Japan still remains in the state of struggle against economic devastation and further imposing nuclear threats. Despite numerous reassurances offered by the Japanese government on the subject matter, the containment of such nuclear expansion throughout space and time is nearly impossible to achieve. Sion Sono expresses this issue in both tragic and satirical ways in his film *The Land of Hope* (2012), which unsurprisingly received almost no distribution in Japan due to its provocative political subject. Thus, while the issues are attempted to be resolved, Japan continues to exist in the state of “extraordinary reality” where new developments both social and cultural are taking place, perhaps faintly, yet shifting the focus away from the mystification of Japanese cinema and the enhancement of cultural ‘uniqueness.’

Therefore, 3.11 created an opportunity for cinematic development to potentially extend beyond previously established patterns and concepts expressed in cinematic languages. It is currently taking Japanese cinema into a new realm. While the resurrection of several older genres like wartime film is expected and necessary to help overcome the psychological unrest, there are also evidences of novel cinematic formations of an increasingly positive and future-oriented nature.

Conclusion

The Land of Hope

As was explored in the third chapter of the thesis, the 3.11 disaster has triggered a shift in Japan's political, social and cultural spheres. Despite the five-year period that has passed since the incident, its aftermath is still largely present, not only within economical and political affairs but also concerning the national state of health due to nuclear radiation. This places a different perspective on to matters of life and death and how these were addressed prior to the disaster, ending the time of 'normality' (the period of the 'paralysis') and entering into a reality of the 'extraordinary' (the present day), as Sion Sono calls it. It also impacts the environment in which culture and cinema are produced.

In the film *The Land of Hope*, Sion Sono addresses the issues of the distraught present, the disappearing past (or rather the past erased by the disaster), the uncertain future, as well as the case of Japanese authorities' attempts to reduce the perceived threat of the radiation through the media. The film largely touches upon several key elements discussed in this thesis such as ancestral connections, a sense of nostalgia and most importantly, an interconnected relation between past and present through relations between life and death. However, Sono places them in a context of severe social, political and environmental conditions. Thus, if previously, the aforementioned ethereal themes were widely expressed exclusively, i.e. without a socio-political edge, Sono creates a well-balanced work that not only brings a new vitality and clarity to these 'mystical' concepts, but also raises critical questions that can be seen as a metaphor for the turning point in the history and life of Japanese people as well as cinema production. Due to these aspects, I would therefore like to look a bit closer at *The Land of Hope* as a concluding cinematic example of this thesis.

After *Himizu*, *The Land of Hope* is Sono's last film that targets the theme of the Fukushima disaster. Unlike *Himizu*, however, it does not recreate the events of the disaster but presents a future in which the incident is repeated. The opening scene portrays an ordinary (nearly idyllic) rural scene, set in the future (the exact year is unknown), in the Nagashima1 Prefecture. The story revolves around a family of farmers who owns a cowshed – the Ono

family, which consists of an older couple (representing the past), Yasuhiko and his wife Chieko (who suffers from dementia) living with their son, Yoichi and daughter-in-law Izumi (representing the future). The family is seen to lead a normal and happy life, which gets interrupted when a massive earthquake strikes.

Soon after, the defence forces arrive and draw the 20 kilometre evacuation line right through the Ono's garden. While the Ono family is considered "safe", everyone beyond the line must evacuate immediately, which includes Ono's neighbours – the Suzukis. Acknowledging the absurdity of the "safety" line, Yasuhiko makes a decision to split the family and forces Yoichi and Izumi to leave as well. This split metaphorically presents a sudden and powerful divide between the past and present as well as the future. Even though it comes after a big struggle, the younger couple obeys their elders' wishes and despite encountering some social obstacles² end up finding a new place to live in a nearby town.

The narrative is followed by a variety of scenes of controversial governmental attempts to encourage the denial of the incident – the television programmes are promoting a quick return to 'normality' and evade facing the potential dangers - "Japan, let's eat, produce and buy!" While Yoichi is inclined to follow the route of relaxation, Izumi becomes obsessed with the situation. The matter gets even more complicated when she falls pregnant. During a regular hospital check-up she finds out that caesium was found in the breast milk of one of the fellow patients. This forces Izumi to realise the full scale of the nuclear threat. She eventually turns frantic, seals the whole apartment with plastic and begins to wear an anti-contamination suit everywhere she goes. This, at the same time, produces a strong social turmoil. Izumi is gossiped about and frowned upon by the town's citizens who either refuse to believe there is a radiation threat or cannot admit to it, as they fear public opinions. However, unconcerned with society's remarks, Izumi continues her routine in fighting "the invisible war of the invisible bullets and missiles in the air", as she calls it. This shows an element of an open social conflict within the narrative (so seldom seen in pre-3.11 cinematic examples) and opposes the significance of Japanese 'groupism' expressed by McCafferty, which at the same time debunks the notion of national 'uniqueness'.

In a parallel narrative Mitsuru Suzuki and his girlfriend Yoko travel to the tsunami-hit area in order to conduct a search for Yoko's disappeared parents. When the couple arrives in Yoko's hometown it appears completely destroyed. The visuals are similar in their ghostly

appearance to those occurring in *Himizu*. The couple encounters two kids who state that from now on Japanese will walk slowly, one step at a time, after which the children disappear. This mirage might be read as a metaphor for the disappeared past and it is also reminiscent of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings and the post-war years. Sono states, “My point with the characters walking one step by one step is my wish for the Japanese people to go forward slowly.”⁷² (Sono, 2011, cited in Niskanen, 2015, p.243) Eija Niskanen writes, “The scene expresses his [Sono’s] critical attitude towards the accelerated development of post-war Japan.” (Niskanen, 2015, p.243)

An eviction notice is sent to Yasuhiko and Chieko as the radiation has now “crossed the safely line.” However, they refuse to leave due to Chieko’s deteriorating health condition. She continuously asks to be taken home. “Home” is a significant word in *The Land of Hope*; it contains a world of ‘normality’ that has increasingly disappeared since the disaster. As Chieko’s memory continues to worsen, she begins to exist only in the past, in the time of her youth, just before her marriage to Yasuhiko. She puts on a kimono and escapes through the contamination fence into the neglected town thinking that it’s time for the *Bon4* festival celebrations. Yasuhiko finds her dancing among the ruins of the destroyed town and joins her. One can imagine a town full of people that used to exist in its place. The scene evokes a bitter nostalgia for the past, for the “home that no longer exists” and “the time of our childhood [or youth], the slower rhythms of our dreams” as Svetlana Boym writes. (Boym, 2001, XV)

Like *Hanezu*, *The Land of Hope* also addresses a narrative of ancestral connections. Sono expresses this notion through the images of the tall trees in the Ono’s courtyard, which were planted by Yasuhiko’s parents and grandparents and one that Yasuhiko and Chieko planted after their marriage. However, unlike *Hanezu*, *The Land of Hope* neither allows time to dwell on the ancestral relationship, nor strives to reinstate it, therefore, does not provide a ‘mystification’. On the contrary, Sono shows a collapse – the trees planted by Ono’s ancestors are now behind the contamination fence and their purity is sullied by the radiation. While Yasuhiko and Chieko’s tree is the last remaining metaphorical link between the generations (it can be assumed that Yoichi and Izumi did not get a chance to plant theirs before being separated from the parents), it also vanishes once Yasuhiko makes a tragic

⁷² Mun, Ki. Sono Interview at Busan International Film Festival, 5th October 2012

decision to cease his and Chieko's existence (to which she agrees), by shooting Cheiko and himself with a rifle, after which their tree goes up in flames and burns, erasing the proof of their existence as well as metaphorically erasing the past and the way of life that was destroyed, or contaminated, by the disaster.

The final scene of the film shows Yoichi and Izumi by the seaside. Izumi seems happy and is enjoying herself while Yoichi watches her from a distance. For a brief moment the scene gives a glimpse of hope that the young protagonists have escaped the dangerous fate and have started their lives anew. However, suddenly the sound of the Geiger counter is audible. Yoichi opens his bag to find it showing high levels of radiation. The ending of the film tells us that the radiation, as an invisible weapon of mass destruction, spreads further than one can imagine and that until that threat is eliminated no place in Japan is entirely safe. *The Land of Hope*, therefore, is a powerful call for action, which, however, has gone nearly unnoticed, as the film received almost no distribution in Japan due to its provocative political subject (confirming Japanese authorities' unwillingness to admit to the posed dangers) and also received very little distribution abroad. This, therefore, relates to one of the discussed elements of 'mystification' – the export and deliberate promotion of specific cinematic narratives that fulfil the criteria of "Japaneseness", which *The Land of Hope* evidently does not.

From an aesthetic point of view, *The Land of Hope* does not contain the overpowering modes of 'beautification' or 'mystification' such as nature glorifications or excessively dark lighting as was seen in *Maboroshi*. It can neither be argued that the film significantly resembles the cinematic modes of the past (Golden Age cinema). The film's pace can be considered moderate, but might feel slow due to the film's length (2 hours, 13 minutes). *The Land of Hope* is modest in its aesthetic representations and shows no complex editing, with the effect that as spectators we pay greater attention to the social and political side of the narrative rather than the visual style, which most assumedly was Sono's intention.

As it stands, I have chosen to end the thesis with *The Land of Hope* as it embodies a variety of issues discussed in the previous cinematic examples – family, nature, ancestral connections, nostalgia and the relationship between past (death) and present (life), which all contribute to the formation of 'mystified' narrative and aesthetic. However, I have discovered that it deals with a connection to the past in a different way to the films addressed in chapter

two. Rather than continuing to exist with and within the present, the past is terminated, which once again emphasises the end of the period of ‘normality’ and entering into the reality of the ‘extraordinary’, as Sono stated. At the same time, by placing the narratives of past and present (life and death) into a context of severe social, political and environmental conditions, the film does not simply construct an existential narrative where ethereal concepts are dominated, dwelled upon and accepted, but negates (or at least lessens) the discussed notions of ‘mystification’ and “Japaneseness”. Therefore, this cinematic example is significant, especially to the subject matter of this thesis as it not only openly addresses the key issues 3.11 produced, but also metaphorically symbolises a historical shift that will potentially modify cinema production, moving it away from the ‘paralysis’ period into a different domain and cinematic language.

The Land of Hope was Sono’s last film that addressed the subject of 3.11. In the interview for L’etrange Film Festival, Sion Sono stated (in relation to his film *Tokyo Tribe*, 2014) that he didn’t want to make another distressing film like *Himizu* or *The Land of Hope* and strove for a lighter feeling where social stakes can rise on a subconscious level.⁵ The key argument that must be noted in relation to this statement is not that Sono purposely decided to ‘close his eyes’ to the prevailing issues 3.11 poses, but that a cult film director who made an international career creating dark and challenging films in which subjects of death and suicide played the leading roles, has made a conscious choice to move away from the established style to explore an alternative aesthetic. Therefore, it can be argued that the move towards hope and optimism away from suicide, death and a nostalgia for the past is a radical and political development. It could be viewed as actively creating new future-oriented narratives. But it could also be viewed more critically as being part of a gesture that seeks to pacify Japanese society and thereby reducing the possibility for potential protests against the government’s refusal to act on the disaster as it displays a return to normality and a happier present. Nevertheless, the shift of consciousness appears to be current and escalating. However, it is difficult to predict whether it will take a solid shape and for how long.

To summarise, the first chapter of the thesis provided an overview of various historical and cultural circumstances that contributed to the formation of contemporary cinematic techniques and patterns, which can be or have been read from the position of national ‘uniqueness’. The chapter was constructed with references to scholarly works, which either enhanced the debate on ‘uniqueness’ or presented an alternative way for the discussion of the

subject. The second chapter delivered a thorough analysis of selected cinematic works from the period of the mid-1990s to 2011 of both mainstream and indie film genres, which pointed to three major cinematic instruments that lead to ‘mystification’ and provided for the discourse on national ‘uniqueness’ within scholarly critique. While the first and second chapter are organically unified in the information and debate they provided, the last chapter presented the newly developing changes within the Japanese cinematic landscape that took place consequential to the 3.11 disaster. The chapter demonstrates the shift in cinematic consciousness in the approach of aesthetic representations of life and death and past and present, as well as representations of 'mystified' in Japanese cinema.

Working through the films’ reoccurring patterns and investigating them in conversation with scholarly debate I have discovered the degree to which the ‘mystification’ of Japan and fabrication of “Japaneseness” has had an effect on contemporary Japanese cinema production and distribution, as well as in a fast-moving, globalised world, distanced Japan from the rest of the world, giving it a status of ‘unique’ exclusivity. The thesis presents major issues such as: the influence that aesthetics of the past has had on the cinematic strategies of the present; the representations of a non-linear concept of time; the continuous distribution of films that fulfill the criteria of being quintessentially Japanese; the subject of national nostalgia; as well as the ability of those to sway the audience and scholars from the socio-political, which is largely concealed through the use of cinematic methods and styles, therefore, creating a ‘trap of mysticism’ and calls for a mere acceptance. This was conducted with references to different analytical discourses on Japanese cinema that both encourage the discourse of national ‘uniqueness’ and disputed it. Finally, it is my strong belief that the Tohoku disaster has triggered an impact and provided a space in which Japanese cinema has the potential to grow beyond its past representations and where new cinema critique (as well as a new approach to critique) can be constructed. This opens up a new important area of the research on the subject matter, which I argued through the investigation of key changes in the cinema production following the 3.11 disaster that were signified by the stronger presence of socio-political issues as well as more future-oriented and hopeful film narratives that came after.

Thus, this thesis traces and raises the awareness of the concepts of ‘mystification’ and ‘uniqueness’ in contemporary Japanese cinema by creating a well-focused exploration of visual and narrative film patterns in selected cinematic works where those patterns are evident. In conducting this study, I have relied on my own experience as a filmmaker, which

allowed me a comprehension that the subject of cinema is resistant to uniform justifications and can be understood or translated in more than a single way. To put it more concretely, I was cautious of the fact that meanings embedded in the cinematic images and narratives exist in constant transformation, provoked also by differing screening contexts and spectators, and that diverse implications can always be added.

I believe that this thesis adds much needed clarity on the subject matter of Japanese cinematic 'mysticism' and would help further researchers to continue constructing debates free from generalising Japanese cinema as "exotic" other and merely accepting what can be perceived as a 'uniquely' national style or a way of thinking. This work is also relevant to film practitioners as it clearly displays how cinematic meanings can be formed, influenced and transported, which triggers a degree of self-reflection on the working process, as well as wider international readers and Japanese film audiences who have been distanced from Japanese cinema by a sense of fabricated 'mysticism' and national 'uniqueness' available to be comprehended only by the native Japanese.

To conclude, the main achievements of this research are:

- Presenting triggers of 'mystification' within contemporary Japanese fiction cinema.
- Raising the awareness of the dangers and issues that 'mystification' poses among scholars, film practitioners and wider audiences whose perspective on Japanese cinema is formed through a prism of 'mysticism.'
- Diversifying the understanding of contemporary Japanese cinema by pointing at the fact that film is a fluid subject matter that remains in constant transformation and entails a lot of accompanying conditions of production.
- Investigating the shift in Japanese cinema after the Tohoku Disaster that appears in the new developing future-oriented/positive as well as more political film narratives.

It is vital to note that the purpose of this study was not to rid Japanese cinema (as a mode of national culture production) of originality (as that is what the term 'unique' implies in the case of Japanese cinema studies), which is undoubtedly as present as in any other world cinema, but to de-mystify certain cinematic techniques and narratives (while tracing their historic origins) and urge against their reading and translation from the point of view of a

‘sacred alterity’ and hereby critiquing international promotion of those as essentially Japanese. By doing that my thesis minimises the ‘mysterious fog’ that often surrounds Japanese fiction cinema and, at the same time, results in falling into the analytical inertia that relies on terminology of the ‘unique’, ‘mystical’ or ‘ethereal’ rather than voicing a resolute and film specific analysis. It also reduces the fear spread among young foreign researchers and film practitioners such as myself who are reluctant to investigate the subject matter or to make assertive claims due to ‘mysticism’ that has been artificially created through the variety of ways (mentioned in this thesis), which promotes the inability of full comprehension of Japanese cinema and culture when being an outsider.

The thesis raises an important issue of distribution by pointing to the excessive popularity of certain Japanese films and directors abroad who receive a great amount of promotion through the world’s leading film festivals (such as Cannes), therefore continuing to represent a specific style of Japanese filmmaking (reminiscent of the pre-contemporary film directors), which fulfills Western knowledge and point of interest when it comes to Japanese cinema, leaving out a lot of films that do not suit these criteria and, hence, sustaining the presence of ‘mystified Japaneseness’, while there is a range of less ‘popular’ contemporary Japanese film directors who certainly deserve a greater international attention, for instance Hamaguchi Ryusuke (*Happy Hour*), Kenji Yamauchi (*Her Father, My Lover*), Yosuke Fujita (*Fuku-chan of FukuFuku Flats*) and particularly Mipo O (*Being Good, The Light Shines Only There, Here Comes The Bride, My Mom!*) – another female film director, whose works have stronger social edge and who in my opinion is entitled to as much world's leading film festivals' regard as Naomi Kawase continuous to receive.

At present time, my main point of interest with regards to this study lies within the subject matter of the final chapter – the transformation of Japanese cinema in the post Tohoku period and deliberate promotion of what can be considered ‘traditional’ cinematic patterns or in other words, the patterns that the outside audiences are familiar with. I believe that this debate has a potential to be explored separately in the form of a published essay where this argument can be extended with a stronger focus on the subject of how trauma is addressed and negotiated through audio visual works as explored e.g. in Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas’ *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (2007) and a larger scope on the social space in which films are produced and most distributed with the issues of authorship, exhibition and critics and audiences' reception, while also drawing attention to

less 'popular' contemporary Japanese film directors and cinematic works. The additional themes that can also contribute to this study in the future could be the in-depth analysis of the production studios, cinematography & sound and *auter*'ism. I do, however, acknowledge a set of limitations if I were to decide to start developing this matter further at present time, which is a language restriction that prevents me from accessing Japanese literature in its originals.

Appendix 1

Chapter 3. Part 3.

The information provided below was gathered through a variety of sources such as film screenings, articles and film reviews.

Cinema of 3.11 – direct portrayal

1. *Himizu* directed by Sion Sono (January 2011)

The detailed examination of the film is in the second part of Chapter 3.

2. *The Land of Hope* directed by Sion Sono (October 2012)

The detailed examination of the film is in the Conclusion of the thesis.

3. *River* directed by Riuichi Hiroki (March 2012)

Hikari lost her boyfriend after a random killing that took place in Akihabara. Giving in to a sense of loss, she completely shuts herself away from the outside world. She goes to Akihabara and starts meeting people there, who are going through their own difficulties. After meeting them Hikari begins to regain her trust and moves on with her life. In an essay *Ordinary Extraordinary: 3.11 in Japanese Film*, Elja Niskanen, Riyuchi states, “Hiroki [film director] had originally planned to make the film to evoke only the murders, but after 3.11, he felt compelled to change the script to reflect also upon the enormity of the more recent tragedy” (Niskanen in Wright, 2015). The film raises a question -how to continue living and go back to “normality” after experiencing a terrible trauma.

4. *Since Then/Are Kara* directed by Makoto Shinozaki (2012)

Shoko and her boyfriend Masashi are living apart from each other — he in Tohoku, she in Tokyo — when the March 11, 2011, earthquake hits. Shoko is trying to contact Masashi, but is unsuccessful. When a call finally comes it is from his brother, telling her that Masashi has been hospitalized with a nervous breakdown and asking her not to visit him. The film is a drama about lovers’ struggle to preserve their love under the tragic conditions.

5. *Odakaya/Odakaya Nichijou* directed by Nobuteru Uchida (2012)

Like Izumi from *The Land of Hope*, the main protagonist of *Odakaya*, Saeko begins to obsess about radioactivity and the damage it could cause to her daughter. She purchases a Geiger counter and measures the radiation levels at the day-care centre that the child attends. This infuriates the staff and the other mothers who try to ignore and downplay the threat of radiation. Elja Niskanen writes, “While the *The Land of Hope* addressed such bullying and intimidation as a side issue, in *Odakaya* it becomes the main focus of the plot. The film exposes the ugly side of the Japanese nation during and after 3.11, a stark reality that was ignored in the foreign media in favour of positive stories about the stoicism, calmness, and law-abiding behaviour of the Japanese people in the face of the disaster.” (Niskanen in Wright, 2015: 244)

6. *Cold Bloom/Sakura namiki no mankai no Shita ni* directed by Atsushi Funahashi (2012)

Set after the 2011 Tohoku incident, the film presents Shiori and Kenji who are a married couple. They both work at a same small factory and hope to have a baby in the near future. One day, Kenji dies in an accident due to a co-worker’s (Takumi) mistake. Shiori cannot stop to blame Takumi for her husband’s death while he is determined to gain her forgiveness. As their relationship develops, Shiori starts falling in love with Takumi and, therefore, also faces the issues of guilt.

7. *Reunion* directed by Ryoichi Kimizuka (February, 2013)

Based on the non-fiction book *The Bodies at the End of the Earthquake and Tsunami (Itai: Shinsai, Tsunami no Hate ni)* written by journalist Kota Ishii, the film is set in Iwate Prefecture following the Tohoku disaster. Retired funeral worker Aiba volunteers to work at the temporary morgue set up in the school gymnasium where the survivors of the disaster struggle to respond to the horrors of the incident.

Reappearance of WWII narratives

1. *From up on Poppy Hill* directed by Goro Miyazaki (July 2011)

The detailed examination of the film is in the third part of Chapter 3.

2. *Isoroku Yamamoto, the Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet* directed by Isuzu

Narushima (December 2011)

After Japan forms a military alliance with Germany and Italy, the United States considers entering World War II. A Japanese man must decide between his country and his morals.

3. *The Wind Rises* directed by Hayao Miyazaki (July 2013)

A lifelong love of flight inspires Jiro Horikoshi to become a successful aviation engineer, whose career includes the creation of the A-6M World War II fighter plane.

4. *The Eternal Zero* directed by Takashi Yamazaki (December 2013)

A brother and sister learn their biological grandfather was a kamikaze pilot who died during World War II. They begin a research into his life to find out the truth about his character and the reason he joined the kamikaze unit.

5. *The Little House* by Yoji Yamada (January 2014)

A woman looks back at her life in Tokyo as a family's maid before and during World War II.

New Wave cinema narratives

1. *Be My Baby* directed by Hitoshi One. (July 2013)

The film is set two weeks following a casual house party where a group of twenty-something Japanese partygoers discover youth relationships. The film touches on the subjects of insecurity, self-worth, misogyny and adultery.

2. *The Light Shines Only There* directed by Mipo O. (April 2014)

“Two troubled souls living in the port town fall in love, but their trials are far from over.”

The film was selected as the Japanese entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards, but was not nominated.

3. *The World of Kanako (Kawaki)* directed by Tetsuya Nakashima (*Kamikaze Girls*, 2004, *Confessions*, 2010). (June 2014)

Based on a novel by Akio Fukamachi, *Kawaki* tells a story of a former detective Akikazu who searches for his missing daughter, Kanako and soon discovers her mysterious, far from innocent secret life.

4. *Undulant Fever* directed by Hiroshi Ando. (September 2014)

A young woman willingly enters into a lengthy tortured relationship (reduced to sex only) with a slightly older emotionally challenged man.

The narratives directed towards the future and the living

1. *I Wish* directed by Hirokazu Koreeda (June 2011)

Twelve-year-old Koichi, who has been separated from his brother Ryunosuke due to his parents' divorce, hears a rumor that the new bullet trains will bring a wish-granting miracle if they pass each other at top speed. Two brothers then embark on a journey to bring their family back together.

2. *Wanko: The Story of Me, My Family and Rock* directed by Isamu Nakae (July 2011)

It is based on a true story from the small island of Miyake-jima, which had to be evacuated in 2000 due to volcano eruption. It centers around a family who run a bed and breakfast and have two golden retrievers one (Hana) of which dies soon after the incident and the other (Rock) who is left behind when the family evacuates. The story ends with a reunion of a family with Rock and rebuilding their home.

3. *Mitsuko Delivers* directed by Yuya Ishii (November 2011)

Nine months pregnant, Mitsuko moves back to a neighborhood where she grew up. She begins to help other residents until going into labor.

4. *Rent-a-Cat* directed by Naoko Origami (May 2012)

A single woman runs a rent-a-cat service to provide companions for lonely people. The film premiered at 2012 *Stockholm International Film Festival* and was also featured in 17th *Busan International Film Festival*.

5. *The Drudgery Train* directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita (July 2012)

A man (Mirai Moriyama) lives a destitute life until he meets a clerk (Kengo Kôra) at a used bookshop.

6. *A Bread of Happiness (Shiawase no Pan)* directed by Yukiko Mishima (January 2012)

The young married couple (Rie and San) move from Tokyo to Lake Toya in Hokkaido

Prefecture to start a bakery restaurant named Mani. Sang bakes bread and his wife Rie makes food that complements the bread. Throughout all the seasons their customers (both local and tourists) come to Mani to experience their bread and food, at the same time, overcoming their emotional struggles and leaving the place happy.

7. *Capturing Dad* directed by Ryota Nakano (January 2013)

The detailed examination of the film is in the third part of Chapter 3.

8. *Tokyo Family* directed by Yoji Yamada (January 2013)

Tokyo Family is a remake of Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*.

9. *A Story of Yonosuke* directed by Shuichi Okita (February 23, 2013)

Yonosuke is an 18-year-old man who arrives in Tokyo to attend university. He then meets and makes friends with Kato, Yoko and Chitaru. 16 years later, Yoko learns that Yonosuke has died and begins to recall the times they shared in college. The film is a recollection of memories and events Yonosuke shared with his best friends while he was alive.

10. *Like Father Like Son* directed by Hirokazu Koreeda (September 2013)

Ryota learns that his biological son was switched at birth with the boy he has been raising, and he must make a life-altering decision between his two sons. The film comments on differences of upbringing and the meaning of family bonds, both biological and specifically emotional.

11. *The Furthest End Awaits* directed by Chiang Hsiu Chiung (October 2014)

The film is a moving portrait of a friendship between two women in rural Japan. It also comments on a subject of mother-son, mother-daughter and siblings relationship as well as a relationship between a person and his past and how important it is to let it go in order to appreciate the gift of the present and move on to the future.

12. *Still The Water* directed by Naomi Kawase (June 2014)

The detailed examination of the film is in the third part of Chapter 3.

13. *Our Little Sister* directed by Hirokazu Koreeda (June 2015)

Three sisters in their 20s are joined by their 14-year-old half-sister (Suzu) after the death of

their father. While Suzu's presence seems to be renewing the purpose of life for the three older sisters, it also complicates their existence and evokes the memories of them being abandoned by their father. The film is a gentle exploration of family relations and sisterhood.

The repetition of previously established cinematic patterns

1. *In His Chart* directed by Yoshihiro Fukagawa (August 2011)

A doctor ponders his future while caring for a terminally ill patient.

2. *Life Back Then* directed by Takahiza Zeze (August 2011)

Two young adults who have previously experienced psychological traumas meet and bond while working for a company that specializes in cleaning out the homes of recently deceased.

3. *Hanezu* directed by Naomi Kawase (September 2011)

The plot is explored in the second chapter of this thesis.

4. *Kamihate Store* directed by Tatsuya Yamamoto (2012)

An older woman runs a small store in an isolated town in Japan. People come by her store before going up on the cliff – the place known for committing suicides. She knows what they will do on the cliff but accepts their decisions and does not act on them.

5. *Crying 100 Times -Every Raindrop Falls* directed by Ryuichi Hiroki (June 2013)

Shuichi had a motorcycle accident four years ago due to which he lost the last year of his memory. One day, at a friend's wedding, he meets Yoshimi. Together they are happy and Shuichi thinks about marrying her. However, soon she becomes sick. A sorrowful truth is hidden in Shuichi's lost memories.

6. *Mourning Recipe* directed by Hisako Kurosawa (November 2013)

Ryohei's wife suddenly passes away, leaving him in an apathetic, near suicidal state. Two weeks after her death, a woman appears and gives him a recipe, which was left by his late wife. Through the recipe a family is able to overcome their personal wounds and move on with their lives.

7. *Still The Water* directed by Naomi Kawase (June 2014)

See the description in the previous section under number 12.

8. *Little Forest: Summer/Autumn* directed by Junichi Mori (August 2014) and *Little Forest: Winter/Spring* (January 2015)

The film follows Ichiko through one summer and autumn, as she learns to use and respect the ancestral wisdom of rural people and appreciate the cycle of life in the environment around her.

9. *The Mourner* directed by Yokihiko Tsutumi (February 2015)

Shizuto Sakatsuki goes to the scenes of accidents and mourns for their victims. The film explores the concepts of life and death, love and hate and sin and forgiveness.

10. *Journey to the Shore* directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa (May 2015)

The detailed examination of the film is in the third part of Chapter 3.

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