IMAGINARY JAPANESE FILM: A CREATION OF WESTERN TECHNO-ORIENTALISM, JAPANESE SOFT NATIONALISM AND NARCISSISM

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Introduction: the boom of Japanese film

During the last decade, films from Japan have enjoyed increasing popularity among the general audience as well as film critics and professionals. Buzzwords such as *anime invasion* or *J-film invasion* have entered the everyday realm and are backed by a vast array of available broadcasts and DVD titles, and popular books by authors and scholars such as Richie, Napier, Mes, & Sharp[1] and many others who aim to deconstruct the moving images from Japan and introduce their creators to audiences abroad.

The scope of popularity of Japanese film is equally testified by a variety of international awards and nominations: the nomination of Yamada's "Tasogare Seibei" in 2003 for Best Foreign Language Film by Academy of Motion Pictures in 2003, the Grand Prix at the prestigious and trend setting

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[1] Listed scholars are often considered to be amongst the most recognized authors on Japanese cinema. See for example Richie, D. 2005. *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History, with a Selective Guide to DVDs and Videos*; Mes, T., & Sharp, J. 2005. Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film; Napier, S. 2005. *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Cannes Film festival for Kawase's "Mogari no Mori" in 2007, followed by Yojiro's "Okuribito" Oscar Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2008. It is also impossible to exclude the wider framework of appraisal of the work of Kitano, Miike, Tsukamoto, Kore-eda, Oshii and other independent film-makers, among the dedicated fans and film critics of the Japanese cinema all over the world (Japanese... 2009: 1).

The Japanese state and media industries are paying close attention to the boom of Japanese cinema abroad and have launched public support schemes and activities, such the Anime Ambassador program in 2007 by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to develop the potential of the *anime* films abroad (Bosker 2007: 1). Also extensive promotion takes place at film industry level with specialized co-production initiatives, such as J-Pitch, with the aim of direct promotion of Japanese film projects to foreign production partners (J-Pitch 2009 1). Financial aid is also available from other governmental organizations such as Ministry of Economy and Bunka Cho[2] for "recovering costs of international promotion and sales" (Unijapan 2009b: 1). As a result, Japanese cinema is featured in extensive quantities at major film festivals and markets, such as Rotterdam, Berlin, Cannes, Karlovy Vary, Toronto and Pusan, where in the case of the latter as much as 19 Japanese films were screened in 2009 (Unijapan 2009a:1).

This period of success has seen the rapid evolution and rise of a distinct form of moving images from Japan – defined by this paper as the *imaginary Japanese film.* The stylistic features and tropes of this type of films, such as construction of narrative and visual language, and especially exaggerated on-screen violence reinforce the Western stereotypical notions of Japan as West's "Other".

Morley and Robins (1995) present that "through new technologies, the contradictory stereotypes of Japaneseness have assumed new forms" and are linked to Japanese ethnicity and identity – a process the authors define as techno-orientalism (Morley and Robins 1995: 169). The paper argues that the phenomenon of *imaginary Japanese films* can be analyzed as evolving primarily from the desire of Western cinema audience for the techno-orientalist exotic "Other" of Japan as defined by Morley and Robins (2005), and secondly as an outcome of aggressive marketing messages of film and DVD distributors who aim to create cult film products for their markets[3].

[2] Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs.
[3] For a comprehensive discussion on cult film see Jerslev in Skovmand & Schrøder (1992), Sconce (1995) and Jancovich (2002).

Consecutively, exoticism combined with aggressively tailored and stereo-type based promotion acts as the driving force behind the appeal and popularity of these films overseas. The process is bi-directional, as the Western techno-orientalist reception seems to stimulate the production of *imaginary Japanese films* by the Japanese film industry. This trend can be attributed to the features of soft nationalism and cultural narcissism of Japanese media and film industry, and its aspiration to achieve and maintain prominent status in world media markets as noted by Iwabuchi (2002).

The paper begins by introducing a theoretical framework of the construction of imaginary audiences and films, inspired broadly by Anderson's theory of imaginary communities and Appadurai's writings on contemporary media and society. To foster a deeper understanding of the various elements surrounding the topic, the issue of dominant feature of *Japaneseness,* often attributed to be at the core of Japanese cinema by its viewers, is presented. Furthermore, its relationship to film genre as an imaginary construct is explored.

The work then proceeds to the aspects related to the viewers of *imaginary Japanese films* – formation of cult audiences and elements influencing their reception of these films. Particularly useful in doing that is Morley and Robins' notion of techno-orientalism standing for perception of Japan by the West as as technologically alienated "Other" which simultaneously evokes attraction and repulsion in the audience (Morley & Robins 1995: 147-148, 169). After that the definition of the phenomenon of the *imaginary Japanese film* is presented drawing on above discussed theories.

The conceptual framework is applied in the discussion of an *imaginary Japanese film*, Iguchi's "Kataude Mashin Gāru" ("The Machine Girl", 2008) to present how imaginary constructs and techno-orientalism are embedded in a successful cult cinema product. Drawing towards conclusion, the dichotomous nature of *imaginary Japanese film*, where the Western demand supports Japanese media film industry's soft nationalism and narcissism is considered with the aim of opening up future reflections and investigations.

A closer look at the imaginary

The inspiration for the definition of phenomenon of *imaginary Japanese film* is broadly based on Anderson's concept of imagined communities outlined in likewise titled book. It can be debated whether Anderson's

notion is applicable outside the discourses of geopolitics and dynamics of nation formation. However, several authors have actually indicated that his framework could be expanded to analyze the effect and affect of mass media and film on contemporary global audiences (Spitulnik 1993, Higson 2000). For example Higson argues that "the rituals of mass communication play a central role in re-imagining the dispersed and incoherent populace as tight knight value sharing collectivity" though he continues that these communities do not have to be necessarily formed around the nation (Higson 2000: 65-67). The reason lies in the fact that they are temporal in their nature forming and disengaging according to different conditions in the surrounding culture and society whereas imaginings of nations seem to be relatively stable (Higson 2000: 65-67). Others, such as Appadurai have claimed even further that *imagined* and *imaginary* have evolved in contemporary global order into a system of imagination as a larger social practice fostered by the increasing influence of mass media and consequently have an immense impact on the daily lives and perceptions of the populaces (Appadurai 1996: 31).

Out of Anderson's criteria of the elements of imaginary communities three are frequently discussed in connection with mass media and communication, and are therefore used as broad reference points in the present analysis. These elements include the following: first, a vivid and coherent perception of the imaginary by all members of the group, secondly the question of limited boundaries of the imagined phenomena and thirdly the strong coherence and comradeship of the members within the imagined group (Anderson 2006: 6-7).

Let us start by recognizing the underlying importance of global collective imagining. Even though the audiences over the world have probably never met each other face to face, potentially all of them perceive a similar psychological construct of *imaginary* as the core criteria of their attraction to a certain film or media product. Although the power of collective imagining can be most likely observed in all forms of international fandom, there are concise examples of the reception of Japanese media overseas that can be applied to the present case of *imaginary Japanese films*. For example, Napier has witnessed how the large and demographically diverse body of fans of Japanese anime films in the US seem to be coherently conscious of the specific cultural features of the jointly imagined object of fandom of anime (Napier 2007: 172-173). Most likely the power of collective imagination of the cultural features of Japan brings together groups of dedicat-

ed anime viewers also globally. Whilst most of Napier's work has focused specifically on *anime* and *manga*[4] audiences it is plausible to extend her findings to the reception of other forms of Japanese popular culture and film, where communities of audiences are formed on the basis of similar collective imagining.

Secondly, attention should be paid to the factor of boundaries. The role of boundaries within the context of the present discussion is viewed at both macro and micro levels. On the macro level imagined boundaries give form to the elements of the global media system that Appadurai has defined and discussed as the concept of *mediascape*, framing cultural and media flows. At the micro level imagined boundaries segment smaller groups of audiences and different types of media, for example distinguishing fans of Japanese anime films and Japanese horror films.

Also film genres could be viewed as arising from the process of segmentation by imaginary boundaries. In this case borders are drawn between different film types. Although film and genre theory forms a vast academic discourse on its own, the present discussion uses Grodal's definition of genre as "merely a set of dominant features of given fiction, which shapes overall viewer expectations and the correlated emotional responses" (Grodal 2000:163). It can be claimed that the dominant set of features is usually based on collective imagination reinforced by commonly perceived familiarity with the iconology of the features as a binding force. Therefore the audience is able to distinguish between comedy and horror genres and familiarity together with vivid joint imagining guarantees that a particular genre is perceived more or less similarly by everyone (Grodal 2000:163).

For the sake of discussion and based on Napier's findings let us ask if Western audience perceives Japanese cinema as not a diverse body of films and genres produced in Japan, but as homogenous and all-encompassing genre of Japanese cinema with the dominant set of *Japaneseness* at its core. Indeed in recent years a tendency has emerged where Asian and Japanese cinema is increasingly seen in the West as a coherent body, thus neglecting genre differences between and within local cinema traditions. A good example is the confusion surrounding the definition of Japanese horror film tradition in the West.

After the success of Nakata's 1998 horror film "Ringu" and it's Hollywood remake in 2002, Japanese horror film became an international pop

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[4] Japanese comic books also popular in the West.

culture phenomenon with a rapidly increasing number of productions, remakes and DVD releases. However, the definition of relatively large Japanese cultural phenomenon was quickly reduced to a vague genre denominator of *J-Horror* by Western audiences. The imagined genre of *J-Horror* was born out of the collective imagination by the West and simplification of cultural differences of the "Other" downplayed the rich and diversified horror tradition of Japan. What emerged was a culturally distorted denominator, whereas conventionality and similarity with Western horror products came to be preferred over historically specific features of Japanese horror film tradition (McRoy 2008: 15). Simplification took place with orientalism at its core, because "it [J-Horror – author] is a term that neither the Japanese nor the Koreans coined themselves" and the term was invented, because these movies were otherwise hard to understand or classify by the West (Rucka 2005: 1).

The approach of viewing Japanese cinema tradition as homogenous construct arising from collective imagination poses severe limitations as was outlined above. Thus, it is useful to introduce the concept of transnational cinema to broaden the discussion. Authors such as Richie (2005) take the stance of advocating transnational analysis of Japanese cinema in comparison to homogenous national cinema for the following reason. Although one can talk of films created in unique Japanese cultural context, in actuality the productions do not arise from that cultural context as somehow unique and uninfluenced by larger international evolution of film art, "because there are more similarities among the films of Europe and America, and those of Japan" (Richie 2005: 10-11). This argument goes hand in hand with Higson's notion that instead of national cinema researchers ought to focus on the dynamics of transnational cinema due to the influence of global media transmission and film distribution, as even "the small , 'home grown', indigenous film can become an international box office phenomenon" with the aid of international promotion (Higson 2000: 68).

It should be mentioned that Higson (2000: 68) opposes Anderson arguing that imaginary boundaries exclude cultural differences in the favor of creating a homogenous body of national cinema with limited possibilities of reception, participation and interpretation. However, the present paper counter-argues to a degree advocating for a larger perspective. In theory, on the global macro level the imaginary boundaries could be viewed as dynamic permitting diversity over singularity of cultural flows and influences – a transnational view of cinema that Higson advocates. Still on the

micro level imaginary boundaries seem to remain relatively stable defining the audiences and genres. While it is complicated to discuss the existence of homogenous cinema of Japan, boundaries may still help to understand the creation of smaller sub-genres, such as *imaginary Japanese films* within the larger cultural system.

Collective reading and imagining of media can create and be influenced by distortions and permutations. In the process cultural stereotypes and simplification play a major role – as noted also in the problem surrounding the definition of *J-Horror*. The farther the actual contact with the culture of the "Other" and the larger the role of mediating media, the greater the distortion becomes. Appadurai explains that therefore the lines between imaginary and realistic become diffused, because the "farther away these audiences are from the direct experience of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world" (Appadurai 1996: 35).

Thus, let us proceed to the role of audience and cultural stereotypes in the reception of *imaginary Japanese films*.

The techno-orientalist gaze of cult connoisseurs

For a film produced in Japan to become *imaginary*, the process requires active and conditioned imagination of its audiences. Therefore it is appropriate to briefly touch the issue of cult publics and their techno-orientalist gaze as the key factors in the process.

Much has been written on the topic cult film and its audiences[5]. Perhaps the most noteworthy is Sconce's argument that cult film or in his words paracinema[6], with its complex aesthetic dynamics has recently evolved outside the opposition of mainstream and sub-culture beginning to "infiltrate the avant garde, the academy, and even the mass culture on which paracinema's ironic reading strategies originally preyed" (Sconce 1995: 373). It is a bi-directional process, as within the society groups of paracinema connoisseurs are imagined and created who oppose the Holly-

[5] See footnote 3 for a partial list of works on cult film.
[6] Including Japanese monster films, and in the framework of this paper also *imaginary Japanese films*.

wood mainstream, thus engage in the viewing of non-mainstream cult films. Paradoxically, the formation of these groups requires mass culture as an opposing force that in effect helps to define the identities of the imagined paracinema communities.

It is also frequently debated that in the context of the recent boom of Asian and Japanese cinema in the West, the Western cult audiences often feel themselves as closely connected special community with privileged access to exclusive content that is unavailable to the public at large. This tendency corresponds closely with Anderson' notion of strong coherence and comradeship within imaginary communities. Also direct parallels can be drawn here with the private salon viewing of Japanese woodblock prints of *ukiyo*-e and erotic art of *shunga* in the second half of the 19th century where exclusivity granted access to the oriental, exotic and often erotic content[7].

Frequently these communities are imagined and created due to the specific marketing strategies of certain Western distribution and DVD sales companies, such as Tartan Video's "Asia Extreme" DVD label. The aim of the distributors is to create loyal consumers who feel belonging to a privileged "members only" club. Exclusivity is used as a revenue model, as sales are based on differentiation and opposition the fans with the mainstream audience. The complexities surrounding this process are outlined by Dew (2007: 69) in his extensive analysis of the dynamics of the boom of extreme Asian films in United Kingdom. Dew argues critically that the specific formation of taste, and creation of imaginary communities of fans based on that taste is equalled with "exclusive sub cultural identity" (Dew 2007: 69).

The marketing messages addressed to the cult audiences are repeatedly based on the imaginary perception of exotic but violent nature of Asian and more specifically Japanese culture. Excess violence of films becomes in return associated with high artistic value, "having the effect of deconstructing and transcending conservative social mores, narrative forms and genres" (Dew 2007: 65). This perception has the potential to evolve to a degree where violence, either artistic or non artistic, becomes subconsciously associated with the daily lives, practices and values of Japan by the cult audiences. For example, even though the popular Western stereotype sees Japanese society as peaceful and harmonious, its visual culture is

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[7] For the analysis of the 19th century viewing of Japanese art in salon settings see Napier (2007).

often seen as overtly violent. Dew (2007: 68) highlights that "this apparent contradiction is explained by asserting that extreme Japanese cinema acts as a "safety valve"" for regressive and suppressed sexual fantasies existing in the society and being revealed through the films to the "informed" Western cult viewer (ibid.). The characteristics and dynamics of these beliefs can be partially attributed to the notion of techno-orientalist gaze in the process of collective imagining of the West of it's Japanese "Other".

The concept of techno-orientalism as a further development on the Saidian notion of orientalism was conceived by Morley and Robins in *Spaces of Identity* (1995) widely cited in analyses of Japanese media texts. The authors propose that as technological innovation being the central feature of Western modernity has moved to Asia, it has culturally fused into the discourse of orientalism (Morley& Robins 1995: 169). As a result it sets the stage for Western perception of Japanese culture as emotionless, machine like and inhuman "Other". Japan in its relation to the world "has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanized technological power" (Morley & Robins 1995: 169-170).

The authors distinguish between two levels of techno-orientalism, romantic and violent-machine like. The feature of both levels is clearly visible in recent *imaginary Japanese films,* as well as Western productions containing elements of Japanese culture and society such as "Lost in Translation" (dir. Sofia Coppola, 2003) or "Kill Bill" (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2003). At the romantic level elements of the traditional Japanese culture are viewed as their postmodern equivalents with exotic and enigmatic essence – zen and kabuki are permuted into Japanese fascination of pachinko[8] and computer games. At the second level, Japanese culture and society is seen as cold, impersonal, authoritarian, machine like – elements reinforcing the dominant Western stereotypes of Japan as irrational warrior society with violence acting as societal safety valve for sexual fantasy. Furthermore, these elements evoke in Western viewer both resentment and envy, detachment and attraction towards the Japanese "Other" (Dew 2007: 68, Levick 2005, Morley & Robins 1995: 169 – 171).

Thus, precisely here lies the base of collective imagining of *imaginary Japanese film*, as Japan becomes associated by the cult audiences with the frequent tropes of the cinematic phenomenon – hyper violence, exaggerated sexuality, criminal underworld of the yakuza mixed with bizarrely trans-

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[8] Form of popular Japanese gambling.

formed elements of traditional culture of martial arts, geisha and cuisine. As one can observe, this rendering is not far for Appadurai's notion of the creation of imagined chimerical worlds, or in the present case, chimerically distorted image of Japanese culture.

Definition of the *imaginary Japanese film*

Based on the theoretical framework above, the phenomenon of *imaginary Japanese film* can be defined as follows. *Imaginary Japanese film(s)* is Japanese cinema primarily aimed at Western cult audience markets (DVD and/or festival) and/or produced with international production capital. These films feature exotic or violent content and thus foster Western stereotypes and prejudices that see Japanese culture and society as being violent and inhuman. The content and visual codes of *imaginary Japanese films* can be read as techno-orientalist which satisfies the Western cult audience's need for Japanese exotic and the "Other". As these films enjoy popularity at genre film festivals and DVD markets, they stimulate the production of *imaginary Japanese films in* greater numbers, as well as foster Japanese film and media industry's cultural pride revealed by the features of soft nationalism and cultural narcissism.

"Kataude Machin Gāru" — *an imaginary Japanese film*

One of the best examples of such Japanese techno-orientalist cult films with a western audience that can be analyzed through the framework of *imaginary Japanese films* is "Kataude Mashin Gāru" ("The Machine Girl") directed by Iguchi and released in 2008. Importantly, the feature was co-financed by the American film distributor Fever Dreams for the release under Tokyo Shock DVD label[9] starring all Japanese cast, but also featuring English dubbed dialogue. Using English dubbing can be interpreted here as an effort to maximize the potential of the film at international cult film markets. The film became an instant success, achieving cult status and being

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[9]   "Tokyo Shock"DVD label itself deserves a longer analysis having released a vast body of mostly violent Japanese exploitation action and horror films that can be read on the basis of the framework of Western audiences demand for Asian exotic.

featured at major fantastic, horror and cult film festivals, such as Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival, Fantasia Film Festival and Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival out of the many (The 2009: 1).

The story evolves around an ordinary teenage Japanese schoolgirl Hyûga Ami and her brother Yu whose parents have committed suicide due to alleged commitment of murder. Unexpectedly Yu and his close friend Takashi die by the hand of bullying classmates and to Ami's chagrin the parents of the participating gang members deny the participation of their children, because of the yakuza origin of their leader. Consequently Ami seeks revenge through violence towards the yakuza and by transforming herself into a demon-like murderer. In the following blood spilling amok run she encounters the geisha-like wife of the yakuza gang head obsessed with excessive violence, such as feeding the family cook sushi made out of human fingers or torturing a housemaid to death for pleasure. It is also her who requests Ami to be severely tortured by the yakuza, resulting in cutting off her arm with a Japanese samurai sword. Disfigured, Ami manages to escape to the garage of her brother's friend's family, who manage to replace her severed arm with a machine gun. What follows is another series of ultra violent sequences featuring flying guillotines, drill bras, chainsaws, penetration of the body by nails and other tropes of the horror genre developing towards the final climax in an abandoned shrine (Iguchi 2008).

The analysis of the film through the framework of *imaginary Japanese film* provides interesting results, as "Kataude Machin Garu" meets all the criteria for being an imaginary techno-orientalist construct. In the film dynamics of violence, bizarre sexuality and stereotypes come into forceful play, delivering the image of exotic and alienating Japan to the viewer. The elements of basic narrative are formed according to the opposition of harmonious Japanese society of the exotic-romantic level in the form of a schoolgirl, undermined by repressed violence of the dehumanizing, machine level. Examples of the latter are inclusion of specific Japanese bullying of Yu (a phenomenon of *ijime*), corrupt and murder hungry police officers, while the cinematic universe of the film is dominated by the violence–fueled ninja yakuza family.

Also stereotypical conventions are utilized in the selection of characters – we have the innocent but sexually arousing *kawaii*[10] schoolgirl protag-

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[10] *Kawaii* stands for certain type of Japanese cuteness especially noted in toys and the idolization of young schoolgirls or *shôjo*. For a discussion on *kawaii* see Napier (2005: 29, 148-149).

onist supported by a family of ex motor bike gang members who have set on the side of law. They are opposed to a violence driven yakuza ninja family originating from Hattori Hanzo, a mythical figure and frequent protagonist of Japanese exploitation film, but also an important supporting character at Tarantino's "Kill Bill"[11]. At the level of characters, the antagonist – the wife of the yakuza leader can be viewed as also an example of techno-orientalist imagining. She brings together the features of traditional culture (geisha-like appearance), sexuality (extensively carnal portrayal of her behavior), combined with her perverted interest in violence (dehumanization). Thus, her character serves the Western gaze on Japan that is driven by the fusion of exquisite traditional art, sexuality and violence.

Thirdly, and most decisively, the machine girl Ami, with her arm made of semi automatic gun, becomes a hybrid man-machine. This notion is perhaps the strongest argument that reinforces the interpretation of the film through techno-orientalist framework, because techno-orientalist stereotyping often sees Japanese as robot or machine-like. As Morley and Robins (1995: 170) argue "people mutating into machines...the Japanese are feeling aliens, they are cyborgs and replicants". Hence, Ami becomes a perfect imaginary Japanese "Other". She is introduced to the audience as a innocent schoolgirl later transforming through aestheticized violence into a cyborg killing machine admired and despised simultaneously by the audience.

The collective fascination with the techno-orientalist elements of the Japanese "Other" become particularly clear when reading the reviews of the film in Internet film sites and weblogs. Although these sources cannot be considered overtly academical they provide accurate results of the portrayal of the trends and values of the cult film communities. For example, one of the commentators explains in the MachineGirl.Net website: "You'll get everything you want out of a movie with this premise. It's a 90-minute splatterfest with enough blood spraying to fill a swimming pool. The bad guys are so bad they're not just senseless killers; they're also necrophiliacs. It's always fun to see how far the Japanese will go with the bizarre and the grotesque, and clearly in this movie there's no limit line" (Chen 2008: 1). A thread of comments in similar tone is available at recognized film news and criticism portal Twitchfilm, where another cult fan describes "Kataude

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[11] This can be read as director's intention to provide intertextual references for the cult audience familiar with the above mentioned films.

Mashin Gāru" in the following manner: "with metal razor tits ,violence and gore .adrenalin and estrogen. what a great combination.i love to see chicks kickn ass in a major way. a true asian cinema fan from new york city"[12] (Brown 2007: 1).

As both sites feature an extensive range of comments in the above quoted style, it can be assumed that indeed the film is being perceived and interpreted at least partially by Western cult audiences through the features of *imaginary Japanese films* outlined in this paper. Based on the quotes it is hard to ignore the fascination of the fans with the imagined constructs, such as the bizarre nature of Japanese society ("how far will the Japanese go") or it's violence and sexuality ("they are necrophiliacs", "metal razor tits, violence and gore").

The cultural neighborhood of soft nationalism and narcissism

Finally, the concept of imaginary techno-orientalist Japanese film, with the help of the brief analysis of the "Kataude Mashin Gāru" as an example can be approached through the notions of cultural neighborhoods, soft nationalism and narcissism advocated by Appadurai and Iwabuchi.

In the present context Appadurai's notion of *neighborhood* as location of knowledge creation can be viewed as the space of the creation, distribution and consumption of the *imaginary Japanese film* in the West. Within that space the audience is being directed and organized according to the messages of distributors and other stakeholders like the media, critics, fan communities, and so on. In line with Appadurai's claim that these neighborhoods are both contexts and context producing, it can be argued that the joint global neighborhood of audiences and distributors of *imaginary Japanese films* are increasingly creating contexts that are influencing actual film production in Japan. As a result the wider engagement in the production of films that can be viewed as *imaginary* emerges. The best example of this trend is the creation of a new film label "Sushi Typhoon" by major Japanese film studio Nikkatsu, with the aim "to deliver the kind of "violent, popular works that only Japanese cinema has engendered" (Shackelton 2009: 1). The

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[12] Direct quotation, punctuation and capitalization errors are left intentionally uncorrected.

future films going to be produced under the label are aimed at international fantastic festivals as the key locations for cult markets, whereas the creation of the label is directly inspired by the success of "Kataude Mashin Gāru" (Shackelton 2009: 1).

Once more, a bi-directional process emerges. Firstly, the demand of Western cult audiences for the Japanese imaginary exotic drives the Japanese film industry. Secondly, it is viewed by the latter as both a source for profitability, but also a method for establishing and reinforcing international pride and recognition of Japan and its culture overseas. Iwabuchi (2002) describes this as the process of Japanese soft nationalism and cultural narcissism. He draws the parallel to Morley and Robins' work, claiming that techno-orientalism is actually fostered by soft nationalism and narcissism of Japanese content creating industries on their way towards establishing and affirming Japan as an important player and leader in world markets: "the focus of Japanese interest in its global cultural power has gradually shifted from the sophistication of its technologies to the appeal of its original cultural products – a shift from techno-nationalism to software-oriented, "soft" nationalism"" (Iwabuchi 2002: 451).

He further argues, that the techno-orientalist gaze of the West is in a reciprocal relationship with Japanese soft nationalism and cultural narcissism. The success of Japanese media products overseas is perceived by Japanese media industry to be relying on their unique Japanese features (above discussed *Japaneseness*) while those features might actually be the basis of West's stereotypical gaze, as was presented by the analysis of "Kataude Mashin Gāru". Thus, these media products and their elements are embedded into the larger framework of orientalism, as "Japanese hyper-real culture, in which comics, animations and video games feature, has replaced Western Orientalist icons, such as geisha or samurai, in the complicit exoticisation of Japan... Japanese indulgence in soft-nationalism still depends on the gaze of the dominant Western other" (Iwabuchi 2002: 459).

In conclusion, it can be argued that thus the Japanese film industry increasingly relies on Western consumers and distributors. The West has become the source for Japan film industry's increased revenue, but also method for drawing domestic attention to films that the Japanese audiences otherwise take no larger notice of. Here the West and Japan become fused as the gaze of the former stimulates the production by the latter, and the outcome reinstates the process from the beginning. Richie summarizes by noting that "Japanese films might not rake in much money at home,

but their appeal could be enhanced by prizes won at foreign film festivals...
younger directors were winning prestigious awards abroad which resulted
in larger sales (cassettes, discs, rentals, direct money from television show-
ings in Japan" (Richie 2005: 216).

Conclusion

The recent boom of Japanese cinema in world has set the stage for new
and important questions and problems to be asked and evaluated by theo-
rists. Elements and conditions of the actual production and distribution,
but also reception of Japanese films by Western audiences have to be scru-
tinized to reveal and understand the underlying dynamics, such as cultural
exoticatizion and discourses of orientalist "Other" among many topics.

The aim of this article was to argue for the theoretical framework of
imaginary Japanese film consisting of the elements of techno-orientalism
combined with the stereotypical notions of the Japanese "Other", wich
becomes particularly useful in analyzing films from Japan. Although the
framework is broadly based in Anderson's theory of imaginary communi-
ties, it was presented that his notion can be applied to the analysis of the
influence of Japanese cinema as well. Within that light, it was revealed how
both fan groups of Japanese film and the source of their affection are imagi-
nary constructions with several pitfalls and limitations.

Furthermore it was noted that the formation of these imaginary groups
is not necessarily autonomous but based on specific marketing messages for
film distributors for establishing exclusive audiences opposing to the gener-
al mainstream. Importantly, it was highlighted that the marketing messages
often condition the viewer to perceive cinematic violence as underlying but
hidden trend in Japanese society only revealed to the educated connoisseur
public – a process that reinforces the stereotypical notion of the irrational
and warrior like Japanese society.

To understand the issues related to the reception of these film's content,
Morley and Robins' notion of techno-orientalism as a Western discourse
that has fused technology with orientalism in popular perception of Japan
embedding notions of exotic, machine like nature of the country and it's
culture was introduced. As an case study analysis of film, "Kataude Mashin
Gāru" (1998) was presented, revealing how the above noted structures are

deeply embedded in recent Japanese features at the levels of narrative and character construction.

Drawing towards the conclusion, it was argued that the increasing popularity of these films overseas is driven by the West's interest in the "Japanese exotic", and the marketing skills of the film and DVD sales promoters and other stakeholders (media, critics, fan communities) who also constitute the neighborhood to the Japanese imaginary film. However, this Western engagement also serves as a catalyzing force for the cultural narcissism and soft nationalism of Japanese media industries, where national pride is evoked by the international success of Japan's soft cultural products, such as film. As a result, a complex net of cultural flows and dynamics emerges where the Western interest in the exotic "Other" stimulates Japanese content production and national pride, in return reinstating the process from the beginning.

To conclude, the issues surrounding contemporary Japanese films are definitely complex and a diversity of analytical results can be revealed by utilizing different but similarly applicable discourses. It is hoped by this paper that the framework of *imaginary Japanese film* provides perhaps a new but useful approach for the future analyses and investigations into the fascinating area of Japanese film.

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Abstract

For the last decade or so, Japanese popular culture and media products, especially animation and film, have been enjoying increasing popularity in the West. The tendency is highlighted by both, successes at the box office and film industry level, the latter in the form of several awards from Oscars and leading film festivals, such as Cannes International Film Festival. The same period has also marked the evolution of a new form and discourse of perceiving moving images from Japan by Western audiences – the *imaginary Japanese film*. This paper, broadly inspired by Anderson's theory of imaginary communities, argues that *imaginary*

Japanese film is a phenomenon, the emergence of which on the one hand can be attributed to a desire of Western film audience for the techno-orientalist "Other," as discussed by Morley and Robins, and, on the other hand, to the marketing strategies of film distributors to create economically successful Asian cult film products.

The *imaginary Japanese film* can be characterized by the combination and enforcement of stereotypical notions about Japan and its culture along with techno-orientalist features, such as violence and dehumanization. The latter aspects are revealed in the narratives of these films as excessive on-screen violence and the portrayal of characters as emotionless and machine-like. These features will be discussed in the article alongside Iwabuchi's notion of Japanese cultural soft nationalism and narcissism. Thus further the work debates that the increasing engagement of Japanese film industry in the production of *imaginary Japanese films* can be viewed from the perspective of satisfying the demand for the exotic cult films in the West, but also reinforcing the Japanese film industry's culturally narcissistic aspiration for the status of a key cultural-economic player in the world's media markets.

Japoniški filmai: vakarietiško techno-orientalizmo sukūrimas, švelnus japonų nacionalizmas ir narciziškumas

Santrauka

Maždaug dešimtmetį populiarioji Japonijos kultūra ir žiniasklaidos produktai, ypač animacija ir filmai, tampa vis populiaresni. Ši tendencija ryškėja prie bilietų kasų ir filmų industrijos lygmeniu, kalbant apie pastarąjį, – gauti keli Oskarai bei apdovanojimai iš prestižinių filmų festivalių, pavyzdžiui, Tarptautinio Kanų festivalio. Šiuo metu taip pat pastebimos naujos formos ir diskursai, vakaruose suvokiant filmus iš Japonijos. Šiame straipsnyje, grįstame Andersono įsivaizduojamų bendruomenių teorija, teigiama, kad įsivaizduojamas japonų filmas – fenomenas, kurio atsiradimą iš vienos pusės galima paaiškinti vakarietiškos auditorijos noru žiūrėti filmus apie techno-orientalistinius „kitus", kaip teigia Morley ir Robins, iš kitos – vadybos strategijomis: sukurti ekonomiškai sėkmingus Azijos kulto filmus.

Įsivaizduojamas japonų filmas apibūdinamas kaip stereotipinių nuostatų apie Japoniją ir jos kultūrą kombinacija kartu su techno-orientalistiniais bruožais, tokiais kaip smurtas ir dehumanizacija. Pastarieji aspektai atskleidžiami šiuose filmuose rodant daug smurto ir vaizduojant bejausmius, į mašinas panašius veikėjus. Šie bruožai bus aptariami kartu su Iwabuchi apibrėžtu švelniu kultūriniu nacionalizmu ir narciziškumu. Taigi šiame straipsnyje teigiama, kad didėjančią tokių filmų gamybą galima vertinti kaip egzotinių filmų poreikio patenkinimą vakaruose, be to, kad tokiu būdu sustiprinamas narciziškas Japonijos filmų industrijos siekis vaidinti pagrindinį kultūrinį-ekonominį vaidmenį pasaulio žiniasklaidos rinkoje.