

Looking Outside:  
Representations of the Periphery in Contemporary Japanese Cinema

by

Joel Van Loon  
B.A., University of Victoria, 2005

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

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*This thesis examines a body of contemporary Japanese films in order to unpack the various portrayals of some of Japan's socially marginalized groups including women, alienated and rebellious youth, mentally unstable and socially withdrawn individuals, immigrants, and others who don't adhere to the rigorous standards of social hierarchies and cultural traditions. Postmodernism provides the theoretical framework for the analysis of these films. I argue that Japanese postmodern films and their celebrations of the periphery are essential to contemporary Japan for three related reasons: These postmodern films represent sites of renewal - a positive view of the periphery; a neutral definition of the periphery as part of everyday life; and lastly, as a negative critique of an illusory meta-Japan. The intended outcome of this paper will be to find contrasting/contradictory representations of the periphery - as portrayed by Japanese filmmakers. Japan's filmic representations of the complex social difficulties faced by the peripheral groups that exist within contemporary Japanese society can provide valuable social awareness and commentaries that are not readily found in other facets of Japanese society.*

**Key words:** Japan, periphery, postmodern, film,

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This is a study of the periphery in contemporary Japanese film. I define contemporary Japan as the post-economic bubble period, from the early-1990s until the present. This study will argue that the demise of the Japanese economy produced scepticism of social constructs, leading consequently to the further development of the periphery, and that this historical context exerted tremendous influence on presentations and critiques of Japanese attitudes towards the periphery as found in contemporary Japanese film.

Defining and labeling the periphery is less straightforward, and potentially problematic; the boundaries open to interpretation, the definitions as multifarious as the individuals represented by the term 'periphery'. Therefore, in determining who the periphery is, I locate and define the social 'centre' - in opposition or contrast to the periphery - so as to better understand who or what the periphery is *not*. I offer a characterization of the 'mainstream', in which religion, ethnicity, language, class, and gender roles have all played major parts in constructing idealized Japanese identities. It is from these constructions of identity that the formation of 'majority society' appears, and those who are not easily lumped into these cultural constructs are thus labeled here as 'peripheral'. By no means are these constructions and categories complete and all-inclusive. But having conceded that point, it is nonetheless imperative that this study offer a depiction of the social centre as it is indispensable in differentiating it from the more questionable term, periphery. As the principal aim of this thesis is to uncover representations in film, there are inevitable spatial and contextual limitations concerning

the examination, and categorization of the centre, and of the periphery - both are worthy of their own studies. Here, it must suffice to cursorily examine these broad and contentious definitions.

I observe and analyze a total of ten contemporary Japanese films. The justification for analyzing ten films: I consider this number to be sufficient in identifying diverse and conflicting representations of the social periphery - the intention of this study. These films were chosen for their form and content; the decision which films to analyze based on a desire to bring to the project films which I suggest all display various representations of the social periphery. Rather than concentrating on one specific filmmaker, I examine a group of different filmmakers/directors, because each filmmaker brings his own influence to the work, and therefore I feel that a wider range of artistic descriptions can offer different perspectives on the subject. Unfortunately there are no works by female filmmakers in this study because it seems there is a predominance of male directors in Japan's film industry, creating a peripheral/core dichotomy between female filmmakers vis-à-vis male directors. There are in fact numerous, acclaimed female filmmakers in Japan: Kawase Naomi, Beppu Yumiko, and Tanada Yuki to name but three. In what seems slightly paradoxical, this thesis takes a mainstream approach to the examination of marginal identities within film: in relation to female filmmakers, male filmmakers (no matter how peripheral they and their films might be considered in Japanese cinema) are decidedly more mainstream. New research into the marginal status of Japanese female directors would certainly be worthy of its own platform, and, in my opinion, would benefit from the examination of films strictly limited to those made by female filmmakers.

I chose these films based on the assertion that each of these films has some or all of the characteristics of a postmodernist film: a rejection of universalizing notions and all-encompassing narratives,<sup>1</sup> fragmented narratives, self-reflexivity (in which characters are aware of their own fictional existence), a blend of styles and genres,<sup>2</sup> a mixing of high and low culture,<sup>3</sup> irony, parody, and pastiche. These films are not documentaries, nor are they political propaganda. Rather, the films I analyze are both commercial and ‘art house’ (films that intentionally defy the conventions as constructed by classical Hollywood cinema)<sup>4</sup> - fictional, narrative cinematic works.

With postmodernism as the theoretical backbone, this study encompasses an identifiable and uniform approach to analyzing the ten unique artistic entities under examination here. Although I consider analysis of film (or anything for that matter), from a specific, pre-determined theoretical standpoint, as inherently biased and restrictive in its systematic observation, I nonetheless respect, and find value in, a study that identifies the theoretical slant beforehand, guiding the interpretations, searching for continuities and contradictions, drawing conclusions and finding answers (hopefully) to pre-determined questions. If one is aware of the theoretical stance from the outset - whether one agrees with the approach or not - then one might more readily evaluate the findings based on the given set of expectations. To be sure, there are various approaches (or none at all) to discovering themes, tropes, signs, and indications. To identify each and every index of signification from within a group of films would amount to a

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, from *The Postmodern Condition* in Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidmann, eds. *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 330.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds., John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 99.

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in *Postmodernism and its Discontents*, E. Ann Kaplan, ed. (London: Verso, 1988) 14.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Caldwell, *Film Analysis Handbook*, (Australia: Insight Publications, 2005) 9.



monumental task of interpretation, a task for which there is not adequate space here. Surveying a number of films then from a specific viewpoint - in this case postmodernism and the representations of the periphery - allows the focus to remain on specific readings of meaning. My interest here is to find within these ten different films the portrayal of the margins, as constructed by the filmmakers.

Japanese cinema does have a history of addressing social problems. There have been anti-war films, gender-sensitive filmmakers, and a smattering of films which have addressed the issue of discrimination against Koreans in Japan. But what of other peripheral social groups? There have seemingly been few films, particularly in the contemporary period, which have taken into account the plight of other, less recognizable groups on the margins of Japanese society. Popular art - film, literature and television - in any society now more than ever, can play a significant role on the effects of public interpretation and conception of cultural signs and social groups. The conception, production, distribution and consumption of cinematic texts is inseparable from cultural and economic influences. Therefore, I feel that a study of the representations in film should be received among anthropologists as a valid examination of the various critiques of society that filmmakers in Japan are exhibiting.

## **Theory**

This examination of the social periphery is facilitated through postmodernism. The 'post' in postmodernism implies a sequence, necessarily referring back to modernism. As a matter of course, I investigate modernism briefly, comparing the two, highlighting essential differences, but remaining devoted to specifically utilizing the

precepts of postmodernism. Postmodernists reject the totalizing and universal applications of narratives or theories, and protest the bordering and boundaries that limit thought processes. So to define postmodernism here is inherently in opposition to its fundamental premise. Nevertheless, without even a loosely defined theory to guide my interpretations of film, the reader may be left to flounder in a wish-wash of wobbly rhetoric. Therefore, it is with slight disinclination that I begin here to set parameters around this far-reaching concept.

Postmodernism is a celebration of the margins, the inclusion of the periphery, the questioning of the importance of the centrality of society.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the socially marginalized have begun to resist the social centre, sceptical of the meta-narratives it has produced. Drawing on the work of Lyotard,<sup>6</sup> Hutcheon,<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard,<sup>8</sup> Jameson,<sup>9</sup> and Azuma,<sup>10</sup> I piece together a ‘remix’, or patchwork (in an homage or reference to the eclecticism this multi-faceted theory) definition of postmodernism so as to effectively describe the theoretical milieu in which I analyze and interpret contemporary Japanese cinematic works. This thesis argues that postmodern theory includes the rejection of meta-narratives, fragmented narratives,<sup>11</sup> the mixing of high/low manifestations of culture, parody, pastiche, and intertextuality. To Hutcheon, parody is “a respectful

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Iles, in discussion with the author, January, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979)

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988)

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, Peter Brooker, ed. (New York: Longman, 1992)

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, E. Ann Kaplan, ed. (New York: Verso, 1988)

<sup>10</sup> Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

<sup>11</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 2009) 81.

homage and ironically thumbed nose,”<sup>12</sup> while for Jameson “[p]astiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style...but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter.”<sup>13</sup>

Japanese cultural critic and philosopher Azuma Hiroki’s analysis of postmodernism in Japan is seen through the lens of the *otaku*, an increasingly recognized postmodernist subculture of enthusiasts. I refer extensively to his examination of *otaku*, helping to ground my own assessment of Japanese film.

## Method

In order to uncover the various representations of the margins within contemporary Japanese cinema, observation and interpretation of content, language, theme, character, context and style facilitate the examination of film. This is essentially what is known as ‘close reading’ or, the “close analysis of the work.”<sup>14</sup> In reading a film, I “analyze how a film uses images and sounds to tell a story and to powerfully affect the audience’s thoughts and feelings about that story.”<sup>15</sup> Needless to say, analyzing film is a highly interpretive endeavour, with potentially numerous interpretations of any given work: There are as many versions of a film as there are viewers.<sup>16</sup> Where does individual interpretation end if every scholar who seeks to analyze film brings their own judgment to the final analysis? David Bordwell suggests that the end of interpretation is when a critic “posit[s] a meaning that is more subtle, pervasive, remote, or elusive than

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen 1985) 33.

<sup>13</sup> Jameson, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Barry, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Caldwell 2005, ix.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis DeNitto, *Film: Form and Feeling* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 81.

other meanings, particularly those already constructed by other critics.”<sup>17</sup> In this research of a substantial group of contemporary Japanese films, the analyses will provide original interpretations precisely because there are no pre-existing English academic criticisms for the majority of the films that I analyze. However, in some cases, there may in fact already be scholarly interpretations and research available, and this must be the starting point, as it would be with any other discipline - to find existing critical academic analyses.<sup>18</sup>

The question I am faced with here is *how* it is a text exhibits meaning. My analyses begin with some basic questions: When was the film made; what are the social, historical, economic, political, cultural backgrounds; who is the director and what other films, if any, has the director made; what genre is the film; what are the expectations and unique characteristics of a particular genre;<sup>19</sup> does the title give a clue as to the content of the film; how does the opening scene foreshadow the theme of the movie; how does the *mise-en-scene* (“all the visual elements within the frame that support the telling of the story: the setting, lighting, costumes and acting style”<sup>20</sup>) position the viewer; does the narration provide a distinct viewpoint, and so forth. For certain, approaching the analysis of any film with postmodernism as the analytical backdrop, there will be an inevitable theoretical bias. Nonetheless, concerning how a text (in this case, film) exhibits meaning, all of the aforementioned questions would be relevant.

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<sup>17</sup> David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 246.

<sup>18</sup> H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006) 96.

<sup>19</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) 2.

<sup>20</sup> Caldwell 2005, 13.

Meaning is discovered through “the language of any text, verbal or non-verbal, [and] can be analyzed according to relations of similarity and placement.”<sup>21</sup> In more simplified terms, the effect of say, a glass of white milk, spilled and mixing with the dark red blood of a Japanese character whose throat has just been slit by a Pakistani immigrant (as a scene from Masashi Yamamoto’s 1997 Japanese film, *Junk Food* demonstrates) could be interpreted as a metaphor for the Japanese flag, and by association, Japan, with its well-documented reluctance to accept immigrants; the purity of the milk (representing Japanese-ness) comingling on the floor with the un-Japanese-ness of the aggressive foreigner, as metaphorically represented by the blood. Or, in the spirit of the name of the film itself, and as an embodiment of the postmodern tendency toward mass consumerism, perhaps there is a critique of a consumption-crazed Japanese society as represented by the mixing of the red and white to symbolize the ubiquitous spread of mass-produced and mass-consumed products like *Coca-Cola*. While this interpretation might be taking liberties with the imagery that is offered, the point here is that various meanings can be extracted from the form the images in films produce, based entirely on the theme, characters, and context. It would be naïve to think that any one interpretation is more valid than another, and interpretations such as these are obviously subject to criticism and dialogue.

## **Body of Research**

This project entails the close reading of ten films, the analytic emphasis on the representation of the peripheral characters in each film, informed by a postmodernist

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires, *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*, (New York: Routledge, 1988) 33.

slant. I structure this thesis in such a way that I build a contextual (social, cultural, historical) and theoretical foundation for the interpretation of those ten films. The body of analyses begins with two films that contrast one another in their representations of the periphery. I take this approach in order to illustrate the acute variances in two films that I identify both as postmodern. Following this comparison, I divide the remaining eight films into three categories. The first category is labeled as negative representations of the periphery, whereby the margins expose the oft-concealed, malcontent underbelly of an artificial meta-Japan. The next category demonstrates a neutral portrayal, in which the periphery is portrayed as a commonplace occurrence, neither accepted nor rejected. Finally, the third category reveals themes wherein marginal characters exhibit hope for a peaceful and contented co-existence in Japanese society.

It must be noted here that it is my intention to comment on the nature of specific critiques as constructed by Japanese filmmakers. This paper is not the domain for an analysis of Japanese society. It also does not intend to be a comprehensive account of the ways in which Japanese films portray the periphery. Just as interviewing fifty people cannot be exhaustively indicative of an entire population, nor can examining the artistic statements of a handful of films effectively represent the work of every Japanese filmmaker who portrays the periphery. It is merely my own interpretation of what a small number of Japanese filmmakers have presented as works of art for general consumption.

Following are the titles and years of production of the ten films which I analyze. The titles are arranged chronologically, and are not reflective of thematic grouping:  
*Tampopo* (1985), *Suwaroteiru* (*Swallowtail*, 1996), *Janku Fudo* (*Junk Food*, 1997), *Riri*

*Shushu no subete* (*All About Lily Chou-Chou*, 2001), *Bijita Q* (*Visitor Q*, 2001), *Gaichu* (*Harmful Insect*, 2001), *Rokugatsu no hebi* (*A Snake of June*, 2002), *Vibrator* (2003), *Shimotsuma Monogatari* (*Kamikaze Girls*, 2004), and *Zebraman* (2004). All of these films, with the exception of *Tampopo* (which is included in the analyses because of its unmistakable postmodern characteristics, and because it provides positive social commentary on the periphery before the downfall of the Japanese economy) were produced in the period of Japan's post-economic bubble and social malaise. It is within the context of this time of transformation that the periphery begins to become more of a recognizable counter-weight and begins to question the centrality of the hegemonic forces in society.

## **Analysis**

This thesis inspects ten films in total, searching for both common and contrasting threads of representation. Ranging in production from 1984 to 2004, I argue that these films are postmodern in both theme and content. The peripheries in these films vary in their portrayals, and the structure of this thesis reflects those differences, establishing three themes: positive, neutral and negative representations. Postmodernism as a literary and cultural theory helps explain the periphery's representations as displayed by the various Japanese directors. Close reading of filmic content and form, as found for example in settings, characters, lighting, and music, reveals sometimes shocking, sometimes sympathetic images of the social margins.

There are, however, underlying currents of scepticism that run through this study - the concern of subjectivity and interpretation, and the question of how the periphery is

delineated. Take for example a scene from *Junk Food* (1997) in which a female character while at a company dinner, irritable from a drug withdrawal, and in an attempt to blackmail another co-worker, shouts wild accusations, causing a disturbance inside the restaurant. Is this representative of a positive or negative portrayal? The analysis here determines that director Masashi Yamamoto has portrayed this character in a negative light. Determination is based on several factors: The background characters are seen frowning and looking at the female character with a sense of rancour; the character is represented as irrational and aggressive; and in an interview with Yamamoto in the films' extras, he explains that this peripheral character demonstrates a "reverse situation, looking at normal society with poison inside."<sup>22</sup> If the director of this film describes the character as a "poison" within normal society, then doesn't that indicate a negative portrayal? This interpretation carries the weight of validity given to it by the director of the film, but not all the films analyzed here have this extra form of legitimization. Here I have alluded to the directors' authorial intent as representative of an ultimate determiner of meaning. But it should be noted that this is not necessarily the case: every reading of a text can be interpreted from a different perspective. Readers interpret texts using a set of interpretive tools, and not everyone's tool box has the same tools inside. That aside, the object of this study is not to analyze Japan's social problems, but rather to observe what specific Japanese filmmakers are using their films to say about the periphery in Japanese society. Among the films I analyze I discover the directors' opinions wide ranging in their critiques or celebrations of the periphery and how the periphery meshes with so-called mainstream Japanese society. Some directors embrace the periphery, valuing difference and dissent, while others are wary of the periphery's interaction in society.

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<sup>22</sup> Masashi Yamamoto, in an interview.



The periphery is not a new term in academia. There has always existed a body of outsiders to contest the meta-narratives of the ruling classes in any society, and these contestations have occurred in numerous cultural arenas, including music, literature and film. Nor is the application of postmodern theory to the analysis of film a new concept either. However, there are a substantial number of contemporary Japanese films that have not been analyzed in academic circles in terms of the periphery, postmodernism and the differing representations of the peripheries. The study of Japanese film in Western academia remains mostly entrenched in the analyses of the films by classic Japanese filmmakers like Kurosawa Akira and Mizoguchi Kenji, as well as contemporary directors like Miyazaki Hayao. In a postmodern sense, the works by these filmmakers have been the centre of Western academic consideration, while other, less known and peripheral Japanese filmmakers receive little scholarly attention. That is where this study finds its *raison d'être*. This examination will open new doors of interpretation of the films produced by less recognized Japanese filmmakers in terms of their representations of the periphery in contemporary Japanese film.

## Chapter 2: The Approach and the Core

Here I concentrate on describing the aesthetic theory of postmodernism, later situating my analyses of film within this many-sided theory. My examination of postmodernism focuses on the aesthetic and formal characteristics. I assess postmodernism through an examination of the prevalent themes, as posited by numerous theoreticians of culture and literature. Within the film analyses in this study, I interpret each film's form based on a postmodernist literary assessment, identifying genre characteristics like pastiche, parody, irony, and narrative constructions like linear fragmentation. The content is also appraised in a postmodernist light, analyzing socially relevant themes that require recognition of the margins overcoming and rejecting grand narratives like patriarchy, hierarchy, and lifetime employment. My appraisal of postmodernism first begins with a comparison to modernism, so as to discover the essential strands of divergence. I also consider Azuma Hiroki's conception of postmodernism to add to my assessment a distinctly Japanese context.

Postmodernism, by its very locution, is inherently retrospective. With the attachment of the prefix 'post' to modernism, the term's nuance morphs slightly, creating a newer entity, and in order to distinguish between the two, it first becomes necessary to inspect the characteristics of modernism so as to find the fissures between the two. In this context then, it is unreasonable to view postmodernism from outside the foundation of modernism, just as it is unreasonable to discuss the periphery without also examining the centre.

## Modernism

Modernism created unbalanced philosophical, cultural, and literary binaries emanating from the phenomena of twentieth century Western culture:<sup>23</sup> West/East, center/margin, masculinity/femininity, high class/low class to name but a few. Elitist traditions were carried over from the Enlightenment, favouring the scholar, the artistic, and the political.<sup>24</sup> The modernist registered “a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact.”<sup>25</sup> Modernists tended to believe that human beings were faced with the inevitable fate of living in total social fragmentation, alienated, and desirous of escape from this condition. The postmodernist, meanwhile, embraces such a position, rejecting representation, preferring a playful, non-sombre frame of self-reference.<sup>26</sup>

One of the complications in differentiating between modernism and postmodernism is the ambiguous temporal boundary that separates the two. Modernist works of art were once considered subversive and shocking. But now, those same works are classic and revered in the same high-class social circles that once dismissed them as oppositional. How then to differentiate between the periods in which modernist works were denied acceptance and now, in the postmodern period when these same works are canonical and taught in schools and universities? In quite a limited sense, modernism can

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<sup>23</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, in introduction to *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London: Verso, 1988) 5.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Brooker, preface to *Modernism/Postmodernism* (London: Longman Group, 1992) xi.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) 80.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992) 155.

be equated with the artistic movements and styles which originated around the start of the twentieth century. Prominent literary figures included Joyce, Proust, Kafka and Woolf, and certainly modernism was associated with the Expressionist, Surrealist and Dada movements in painting. A rule of systems emerged that didn't necessarily translate over to literary and artistic designs, but certainly resonated within political and social systems: a "belief in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders under standardized conditions of knowledge and production."<sup>27</sup> All-encompassing narratives of freedom and liberty in the modern metropolis required the obligation of rationality, aided by mechanical technology, efficiency and capitalism. As Andreas Huyssen sees it, "Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture."<sup>28</sup> In Huyssen's opinion, the divergence between mass culture and high art is the greatest factor in understanding modernism.

John Frow makes a useful distinction between three related concepts: *modernism* (groupings of cultural practices, often conflicting); *modernization* (an economic progression with social and cultural ramifications); and *modernity* (intersecting with modernization, and indicating a philosophical and temporal framework).<sup>29</sup> These same characteristics can be applied, with necessary changes, to post-modernism, post-modernization, and post-modernity. The indicators of modernity in Japan were the development of a mass society, growth of cities, expansion of the press, and absorption of

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<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 35.

<sup>28</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986) introduction.

<sup>29</sup> John Frow, "What Was Post-Modernism?", in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, eds. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990) 139.

Western ideas. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), modernization meant predominantly Westernization, developing a “rich country, strong army”, and looking to gain position among Western powers. A deepening worry that something was vanishing in the dash towards a Western-centered modernity appeared with increasing force in the 1880s and 1890s. This thought agonized intellectuals, causing them to idealize new notions of Japanese “tradition”. It also connected with a nagging apprehension over social disorder and political contestation within the state. Their response was to put repressive restrictions on individual thought and actions.<sup>30</sup>

For Marilyn Ivy, writing about the anxieties of the Japanese in grappling with modernity, the term, *modern* encompassed the metropolitan vigour, the capitalist tendencies, and the mechanical and electrical structures of reproduction in 1920s Japan.<sup>31</sup> The modernization of Japan was a state-led enterprise that created a situation of unevenness: an ethnocentric state narrative and increasingly authoritarian legislation aimed at the control of culture operated alongside a brand of consumerism that emphasized the consumption of things, images, and entertainment. This consumer culture revealed class divisions, and the uncertainty of gender and culture identity,<sup>32</sup> perhaps paving the way for later contestation of dominant narratives that dictated conceptions of social order.

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 93.

<sup>31</sup> Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 5.

<sup>32</sup> Miriam Silverberg, “Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity” in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, (Vol.51, No.1, Feb. 1992) 32.

Stephen Bonnycastle defines a grand narrative as “a story that evokes a particular culture, tells about the past, and predicts how the future will unfold.”<sup>33</sup> A grand narrative implies one frame of reference, applicable to all under one large community, which for modernists represented the notion of human progress and infallibility. Further, modernists felt justified to differentiate between, and separate, the realms of high and low class art, while postmodernists are content to merge the two, ignoring rules that govern genres. Ihab Hassan identified binary themes and contrasted the characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, and here I include an (heavily) abbreviated version, the modernist traits listed first, followed by the postmodernist: purpose/play, hierarchy/anarchy, centering/dispersal, selection/combination, and root/surface.<sup>34</sup> This last pairing is indicative of Azuma Hiroki’s imagining of the “tree” and “database” models, in which the *otaku* value the surface outer layer, the small narratives, while suspicious of the deep-rooted inner layer, or grand narratives. Following a characterization of postmodernism, I examine Azuma’s work concerning the essence of Japanese postmodernism, as reflected in his examination of the *otaku*.

## **Postmodernism**

Why use postmodernism as the lens through which to interpret contemporary Japanese cinema? Contestation of dominant culture, particularly the erasure of the distinction between high and low culture enables this research of the periphery in Japanese film to be acknowledged as a valid form of cultural commentary, precisely

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Bonnycastle, *In Search of Authority: An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Canada: Broadview Press, 2007) 261.

<sup>34</sup> Ihab Hassan, “The Culture of Postmodernism” in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 2, No.3 (1985) 123.

because postmodernism breaks down and rejects the boundaries of grand narratives and accepts popular culture as a legitimate, autonomous entity. The constructed barriers between the high-class realm of art and literature and the popular fields of music, television and film disintegrate in the face of the postmodern assessment.<sup>35</sup> Without the distinction of one form of ‘art’ taking precedence over another we are able to evaluate the messages and content of say, an erotic film, without fear of our analysis being regarded as inherently shallow or irrelevant.

The interpretations of specific films in this thesis hinge on the representations of fringe groups, the sectors of Japanese society which don’t conform to the standard socio-political mold, and thus are conveniently ignored and consequently marginalized. But it is the margins that contest the ruling social structures. Postmodernist theory suggests that the alienated have gained a space in which they can oppose the ideology of the elite, involving the contestation of, and, as Jean-Francois Lyotard conceives it, the dismissal of the grand narratives of history.<sup>36</sup> No longer is it acceptable to take for granted such notions as ‘capitalism’ and ‘patriarchy’.<sup>37</sup> Within the films offered for analysis, I argue that the directors use their films to critique cultural constructs like hard work, loyalty, social cohesion, and harmony. This denial of dominant socio-cultural systems is inherent in postmodernist ideology. This is why the periphery is an integral element in any discussion of the postmodern.

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<sup>35</sup> Barry, 81

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Postmodern Condition” in *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidmann, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990) 330.

<sup>37</sup> Hutcheon 1988, 2

Postmodernists question the validity of existing power structures and social conventions. Long-held notions of social conformity, and hierarchies within personal, social and business relationships necessitate a high degree of complicity within Japanese social structures. Complicity is a consensus of norms within in a society which in turn validates the ruling and power-holding factions. Postmodernism then, in one of its many guises, is scepticism of the universal notions of all-encompassing power and belief systems. Its aim is to call into question the concept of hegemony – the ways in which the dominant ruling classes produce and maintain power; the connection between meaning and power<sup>38</sup> – and to critique that domination. There is a seeming paradox in the fact that we are aware of the long-standing tradition of narrative representations, but yet we have grown weary of the boundless power that these representations hold. It is from this paradox that parody stems and contributes to the postmodern expression.<sup>39</sup>

In the postmodern era there has been a loss of incentive for those who have fallen out of line with the given standards to toe the socio-cultural line. Consequently, those groups or individuals with less cultural<sup>40</sup> and financial capital have become marginal, left to fend for themselves on the outskirts of the social boundaries. Through a postmodern critique, those outside the centre - the glossed-over and conveniently overlooked sub-cultures regarded as anomalies - contest the boundaries of social inclusion.

The *otaku* comprise a large Japanese consumer subculture in which its members are often detached from social relations of the family and workplace. The *otakus*' social

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of hegemony, see Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed., trans., Derek Boothman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995)

<sup>39</sup> Hutcheon 1988, 8

<sup>40</sup> Cultural capital refers to educational, social, and intellectual assets. For a discussion of cultural and social capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1984)



realities are formed through membership in this group which eschews parental and national authorities, preferring fictional realities to social ones, the *otaku* often criticized for not being able to distinguish between the two.<sup>41</sup> *Otaku* are part of a burgeoning culture of young and middle age Japanese who can no longer find justification for traditional narratives of hard work, loyalty to companies, and economic growth.

Azuma, in an interview for the U.S.-Japan Innovators Project in 2005, explains that the *otaku* have lost their belief in the objectives of society, believing in less and less, slowly losing the grand narratives.<sup>42</sup> What Azuma identifies as a loss of meaning in objectives and ideologies is not only reflected within the *otaku* membership, but within the broader social context as well. As Miyoshi and Harootunian point out, the social climate in Japan at the end of the 1980s was such that the Japanese were already trying in vain, “to extract the guarantee of stable meaning from a ceaselessly changing landscape and wrenching social transformations in daily life.”<sup>43</sup> Authors like Asada Akira put forth new ideas framed in a postmodern context, and echoed the sentiments of a new generation of disaffected Japanese. In his 1984 book *Structure and Power*, Asada advocates a desertion of the “meta-narratives that have seemed compelling in the past to search for truth in the struggle to create a prosperous future, to work and identify oneself with the corporate ethic.”<sup>44</sup>

The *otaku* subculture enthusiastically engages in rampant consumerism of electronics, animation, *manga*, science-fiction and video games, which have been

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<sup>41</sup> Azuma, 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> Hiroki Azuma in an interview for *JapanSociety.org*, ([http://www.japansociety.org/resources/content/2/0/5/4/documents/azuma\\_mcgray%20interview.pdf](http://www.japansociety.org/resources/content/2/0/5/4/documents/azuma_mcgray%20interview.pdf)) 3. Accessed April 8, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, eds., *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer 1988, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) 397.

<sup>44</sup> Marilyn Ivy, “Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan”, in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer 1988, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) 426.

blended together, morphing older products with newer ones, parodying originals, intermingling distinct elements of, for example, animation characters, to create ambiguously new and unique items, consuming “the original and the parody with equal vigor...at the level of simulacra where there are no originals and no copies.”<sup>45</sup> This observation is congruent with what Jean Baudrillard posits as the notion of societies that become inundated with media images and mass consumerism to the point where there is a ‘loss of the real’, in which lost is the “distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth.”<sup>46</sup>

Azuma explains that various products and works are entered into a ‘database’, where consumers are able to choose from a collective of characteristics, and re-create their own desired product. In Azuma’s words, a “body of work is understood as a database, while the simulacra are extracted from it based on the preferences of the consumer.”<sup>47</sup> He further explains that *otaku* are quick to distinguish between the simulacra and the database. In a somewhat contradictory tone to Baudrillard, who believes that there are no longer any grand narratives (database), Azuma states that “it is better to assume the prior existence of a database that enables both an original and the works derived from it.”<sup>48</sup> The database is an all-encompassing meta-narrative or meta-product; individual contributors extract from it only the elements they seek to utilize in fashioning their own, personalized narratives.

I compare Azuma’s notion of the database to the structure of a text, and evaluate his “tree” and “double layer” models. Azuma identifies in the work of Otsuka Eiji, small

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<sup>45</sup> Azuma, 26

<sup>46</sup> Barry, 2009, 84

<sup>47</sup> Azuma, 102.

<sup>48</sup> Azuma, 33.

narratives and grand narratives which are the basis for *narrative consumption* (in which the system behind a story or drama - the grand narratives - cannot be sold, so the fragments, or ‘goods’ – the small narratives - are consumed individually).<sup>49</sup> Grand narratives are referred to as a worldview or a setting, while small narratives are sold and consumed as sections of the grand narrative.<sup>50</sup> In this way, the small narratives are copied, parodied and imitated, creating in each parody a new small narrative of its own. Azuma departs slightly from Otsuka’s rendition of narratives to offer his own model of postmodernity – the *database*, or the grand non-narrative.

In the database model of consumption, there are no hidden agendas, no grand narratives behind the small, individualized narratives. The surface level of small narratives is interpreted differently by individuals who in turn create their own new small parodies, essentially producing what Baudrillard refers to as “simulacra”. Consumers no longer want the grand narratives of franchise stories. Instead, they prefer to consume characters of a story, drawing from a database, changing the characteristics of each in a way that satisfies their own personal tastes. “As a result, instead of narratives creating characters, it has become a general strategy to create character settings first, followed by works and projects, *including the stories*.”<sup>51</sup> Azuma provides the Internet as an example of his double-layer structure. There is no hidden worldview behind the surface of the Internet. He explains that, “the agency that determines the appearance that emerges on the surface outer layer resides on the surface itself rather than in the deep inner layer.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Azuma, 29

<sup>50</sup> Azuma, 31.

<sup>51</sup> Azuma, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Azuma, 32.

In other words, the deep inner layer is where grand narratives exist, but in the database model, there is no grand narrative, hence the grand *non*-narrative.

There are no rules or structure to a database; anyone can add to it, create something new with the characteristics found within the database. A postmodern film might draw from a database of the filmic standards, incorporating the narrative conventions of a romance together with a western (as seen in *Tampopo*), creating a new product or identity in a pastiche or parody. The database is a fluid entity, constantly being altered by an endless flow of spin-off simulacra. On the other hand, a traditional book is bound with two covers; there are chapters, structure, often linear, following a story from the beginning to an end; there is a single author with an original concept with just one story to tell. A text then, resembles a grand narrative, a unit that is not adjusted, nor added to.

Imagine the most basic and simplest of texts, fabricated from paper, held together by a binding, front and back covers enclosing one narrative produced by a single author. The authors' work does not change, it retains its original form; consumers can exploit only the original work. Now imagine a database: accessible from any computer with a portal to the Internet, no beginning and no end, information flowing freely from one author to another, anyone able to contribute their own personalized narrative, while free to obtain others. The traditional paper and binding book represents modernism – a fixed system of beliefs, totalizing notions that seek to mask difference and disguise plurality; the database embodies postmodernity – a rejection and a departure from universalizing grand narratives. The database is an amalgamation of individual narratives, derivatives

and simulacra. Multiple themes are included in the database, dissimilar to the singular themes and genres found in the paper pages of the modern text, the creator a lone voice.

Using two models – a “tree” model and a “database” model - Azuma makes a distinction between modernism and postmodernism. In the tree model, there exists a deep inner layer, representative of a grand narrative, which informs and regulates the outer surface layer, indoctrinating individuals’ consciousness. The outer surface layer is comprised of small narratives, determining how individuals perceive reality, influenced by the deep inner layer. The database model, on the other hand, is a double layer structure, wherein individuals determine their own small narratives from the outset, inputting into the outer surface layer one’s own preferences/small narratives/simulacra. In other words, the individual creates one’s own narrative, beginning in the double layer structure on the outside, informing the deep inner layer, or database. In essence, the modernity “tree” model provided the grand narrative, affecting the individual, while with the postmodernity “database” model, the individual chooses the small narrative, or preference, affecting or adding to the database.<sup>53</sup> The tree model signifies the renunciation of universalizing notions within modernism, while the database model represents a new formation of individual agency within the postmodernist era.

### **The Japanese ‘Core’**

At this point I depart from the discussion of the postmodernism to examine the characteristics of Japanese social centre, or the core, where grand narratives determine who or what is accepted within the framework of Japanese society. I seek to establish the

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<sup>53</sup> Azuma, 31-33.

characteristics of the periphery. However, in contrast, it is easier to describe the center, the desired formation of the social apparatus. It is challenging to define who or what the periphery is. Here I take steps in delineating the periphery through a definition of the center. The characteristics of the social center embody social class, education, employment, and ethnicity. What led to the creation of the center, and in that structuring process, what factors contributed to the periphery being created?

At a most basic level of categorization the Japanese centre is ethnically Japanese. This is both a widely supported and a contested notion based on a purported theory of the unique Japanese national character- *nihonjinron*.<sup>54</sup> The Japanese core is highly educated due in part to the post-war need for an educated workforce to rebuild the country, and to provide equal opportunity for all to succeed in society;<sup>55</sup> the centre is a hierarchically structured, rigid scale of social ranking, creating a vertically organized society.<sup>56</sup> There are tight, restrictive social standards that guide Japanese behavior, like that of *uchi* (inside)/*soto* (outside) which clearly delineates insiders and outsiders, giving rise to core and peripheral members.<sup>57</sup>

Institutions like the family and large corporations both play roles in controlling how people act and perform in social spaces by creating and maintaining boundaries based on hierarchical ranking.<sup>58</sup> Within this established system of loyalty and respect, members of a group know their respective roles and responsibilities, rarely deviating from them. In *A Modern History of Japan* Andrew Gordon explains how in post-World

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<sup>54</sup> Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of "Nihonjinron"*, (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001)

<sup>55</sup> Kirsten Refsing, "Japanese educational expansion: Quality or equality", in *Ideology and Practice in Modern Japan*, Roger Goodman and Kirsten Refsing, eds. (London: Routledge, 1992) 117.

<sup>56</sup> William H. Forbis, *Japan Today: People, Places, Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 31.

<sup>57</sup> Takie Sugiyama Lebra, ed. *Japanese Social Organization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992) 5.

<sup>58</sup> Joy Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) 115.

War Two Japan, society was guided by Japanese bureaucrats intent on constructing for Japan an idealized and standardized set of values and images to follow which emphasized middle-classness as a typical life.<sup>59</sup> “More people than ever came to share in experiences understood as those of middle-class or ‘mainstream’ society.”<sup>60</sup> As economic growth continued in the post-war era, and Japan began to produce more products for consumption, a situation occurred in which “[t]he systematic reproduction of consumer goods...homogenized society, making everyone, as [was] often expressed with much pride in Japan, a member of the “middleclass.”<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the homogenization of society, the disintegration of social and economic barriers in Japanese society, the creation of a broad middle class, resembled a pattern of commonality which precluded a sense of exclusiveness.<sup>62</sup> This sense of exclusivity was aided by qualities particular to Japanese social structure emphasizing organization, for example, in terms of a circle; within a circle there being no one better than another,<sup>63</sup> and all being connected with a similar goal or focus. Relationships then, discouraged individualism, instead preferring connections between humans, connections between the part and the whole, the single parts cooperating together for the betterment of the complete entity.<sup>64</sup> Such relationships are embedded in Japanese society, like “a social constellation held together by fundamental and culturally irreducible relationships that determine how one is to behave with reference to others within the confines of Japanese society.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Gordon, *A Modern History*, 243.

<sup>60</sup> Gordon, 243.

<sup>61</sup> Tetsuo Najita, “On Culture and Technology in Postmodern Japan” in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer 1988, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) 405.

<sup>62</sup> H.D. Harootunian, “Visible Discourses/Invisible Ideologies” in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer 1988, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) 466.

<sup>63</sup> Harootunian, 462.

<sup>64</sup> Harootunian, 462.

<sup>65</sup> Harootunian, 463.

In establishing and maintaining the boundaries of the centre, Japanese bureaucrats have at times been overtly critical of ethnic minorities. In 1986, at a party speech to his Liberal Democratic peers, then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone remarked that, “in America there are many blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, and on the average America’s level [of intelligence] is still extremely low.”<sup>66</sup> This high level government official further added to already existing negative narratives of Japan as a nation which demarcates itself according to a widely-held view of the Japanese as ethnically homogeneous, somehow different, culturally superior and inherently more intelligent than other races,<sup>67</sup> or what Miyoshi and Harootunian describe as “the contemporary penchant for eliminating the Other altogether and suppressing all signs of the heterogeneous or different for a new ‘science of the same’.”<sup>68</sup>

The abundance of literature outlining key characteristics of Japanese society points overwhelmingly to a family/company oriented social structure emphasizing adherence to customs and traditions of respect and servility, pursuit of higher education, and clearly demarcated vertically organized social boundaries. Those in Japan who choose to ignore or find it difficult to conform to such definitive social conventions, more often than not are relegated to the periphery. The study of Japan’s peripheral others has traditionally focused on differences in ethnicity, and “identity politics” among Japanese minorities – the Ainu, Koreans, Okinawans, and Chinese.<sup>69</sup> Certainly the periphery encompasses more than just a few ethnic minorities, and financially-challenged groups.

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<sup>66</sup> Ivy, 420.

<sup>67</sup> Here I am referring to *nihonjinron*, a contentious theory outlining Japanese ethnic and cultural differentiation.

<sup>68</sup> Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian in the introduction to the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer 1988, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988) 395.

<sup>69</sup> John Clammer, *Japan and Its Others*, (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001) 7.



As John Clammer points out, this concentration on ethnicity as an exclusionary construct has overshadowed other aspects of difference in economic status, and physical and mental disabilities. The organization of resident foreigners, as well as Japanese who have lived abroad, returned to Japan and consequently felt out of place are also situated in a relationship of differentiation.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, the periphery is not as easy to define as the core, which on the other hand is readily identifiable, and supported by grand narratives beneath the surface of individual identities. Those on the outside looking in exist in relative isolation, either content in their identities or seeking to adjust their own outer narrative layers to conform to the grand narratives of social harmony and cooperation.

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<sup>70</sup> Clammer, 7.

## Chapter 3: Origins of Marginality

It is a salient feature of this study to examine the processes through which groups of people are marginalized in Japan. Here I examine the historical practices of discrimination in Japan so as to provide a vehicle for the interpretation of contemporary manifestations of marginalization. In order to gain some understanding of how and why various groups are oppressed or relegated to the social periphery, I believe it is indeed a valid point of departure to investigate the early causes of social intolerance. There, it is possible to find the roots of social alienating practices, which enveloped class, gender, and ethnic distinctions. An historical pattern of ostracism and discrimination then would help to account for the current social climate in which those outside the social majority experience very real discrimination. Thus it is possible to draw parallels between current and past threads of prejudice. The focus here then, is on Japan's original outcaste: their origins, categories, and occupations, as well as the social consequences of their estrangement from Japanese society. In this section I inspect key issues in the formation of outcastes: Shinto and Buddhist notions of purity, the historical evolution of Japan as a colonial power, and myths of racial cohesion and superiority.

### **Social Class**

Perhaps the most significant early moment in the demarcation of social classes were the Taika Reforms of A.D. 645 which resulted in the enactment of the distinction between 'good people' (*ryoumin*) and 'base' or 'humble people' (*senmin*) and has stayed

intact throughout Japanese history.<sup>71</sup> The so-called ‘base people’ fulfilled slave roles, and were occupationally categorized into 5 groups: tomb guards (*ryouko*), government farmers (*kwankou*), temple and private servants (*kenin* or *yatsuko*), government slaves (*kunuhi*), and private slaves (*shinuhi*).<sup>72</sup> The demarcation of ‘good people’ and ‘base people’ served to appease the peasant masses who occupied 80% of the population,<sup>73</sup> and who were oppressed and exploited by the minority ruling class. This separation between the groups was particularly satisfactory to farmers, producers of the country’s sustenance yet severely oppressed in their working conditions and who were expected to produce for the nation. In separating the massive working population from a lower tier of citizen, the ruling class could effectively blind the working classes to the miserable conditions of their existence,<sup>74</sup> thus alleviating any desire for revolt because as exploited as the farmers may have felt, there was still a lower and more subjugated class below them.

This is an important aspect of Japanese hierarchical organization, because it is the early separation of those groups that led each to find its place within the social structure and to fulfill certain obligations (the ideals of collectivism over the individual, inheritance of occupation, a solid hierarchy) for medieval Japan to operate as a whole. For society to function effectively there was an inherent need for specialized occupations: the slaughter of animals; the production of leather armour for samurai; the burials of deceased family members; entertainers, etc. The population was divided along a strict

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<sup>71</sup> Eugene E Ruyle, “Conflicting Japanese Interpretations of the Outcaste Problem “(Buraku mondai)”, in *American Ethnologist* Vol.6, No.1, (American Anthropological Association, 1979) 58.

<sup>72</sup> John Price, “A History of the Outcaste: Untouchability in Japan”, in *Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*, Eds. George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 16.

<sup>73</sup> Juichi Sugihara, *The Status Discrimination in Japan: Introduction to Buraku Problem*, (The Hyogo Institute of Buraku Problem, 1982) 12.

<sup>74</sup> Sugihara, 13.

hierarchy and each group contributed in their own ways to the national civil order and the production of agriculture. Those people who took on socially abhorrent roles played a specific part in the system, thus creating “the culture to insure the persistence of groups to carry out the defiled occupations”<sup>75</sup> so that society as a whole could conduct its operations efficiently.

Archaic taboos surrounding various contagious illnesses, the taking of life, and the methods of dealing with the dead all contributed to defining the targets of discrimination. The processes for labeling and stigmatizing medieval citizens who existed on the periphery of ‘majority society’ echo the intricacies of social conventions.<sup>76</sup> The Japanese pre-modern social class hierarchy, encompassed in descending class order the samurai (the warrior administrators), peasants (highly valued as rice producers), artisans, and merchants (under Confucianism, merchants were considered greedy and selfish). In addition, there were two other sub-classes of citizens which were relegated to the margins. One was labeled *hinin* (non-people) and in terms of social hierarchy, were slightly above the *eta* (a word with uncertain origins, but commonly translated as ‘much filth’). The *hinin* were a “heterogeneous group comprised of beggars, prostitutes, itinerant entertainers, mediums, diviners, religious wanderers, and fugitives from justice who had fallen out of the four-class system, and others who had been reduced to *hinin* status as punishment for infractions of civil or penal codes.”<sup>77</sup> *Eta*, on the other hand, were considered less than human, in spite of the notion that blood lines connected one generation to the next. Through those blood lines, by close association or through

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<sup>75</sup> Price, 17.

<sup>76</sup> Gerald Groemer, “The Creation of the Edo Outcaste Order”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 27, No.2 (The Society for Japanese Studies, 2001) 265.

<sup>77</sup> George A. De Vos and William O. Wetherall, *Japan’s Minorities: Burakumin, Koreans, Ainu, and Okinawans*, (London: Minority Rights Group, 1983) 4.

marriage, each successive offspring had little choice but to engage in the type of occupations centered around death and blood.<sup>78</sup> During Japan's medieval period, the *eta* and *hinin* were often lumped together under the single category of lower tier citizen, but it wasn't until about the middle of the sixteenth century that there came to be a distinction between the two.<sup>79</sup> As has been recognized, "the Eta [were] not racially distinct, nor did they possess any overt cultural characteristics which might differentiate them from the majority society,"<sup>80</sup> which necessarily begs the question, on what grounds were they discriminated against?

Although the history of intolerance of an arbitrarily assigned outcaste group of Japanese citizens necessarily begins with the distinction of 'good' and 'base' people in the mid-seventh century, systematic discriminatory processes against Japan's outcastes firmly took hold during the Edo period (1603-1868). As Groemer points out, "oppressive edicts, flagrantly biased legal decisions, and inhumane discriminatory policies played a major role in creating, solidifying, and reproducing the Edo outcaste order."<sup>81</sup> The examination of the *eta* and *hinin* during the Edo era can help to illuminate some of the existing processes by which 'majority society' marginalizes and discriminates against undesirable individuals.

*Eta* and *hinin* at one point were thought to be marginalized based on a notion of ethnic dissimilarity. But contemporary scholars have discarded that hypothesis. Now, academics widely support the opinion that these individuals were oppressed because of

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<sup>78</sup> George A. De Vos and William O. Wetherall, 4.

<sup>79</sup> George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 19.

<sup>80</sup> John D. Donoghue, "An Eta Community in Japan: The Social Persistence of Outcaste Groups", *American Anthropologist*, Vol.59, No.6, (Blackwell Publishing, 1957) 1000.

<sup>81</sup> Groemer, 287.

the overt political judgments that echoed the social and religious convictions of the past.<sup>82</sup> The *eta* and *hinin* were in large part ostracized as a result of their occupations, handed down through generations, effectively entrenching them in a cycle of social abuse and neglect at the hands of majority society. Further, a greater number of *hinin* became such simply because they were destitute or because the requirements of lineage dictated they follow suit and continue the family occupation.<sup>83</sup> The outcastes, along with fulfilling specific occupational needs for mainstream society “served, by their very existence, as the foundation stone for the ideology that legitimized and justified the entire system of feudal exploitation and oppression.”<sup>84</sup>

## **Shinto**

Along with occupation, another major contributing factor in the early discrimination of the *hinin* and *eta* was a belief that individuals who were in close proximity with death became polluted, whether by occupation or through unfortunate health conditions. Japan’s folk religion, Shinto, played a significant role in the formation of Japan’s outcaste, their occupations the by-products of a Shinto belief in ritualistic cleansing, and disassociation with unclean elements; in the past, women’s menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, bleeding, and death were considered impure, while contemporary manifestations of pollution have declined in part because of the modern industrialization program of Japanese capitalism and the corresponding changes in social norms and

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<sup>82</sup> Keiji Nagahara, “The Medieval Origins of the Eta-Hinin”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol.5, No.2 (The Society for Japanese Studies, 1979) 386.

<sup>83</sup> Groemer, 284.

<sup>84</sup> Ruyle, 60.

lifestyles.<sup>85</sup> Whereas in feudal times, for example, restrictions on the slaughter of animals for food and clothing were extensive due to pious beliefs, there are few, if any contemporary restrictions on meat eating and the production of leather goods. Today, Shinto is still a pervasive belief system which interprets and forms meaning in people's lives, referring to the "interpretive value-world that they are invested in intellectually and emotionally and that provides the standards for assessing life."<sup>86</sup>

Boyd and Williams identify three fundamental aspects that are essential for understanding Shinto, which has been referenced as far back as the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, the first documented annals of Japanese history. First, nature and humanity are understood as the results of creative and life-giving power (*musubi* and *kami*); second, natural occurrences and human behavior can cause the impediment and devastation of that creativity, known as "polluting"; last, individuals have the power to surmount these adversities through processes of purification.<sup>87</sup> The concept of *kegare* (impurities) is an idea which permeates the belief structure of Shinto. Childbirth, menstruation, and death are at the core of defilement. Women especially were made to observe specific rituals. Women who were menstruating had to take cautious measures so as to not pollute the food and people, and giving birth required a necessary segregation from other family members.<sup>88</sup> The *hinin* and *eta* held a monopoly on the type of professions which were traditionally labeled as impure: the butchering of animals for the production of hides and the processing of leather, preparation and burial of the deceased. The control of these

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<sup>85</sup> Emiko Namihira, "Pollution in the Folk Belief System", in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.28, No.4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) S65, S66.

<sup>86</sup> James W. Boyd and Ron G. Williams, "Japanese Shinto: An Interpretation of a Priestly Perspective", in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol.55, No.1, (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005) 34.

<sup>87</sup> Boyd and Williams, 34.

<sup>88</sup> Edward Norbeck, "Pollution and Taboo in Contemporary Japan", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol.8, No.3, (University of New Mexico, 1952) 272-3.

specialized albeit socially unacceptable professions, was the result of a long period of internal conflicts between feudal war lords. War-mongering *daimyo* (lords) who required saddles, armour, and bowstrings, among other goods, competed with other military lords for the production services of the *eta* and *hinin*.<sup>89</sup> But once the era of warring factions came to an end, the *eta* and *hinin* were forced into the domain of agricultural production, the result of a limited market for leather goods.<sup>90</sup>

At this point, if the reader is curious as to Shinto and the concept of *kegare* relates to the project at hand, allow me to refresh the underlying narrative. Ethnic Japanese citizens are discriminated against in some facets of social relationships because of a persistent, (put-on) perception of impurity or acquired uncleanness based on the occupational inheritance passed down to successive generations. Separate communities (*buraku*) for these ‘defiled’ citizens have been established, and maintained throughout Japanese history. While perhaps the principal issue in regard to discrimination these citizens face is the association with ritual uncleanness, Eugene E. Ruyle identifies two ideological stances toward Japan’s contemporary outcaste, the *burakumin*. On one hand, he identifies the Japanese government’s position as defining the outcaste problem as one which is predicated on a less advanced stage of capitalism; the *dowa chiku* (“integration districts”) in which the *burakumin* reside, maintain feudalistic tendencies to exist through small-scale agricultural practices, traditional occupations and production techniques. On the other hand, the outcaste problem can be viewed as a result of the political and

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<sup>89</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, 21.

<sup>90</sup> John A. Price, “The Economic Organization of the Outcasts of Feudal Tokyo”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol.41, No.4, (Washington: The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research, 1968) 213.



economic relationship vis-a-vis the exploitative nature of capitalism.<sup>91</sup> The economic processes which have contributed to the *burakumin*'s marginalization surely require its own thorough and complete examination, one which cannot be enveloped in the present discussion, as such an examination would surely merit its own immense space. I mention this here to highlight the idea that there are also economic considerations involved in issues of discrimination, but here the focus remains on the attitudes of majority society toward the margins, informed by narratives of religion, purity and occupation.

The notion of pollution has been carried through from the medieval era, adapting to the changing (post)modern era, merging with modified, although less stringent contemporary assumptions of contamination. Systematic socio-cultural exclusionary practices like those associated with avoidance of the unclean have been ingrained in Japanese social consciousness through well-worn and widely disseminated narratives. To be sure, Shinto has been connected with the rise of modern nationalism, with it the Emperor as a symbol of the direct descendent of *kami* (often translated as a 'god', or deity, but the concept is conceptually flexible, everyone and everything having *kami* potential).<sup>92</sup> The doctrines of Shinto played a large role in marginalizing the *hinin* and *eta*, an emphasis on an unbroken line of unpolluted Japanese citizens. Early movements, like the National Learning school of Motoori Norinaga and the Restoration Shinto movement of the Edo period facilitated the process of indoctrinating the philosophy of Shinto and helped to separate Shinto from Buddhism,<sup>93</sup> but that separation did little to help emancipate the *burakumin*.

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<sup>91</sup> Ruyle, 57.

<sup>92</sup> Boyd and Williams, 35.

<sup>93</sup> Kuroda Toshio, James C. Dobbins and Suzanne Gay, "Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol.7, No.1, (The Society for Japanese Studies, 1981) 19.

Buddhism, in a similar vein to Shinto, has also played a role in the discrimination of outcasts, with conceptions of tainting, and the taking of any form of life causing defilement of the individual. In part, due to the precepts of Buddhism, the *burakumin* are considered polluted, consequently stigmatized, scorned, and excluded from majority society. They carry out dirty, demeaning and distasteful jobs for those above them on the social scale.<sup>94</sup> Buddhism proscribes the killing of animals and the eating of meat so as to further separate occupations dealing with animal slaughter and the processing of hides, with the more respectable and unpolluted jobs allocated to the commoners of majority society.<sup>95</sup>

Thus far I have illustrated how notions of religion, social structures and occupation have been major factors in delineating a large group of Japanese outsiders from mainstream Japanese society. Another element that I examine here, as a factor in the separation between mainstream and peripheral society, is the notion of race, and in Japan's case, its inseparability with nationalism. Japan has often been characterized as being a racially homogenous society. Cultural nationalists, as defined by Kosaku Yoshino, "regard the nation as the product of its unique history and culture and as a collective solidarity endowed with unique attributes."<sup>96</sup> Dating back to the early twentieth century, an extensive number of Japanese characteristics and tendencies have been tirelessly purported by scholars, politicians and the media, as being intrinsically unique to Japan, its culture and people. This rhetoric of national, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic difference, labeled *nihonjinron* ('discussions of the Japanese') has been utilized in

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<sup>94</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, 293.

<sup>95</sup> De Vos and Wagatsuma, 18.

<sup>96</sup> Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry*, (London: Routledge, 1992)1.

various guises to justify Japan's imperialism and colonization, militaristic nationalism, and rapid economic progress, as well as being commentary on Japanese cultural origins, social structure, and psyche.<sup>97</sup>

## **Ethnicity**

It was not until the beginning of the Meiji era that Japan emerged as a cohesive nation. The division between regional areas during the Tokugawa period brought a more localized sense of community, precluding any awareness of nation. There was very little in the way of a shared cultural identity or history, let alone any form of 'print capitalism'.<sup>98</sup> Japan as a unified, cooperative nation-state had yet to be imagined. In the mid nineteenth century however, with the onset of Western imperialists encroaching on Japan's self-imposed isolation, and seeking trade concessions, Japan became an unwilling trade partner with several Western nations. This infringement led Japan to bolster its national image. In response, Meiji leaders employed the powerful, binding image of the Emperor to begin building a form of modern nationalism. The *Sonno Joi* movement (Revere the Emperor! Expel the Barbarians!) was a reaction to the increased foreign presence, and utilized the Emperor's iconic image as a rallying point for Japanese, while simultaneously signifying the antagonists. As Delmer Brown indicates, "the restoration

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<sup>97</sup> Harumi Befu, "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*", in *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity*, Harumi Befu, ed., (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993) 109.

<sup>98</sup> For a thorough discussion of nation building and nationalism, refer to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

of the Emperor and the stronger anti-foreign feelings were obviously manifestations of a more positive form of national consciousness.<sup>99</sup>

As early Meiji officials focused on strengthening the nation, they began to disseminate new ideology, as well as written documents. They distributed printed notices in easily understood vernacular, informing the citizens of Japan of the pious and political importance of the Emperor, a descendent of the Sun God, to be worshipped and revered, everyone belonging and related to Him.<sup>100</sup> Shinto was transformed from a folk religion to the state religion, with the Emperor as the religious symbolic head. Propagating the Emperor as an anthropomorphic entity served the interests of the Meiji government in its efforts to build a nation on par with Western powers. To be sure, Japan felt compelled to compete with Western nations, lest it face the same fate as other colonized Asian states. Japanese scholars and leaders had observed the international scientific scene vis-a-vis racial purity and eugenics programs, and were not alone in promulgating the advantages of racial homogeneity. For the Japanese, the scientific study of race was an acquired piece of Western modernity from the late nineteenth century onwards; Meiji officials were influenced by Western-developed notion of Social Darwinism, and concerned with the correlation between power and race.<sup>101</sup> Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Japanese scientists and scholars debated the merits of race and genetics, and “ideas of racial or ethnic difference were often mobilized, both at the

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<sup>99</sup> Delmer M. Brown, *Nationalism in Japan: An Introductory Historical Analysis*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1955) 88.

<sup>100</sup> Takashi Fujitani, “Inventing, Forgetting, Remembering: Toward a Historical Ethnography of the Nation-State”, in *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity*, Harumi Befu, ed., (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993) 87-8.

<sup>101</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Debating Racial Science in Wartime Japan”, *Osiris*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, Vol.13, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 357-8.

official level and in popular discourse, to justify discrimination against colonial subjects.”<sup>102</sup>

Because such clear racial differences were spelled out early on with foreigners being compared to smelly, hairy, amoral beasts, and scientific justifications for racial supremacy ubiquitous throughout Western scholarship, the Japanese interwar propaganda concerning the “Yamato race” was easily disseminated. This myth of a common lineage permeated Japanese society before and during the war, enhanced by a brand of nationalism which stressed the idea of the nation-state as one big family, interconnected and all bloodlines related to the Emperor.<sup>103</sup> Of the interwar Japanese government policies that indicated a racial bias, none were more evident than that of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which Japan promoted as Asia’s answer to Western imperialism. The aim was to enfold all Asian nations under a Japanese protectionist blanket. In reality, the Sphere consisted of Asian satellite nations under Japanese occupation, but was promoted as ‘Asia for the Asians’ under Japanese guidance. Dower remarks that, “in spreading out geographically, the Yamato race would draw closer psychologically. In the realm of racial consciousness, expansion meant contraction.”<sup>104</sup>

During the Second World War, the Japanese were occupied with the idea of what it meant to be Japanese, and how the “Yamato race” was different from people across the world, perhaps not intellectually or physically superior, but inherently more virtuous and pure, the notion of uniqueness concentrated around a shared genetic base.<sup>105</sup> As John Dower explains in his examination of race and war, “this intense self-preoccupation

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<sup>102</sup> Morris-Suzuki, 359.

<sup>103</sup> Morris-Suzuki, 355.

<sup>104</sup> John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) 278.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Weiner, *Race and Migration in Imperial Japan*, (New York: Routledge, 1994) 19.

ultimately led to the propagation of an elaborate mythohistory which emphasized the divine origins of the Japanese imperial line and the exceptional racial and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese people.”<sup>106</sup> Japanese wartime propaganda scrutinized corrupt Western thoughts, the most dangerous one being preoccupation with the self, or the individual, in opposition to the collectivity of the Japanese.<sup>107</sup> The prewar and wartime idea of Japan as one big family went a long way in helping to promote a continued perception of the Japanese as a racially pure society.

In the postwar period, *Nihonjinron* advocates have extolled extensively the unique makeup of Japanese social structure enveloping group orientation, highlighting face-to-face relationships, hierarchical organization, and agreement between members. An important element for the Japanese government in the development of the post-war economic miracle was the “one ethnic group, one language”, suggesting a desire for racial homogeneity.<sup>108</sup> In 1986, then Prime Minister Nakasone attributed America’s weak economic condition to the subpar performance of American racial minorities, particularly Blacks and Chicanos, while Japan’s miraculous success was attributed to its racial homogeneity.<sup>109</sup> This admission was representative of an overwhelming hegemonic cultural policy supported by the state, reinforced by academics, the media, and politicians - who are deeply concerned with definitions of Japanese collective identity - and manifested in the form of cultural treasures, monuments, awards, medals, and

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<sup>106</sup> Dower, 205.

<sup>107</sup> Dower, 228.

<sup>108</sup> Keiko Yamanaka, “New Immigration Policy and Unskilled Foreign Workers in Japan”, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.66, No.1, (Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia, 1993) 79.

<sup>109</sup> Befu, 121.

designations given to people in traditional fields of Japanese culture and indicating state recognition.<sup>110</sup>

Japan's nationalism in the postwar period has been labeled 'secondary nationalism' meaning that in the period leading up to 1945, as Maruyama Masao stated, "Japan alone [had] completed one full cycle of nationalism: birth, maturity, decline."<sup>111</sup> Postwar *Nihonjinron* then can be interpreted as an effort to resurrect the prewar rhetoric of connectedness to the Emperor minus the explicit imperial-political discourse,<sup>112</sup> and as such has been labeled as 'intellectual nationalism', referring to the extensive scholarship published in academic journals, newspapers, magazines and the like. In examining this wide range of literature on *Nihonjinron*, Peter Dale vigilantly and loquaciously deconstructs this putatively sui generis Japanese cultural rhetoric in his book, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*. What he discovers is a formally and scientifically invalid method of interpreting Japan in which an established and widely accepted process of distinguishing the Japanese from the rest of the world has even effectively blinded Western scholars.

Dale's inspection covers linguistics, family structure theories, sociological notions, and psychoanalytical concepts that have been intricately woven through the tapestry of Japanese philosophy, both in the contemporary and past periods. He finds that, "virtually every key axiom in the contemporary literature on Japanese identity could be tracked down to work done in the critical years of 1909-11."<sup>113</sup> Dale also observes among the literature an elaborate binary code featuring a West-East opposition,

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<sup>110</sup> Befu, 119.

<sup>111</sup> Maruyama Masao, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics*, Ivan Morris, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 139.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 39.

<sup>113</sup> Dale, introduction.

highlighted by carefully constructed differences. For example: geoclimatic (continent vs. island), racial (miscengenation of races vs. blood purity), social base (individualism vs. groupism), socio-cultural mode (bellicose vs. peaceful), and intellectual style (talkative vs. silence).<sup>114</sup>

These cultural binaries have perpetuated the ideology of Japanese uniqueness, and in conjunction, have furthered racial biases, setting up the process of ‘othering’. Essentially, *Nihonjinron* is the endless discussions of what it means to be different from everybody else. Historically, it was China that Japan sought to culturally separate itself apart from, but modern discussions point to the differences between the West and Japan. As Kosaku Yoshino points out, “Japanese identity is the anti-image of foreignness and, as such, can only be affirmed by formulating the images of the Other; namely, the West.”<sup>115</sup> Japan’s nationalist scheme, particularly in its racial structure, rejects difference and denounces the racial or cultural Other, and only by welcoming pluralism can the circumstances for non-Japanese in Japan improve.<sup>116</sup>

*Nihonjinron* has elements of scientific absurdity, ethnocentrism, a complex mytho-history and heavily racial bias. With these deeply ingrained historical perceptions of uniqueness, and a ‘secondary’ or ‘intellectual’ nationalism hard at work in the construction of difference based on opposites, it comes as no surprise that various members of Japanese society are discriminated against. Japanese academics, politicians and the popular press have formulated a thorough argument of Japanese uniqueness which permeates a wide range of Japanese social organizations. In sketching the historical origins of marginality in Japan, I have touched upon the creation of the outcaste

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<sup>114</sup> Dale, 42-46.

<sup>115</sup> Yoshino, 11.

<sup>116</sup> John Clammer, *Japan and Its Others*, (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001) 24.



order which encompasses notions of political, religious, occupational, and racial components. Enveloping a polemic and parochial notion of ethnicity, *nihonjinron* advocates a brand of cautious, and perhaps even xenophobic Japanese cultural nationalism by playing a massive role in the stigmatization of contemporary Others in Japan.

### **Confucianism**

Here I focus principally on Confucianism as a social narrative as it relates to Japanese women and to language. With its patriarchal slant, Confucianism has systematically limited, devalued and repressed Japanese women for centuries. Confucian ideology is an invaluable tool for observing and explaining some of the core social values that permeate Japanese society. It has influenced numerous aspects of the Japanese social character, prescribing ideals concerning filial piety, class and gender hierarchy, expression of feeling, and sexual mores. Of the ten films that I analyze in this study, a majority depicts women as being on the fringes of society; therefore it is imperative to provide an examination of the historicity of Confucianism and Westernization, and the resultant effects on Japanese women throughout the pre-modern and modern history of Japan.

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) Japan's hierarchical class system, (which included samurai, peasants, artisans and merchants) informed by Neo-Confucian ideals, affected heavily how people conceived of social relations, particularly emphasizing the social roles of the males, elders, and officials, placing them above other

members of society.<sup>117</sup> The Tokugawa period was emblematic of a reunification phase after centuries of warfare splintered the country. Tokugawa officials believed that the unstable warring period contradicted the organized functioning of nature, and thus they sought to restore a ‘natural’ order to society.<sup>118</sup> The powers involved in restructuring the nation sought a system which would bring order and civility to chaos and Neo-Confucianism more than any other tradition had identified ways in which to accomplish that goal.<sup>119</sup>

Japan was primarily an agrarian state, and the *ie* system (a “stem-family household, which retained only one child as heir in each generation”)<sup>120</sup> helped fuse together, through hierarchical relationships, all members of the family in working towards being an efficient, industrious household. Moreover, the *ie* system also created a social narrative of control and organization through its corporate characteristics, rigid structure, and utility as a site of production and reproduction.<sup>121</sup> While women’s roles were steeped in Neo-Confucian social values placing emphasis on filial piety, docility, subservience, obedience, monogamy, and fertility, the mother’s sole directive was not necessarily to bear children, as women were morally suspect in terms of raising their own children, doting on and spoiling them until children became dependent. Just as essential as motherhood were the roles of wife, worker and daughter-in-law.<sup>122</sup> A double standard had already emerged during the Tokugawa period: monogamous relationships between

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<sup>117</sup> Gail Lee Bernstein, ed., introduction, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 2.

<sup>118</sup> H.D. Harootunian, *Toward Restoration: The Growth of Political Consciousness in Tokugawa Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 3.

<sup>119</sup> John Bethrong, “Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism”, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol.48, No.1, (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1998) 68.

<sup>120</sup> Bernstein, 2

<sup>121</sup> Kathleen S. Uno, “Women and Changes in the Household Division of Labor”, in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, Gail Lee Bernstein, ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 22.

<sup>122</sup> Bernstein, 3-4.

husbands and wives was the pervasive principle, yet while women were confined to the home and daughters of good families kept as though in a box (*hako-iri musume*)<sup>123</sup> to protect them from the lasciviousness of the outside world, men on the other hand, were free to associate with prostitutes and concubines – the economic status of a man reflected in the ownership of wives and mistresses.<sup>124</sup>

The Meiji era marked the loosening of restrictions on interaction with the West, unlocking Japan to foreign commerce and culture. The cultural floodgates opened, and a deluge of Judeo-Christian morals and values washed over both men and women. Nudity (whether partially or totally devoid of clothing) for example, was a cultural norm in Japan dating back to the middle ages, but with the spread of Judeo-Christian traditions, nudity became a symbol of sexuality, the covered body a Western construction of suppressed desire.<sup>125</sup> In Japan however, “woman’s breasts [had] been adored more as a symbol of maternal nurturance than of sex.”<sup>126</sup> An influx of hence-to-fore unheard of and seemingly alien morals and Western cultural values, some of which emphasized women’s increased rights and expression, seeped into Japanese society, having a profound effect on young, impressionable Japanese women. The Meiji government viewed the growth, in their opinion, of morally deficient Western ideals as a negative distraction for Japanese women. For government officials, modernization with its emphasis on industrialization and technological advance was not identical to Westernization. Weary of too much Western stimulus, and eager to promote the salient Japanese social values at sites of girls’

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<sup>123</sup> Kittredge Cherry, *Womansword: What Japanese Words Say About Women* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1987) 41.

<sup>124</sup> Howard S. Levy, *Sex, Love and the Japanese*. (Washington: The Warm-Soft Village Press, 1971) 14.

<sup>125</sup> Nomura Masaichi, “Remodelling the Japanese Body” in *Culture Embodied*, ed. Michael Moerman and Masaichi Nomura (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1990) 262.

<sup>126</sup> Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1976) 59.

higher education, Meiji officials introduced the “Good Wife, Wise Mother” ideology, instilling ideals necessary for the fulfillment of their conception of the modern woman’s role in Japanese society, essentially indicating that the modern Japanese woman should “be a good-wife-wise-mother aspiring middle/upper class virgin.”<sup>127</sup> This social narrative took root, fortifying women’s roles as the backbone of the family, the woman being “educated in domestic skills and the higher arts of household management, able to properly rear their children, sufficiently worldly to endorse Japan’s international endeavours, dutiful, loyal, deferential to husbands and in-laws, modest, frugal and virtuous in their personal behaviour.”<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the Civil Code of 1898 (abolished in 1947) required women to live a chaste life; men were able to divorce for adultery while women could not; a woman’s adultery was a criminal offense, subject to imprisonment, whereas a man was exempt from such punitive measures.<sup>129</sup>

Predictably, some women were not content to perform their prescribed social roles. Upper-class Meiji daughters who were sent away to Tokyo for schooling embraced their new-found freedom in ways which the public often deemed morally corrupt, engaging in romance with boys, and possessing a desire for economic independence. Schoolgirls were able to “cultivate a growing consciousness that led many to question the orthodoxy of state ideologies in matters that concerned them.”<sup>130</sup> Some of the more outspoken and brave women adopted Western attitudes, ideals, and dressed in a similar fashion to Western women. These non-conformist females epitomized the type of

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<sup>127</sup> Melanie Czarnecki, “Bad Girls from Good Families: The Degenerate Meiji Schoolgirl”, in *Bad Girls of Japan*, Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, eds.(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 51.

<sup>128</sup> Kathryn Ragsdale, “Marriage, the Newspaper Business, and the Nation-State: Ideology in the Late Meiji Serialized Katei Shosetsu”, in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (The Society for Japanese Studies, 1998) 236.

<sup>129</sup> Joanna Liddle and Sachiko Nakajima, eds., *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters: Gender, Class and Power in Japan* (London: Zed Books, 2000) 42-43.

<sup>130</sup> Czarnecki, 61.

women that the Meiji government found problematic. The “Woman Problem” (*fujin mondai*) was an expression that gained ground around 1900 as a euphemism to describe the issues related to the New Woman (*atarashii onna*) who advocated women’s rights in a struggle to gain equality.<sup>131</sup> That the Meiji government even utilized such a loaded term points to the evidently male-centric attitude of the time.

During the Taisho era (1912-1926), the so-called “modern-girl” (*modan gaaru, moga*) embraced the limelight, flaunting her sexuality, and emerged as a peripheral player, dancing freely at dancehalls, wearing Western fashions, consuming frivolously and eventually became the subject of novels, magazines and films.<sup>132</sup> This group of modern, independent women perplexed and annoyed Japanese bureaucrats precisely because “this self-respecting modern girl had liberated herself from age-old traditions and conventions and...had stepped out onto the same starting line with man in order to walk alongside him.”<sup>133</sup> A combination of sexual experimentation, selfishness, and flagrant dismissal of desired social norms provoked critics to condemn the modern girl. With their laid-back socializing with ‘modern boys’ of the same age, waitresses working at cafes, and dancers in Western style clubs were an affront to the beliefs of a society which found structure in arranged marriages and patriarchal power.<sup>134</sup> Indeed the modern girls’ capability to support herself financially was perhaps as troubling as her unfettered

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<sup>131</sup> Jennifer Robertson, “Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan”, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol.25, No.1, Autumn 1999, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 2.

<sup>132</sup> Miriam Silverberg, “The Modern Girl as Militant”, in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*. Gail Lee Bernstein, ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). 239-266.

<sup>133</sup> Silverberg, 241

<sup>134</sup> Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 107.

lifestyle.<sup>135</sup> “This modern young woman transgressed societal norms by crossing boundaries erected by class, gender, and culture.”<sup>136</sup>

Also during the Taisho period, a proliferation of curiosity seekers emerged, anxious to experience something beyond the social norms. Japanese physicians, psychologists, and sexologists made numerous efforts to categorize and name sexual practices; such works engaged reader interest by delineating the ‘strange’ from the moral and served to create boundaries that curiosity seekers attempted to transgress.<sup>137</sup> The cultural fad of erotic, grotesquerie, and nonsense (*ero*, *guro*, *nansensu*) between the 1920s and 1940s became a barometer for the strange, sexualized and criminal episodes that captured the attention of new consumers with disposable incomes eager for something fresh and different. Miriam Silverberg suggests that this era was one which, promoted by mass culture (production, distribution, consumption), exhibited a documentary impulse in which Japanese consumer-subjects –not just restricted to the middle class - fed their consumer desires.<sup>138</sup> Regimented women’s roles dictated that they were in public places for a specific function, while the ‘curiosity seekers’ were predominantly men, searching out erotic or criminal encounters. A gender imbalance in the public realm dictated that women were predominantly the objects of attraction, rather than the seekers of it.<sup>139</sup> Jeffrey Angles suggests that “[p]eople seem to have shared a tacit assumption that an ordinary, sensible woman—“modern girl” or not—should not place herself in the kinds of questionable, criminal, or even dangerous situations that

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<sup>135</sup> Silverberg, 247.

<sup>136</sup> Silverberg, 254.

<sup>137</sup> Jeffrey Angles, “Seeking the Strange: *Ryoki* and the Navigation of Normality in Interwar Japan”, *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol.63, No.1, (Tokyo: Sophia University, 2008) 121.

<sup>138</sup> Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>139</sup> Angles, 131.

would appeal to the male curiosity-hunter.”<sup>140</sup> In short, the era of *ero*, *guro*, and *nansensu* enabled a form of erotic and irrational resistance against the standardized moral, aesthetic, and legal codes as dictated by the civilizing structures of social ethics.<sup>141</sup>

The early modern Japanese woman’s capability to subsist outside the economic boundaries constructed by the tenets of Confucianism indeed has its roots farther back than the modern girl. In an examination of female crime and punishment during the Tokugawa era, Diana Wright demonstrates that government officials concentrated more on the restriction of women’s economic status than ideological considerations.<sup>142</sup> Indicative of this was the Tokugawa government’s focus on curbing unauthorized prostitution which, unlike other offenses was prosecuted frequently, pointing toward the “potentially disruptive nature of illegal prostitution, rather than the morality of prostitution per se.”<sup>143</sup> Thus it becomes apparent that a pattern of limitations to restrict women’s influence outside the designated boundaries of the home had emerged long before the contemporary period, where we once again witness the transgressions of Japanese women in various forms, as documented by Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley in *Bad Girls of Japan*.

Alongside Neo-Confucian ideals that have shaped the social roles of females, the Japanese language has played a major part in demarcating male and female expectations and assumptions. Miyako Inoue argues that modern Japanese “history involved the opening of a new cultural space where women became objectified through their language use, and thus their language use became the productive site of knowledge of Japanese

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<sup>140</sup> Angles, 131.

<sup>141</sup> Angles, 102-103.

<sup>142</sup> Diana E. Wright, “Female Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Japan”, in *Journal of Women’s History*, 16, no. 3. (John Hopkins University Press, 2004) 10-29.

<sup>143</sup> Wright, 20.

women.”<sup>144</sup> Japanese is laced with gender-biased cultural constructs which perpetuate stereotypes and sexism. Kittredge Cherry compiled a book of Japanese expressions and idioms which clearly illustrates a set of cultural attitudes revealing a heavily male-based, sexist vernacular. *Kashimashii*, literally meaning noisy, is an “example that springs to mind when linguistic sex discrimination is discussed”<sup>145</sup> because the Chinese character for woman is repeated 3 times, thus contributing to a stereotype that congregating women cause a commotion. While examples of sexist language are abundant, for the purpose of brevity I present only a few here, referring specifically to ‘wife’ and ‘husband’: *okusan* (Mrs. Interior, referring to the designated place for women), *kanai* (house-insider), while *shujin* or *danna* refers to the male master.<sup>146</sup>

Confucianism and state ideology served to limit female sexuality, officials fearing liberalized sexual mores could be destructive to the moral fabric of society; but nationalism and imperialist designs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s also effectively entrenched women’s sexuality within the process of reproduction. Japan was forced into a corner: either submit to Western imperialism or compete against it. Japan chose to compete, and in order to do so, Sabine Fruhstuck argues that through the ‘colonization of sex and sexuality’, of both males (enlisted soldiers) and females (home-bound mothers and daughters) the individual became a microcosm of the social, the national and the imperial body; the uterus and womb

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<sup>144</sup> Miyako Inoue, “Gender, Language, and Modernity: Toward an Effective History of Japanese Women’s Language”, *American Ethnologist* Vol.29, No.2 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 395.

<sup>145</sup> Cherry, 26.

<sup>146</sup> Cherry, 67.



representing the most critical building block in the production of race and empire production.<sup>147</sup>

In the early twentieth century, sexologists and the subject of sex became a sensitive issue for social policy determiners, and the extent to which Japanese sexologists were able to disseminate useful and positive information was severely disabled. In the view of sex researchers, “the dissemination of sexual knowledge would help liberate the working class from its misery and women from their roles as “childbearing machines.”<sup>148</sup> However, any sexual content not related to the government’s policies vis-à-vis the propagation of sex as a vehicle through which to breed a healthy, homogenous race was ultimately subject to censorship. According to some Japanese scholars at the time, sexual desire was to be used as a tool for reproduction alone; anything else was to be regarded as a ‘sex crime’.<sup>149</sup>

Regulated prostitution has been a thorn in the side for many gender equality activists in Japan throughout the past century. To Japanese officials, a licensed area specifically for sexual vices served as a ‘breakwater’, protecting the ‘daughters of good families’ from rape and other sex crimes.<sup>150</sup> Concentrated areas of prostitution catered to the needs of soldiers, whose carnal desires were likely to play out in violent sex crimes involving local women and girls if not taken care of by means of a licensed sex worker. After Japan’s defeat, the impending American occupation of Japan prompted government officials to recruit women labeled as habitual prostitutes to serve the country, protecting Japanese people against the threat of ‘racial contamination’ by acting as a hygienic

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<sup>147</sup> Sabine Fruhstuck, “Colonizing sex: sexology and social control in modern Japan”, (Berkeley: University of California Press) 4.

<sup>148</sup> Fruhstuck, 14.

<sup>149</sup> Fruhstuck, 63.

<sup>150</sup> Garon. 100

barrier against American servicemen.<sup>151</sup> Sheldon Garon suggests that the regulation of prostitution “formed part of the national government’s well-conceived program of managing society so that men would postpone the decision to marry, young women would employ their sexuality in a socially efficient and orderly manner, and wives would endure their husband’s infidelities in the interests of family stability.”<sup>152</sup> This line of thinking created another double standard in which male sexuality was allowed to play out among the brothels, tolerated by officials, while women’s sexuality was again confined to the home. Further entrenching women’s roles as the cornerstone of the family, regulated prostitution acted as a buffer against what the state considered the potentially subversive sexuality of women. Restraining women’s physical desires for the prosperity of the family enabled the state to manage the economy, sexuality, and gender roles. Through the state’s management of prostitution, the “*ie* family system” was maintained while continuing to promote the unambiguous gender roles that allowed the nation to function efficiently.<sup>153</sup>

The 1960s ushered in a phase of rapid economic growth which corresponded with an increase of urban middle class housewives joining the labour force in order to support the new consumer lifestyles of the family, while “women who did not marry or who lost their husbands were considered deviant and labeled as social anomalies.”<sup>154</sup> In an interesting aside, a study of 16 industrialized countries encompassing several decades has shown that in Japan the average life expectancy of unmarried individuals is significantly less than that of married individuals, and it is conceivable that the marriage selection

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<sup>151</sup> Garon, 111.

<sup>152</sup> Garon, 111.

<sup>153</sup> Garon, 101.

<sup>154</sup> Mariko Asano Tamanoi, “Women’s Voices: Their Critique of the Anthropology of Japan”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol.19 (Annual Review, 1990) 20.

process plays a significant part in that glaring divergence.<sup>155</sup> Thus it would seem plausible that the practice of widespread comprehensive background checks of potential marriage partners to ‘weed out’ individuals with undesirable physical and mental personal characteristics would play a part in entrenching individuals (particularly women, with rigorous social standards applied to their sexuality and gender) in their socially prescribed roles because the narratives of marriage and nation building were in fact major determinants in a longer life expectancy. With prevalent social norms concerning belongingness, collectivism, conformism, commitment, consensus, dependency, status, and shame,<sup>156</sup> it is not difficult to understand why, at least through the 1980s, the greater part of Japanese men and women ultimately married and very few obtained divorce.<sup>157</sup>

If Neo-Confucianism, government policies, and language have formed rigid guidelines to determine women’s social roles, then in what ways are contemporary Japanese women transgressing social boundaries, perpetuating their status as the periphery? Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley in the introduction to *Bad Girls of Japan* suggest that certain themes of civil disobedience have appeared across time and historical spaces. The bad girls are those who are shockingly obvious, have a good financial income, behave extremely, act upon their sexual and consumer urges, chase their dreams and desires, and manipulate others.<sup>158</sup> The women who have reacted and acted against Japan’s male dominated cultural values have consequently become members of what this study labels the periphery, precisely because these women are labeled as bad,

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<sup>155</sup> Noreen Goldman, “The Perils of Single Life in Contemporary Japan”, *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Vol.55, No.1., (National Council on Family Relations, 1993) 191-204.

<sup>156</sup> Lebra, 1976

<sup>157</sup> Goldman, 191.

<sup>158</sup> Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, eds., introduction, *Bad Girls of Japan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 7-11.

transgressive, dangerous, immoral and so forth. It should be noted that although the omnipresent sexual segregation in Japan tends to be interpreted as regressive, women's command of the household realm is not insignificant, and to a certain extent may be able to counterbalance their low status in the public realm.<sup>159</sup> However, this thesis analyzes a number of films which portray the Japanese female as transgressing the social norm by ignoring socio-cultural expectations. I reveal that the characters are indeed part of the periphery and as such have been represented in various manners, the depiction of those characters both positive and negative.

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<sup>159</sup> Chizuko Ueno, "The Position of Japanese Women Reconsidered", *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol.28, No.4 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 76.

## Chapter 4: Film Analyses

### Comparison and Contrast: *Tampopo* and *Junk Food*

Having constructed a contextual background for the interpretation of the periphery, I now move forth into the analyses of film. I begin by examining two Japanese films, *Tampopo* (1985), and *Junk Food* (1997), which, though set apart by little more than a decade, are demonstrative of strikingly varied representations of the Japanese social margins. These films in both their form and content represent works of postmodern cinema. The former exhibits a decidedly positive tone in its depiction of the periphery while the latter displays a tone which is distinctly negative.

Juzo Itami was part of a group of modern Japanese directors who produced satirical cinematic works that seemed to observe Japan from the outside,<sup>160</sup> presenting in a sympathetic and humanistic fashion the experiences of some of Japan's socially marginalized groups. *Tampopo* is an optimistic, light-hearted example of one of Itami's films. The film's multiple narratives introduce an ensemble of mostly good-natured, but socially peripheral individuals. There are postmodernist aspects, recognized in both its form and content. Set in mid-1980s Japan, the main narrative follows a noodle cook, Tampopo (Miyamoto Nobuko), in her quest to create a perfect noodle dish in order to revive her failing business. Led by Goro (Yamazaki Tsutomu), an archetypical strong masculine character, Tampopo is aided by a group of individuals whose only motives are to help her become successful. Along the way the film weaves in separate, disjointed narratives depicting other marginal individuals and groups skilfully and seamlessly.

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<sup>160</sup> Zvika Serper, "Eroticism in Itami's 'The Funeral' and 'Tampopo': Juxtaposition and Symbolism" in *Cinema Journal* Vol. 42, No. 3 (Spring, 2003)

Itami's use of fragmented narratives, satire, parody, blending of high and low culture, and a touch of the surreal, establish *Tampopo* as a piece of postmodern cinema.

*Junk Food* director Masashi Yamamoto presents an uncommon and definitely peripheral view of contemporary Japan. In the film's extras, there is an interview with Yamamoto in which he describes the idea for the film originating from a desire to "show a day in the city...something like a diary". He further explains that everyone has a different perspective of the city, and the perspective in *Junk Food* is that of the outsider's. The film's structure gives us brief and unconnected glimpses of a number of peripheral characters. The fragmented, isolated narratives take the viewer on a one-day journey through the bowels of Tokyo. Along the way we witness morbid sex, misogyny, drug abuse, blackmail, extortion, tattoo artistry, domestic dispute, prostitution, murder, robbery, gang violence, and severe social alienation which blends together to create a virtual shopping list of a surreal dystopian environment. There are no resolutions in this film, only disillusionment. Both the form of this film - in its surreal tone, and disjointed narratives - and the content (as the aforementioned list demonstrates) enable us to categorize this film as postmodernist.

In *Tampopo* there are numerous instances where a blend of foreign images and culture are referenced to re-interpret and apply to a new contemporary global reality. The white-suited gangster in his fedora hat sips champagne and eats exotic fruits, Goro wears a cowboy hat and embodies a Clint Eastwood-esque stoic demeanour, businessmen dine in French restaurants, homeless people discuss the contexts in which French wines are produced, Japanese women learn techniques for eating noodles in a civilized Western manner, a Chinese girl sells dim sum on a train, and *Tampopo* dresses like a French film

star. *Junk Food* is also demonstrative of these blends of reality, the cross-cultural copies, the adoptive consumerist nature of the simulacra: images on TV of Indian music video, Japanese eating ‘ethnic foods’, advertisements for non-Japanese products, international hotels, a Chinese-American woman dancing with a Japanese man in a Mexican-themed bar, drinking European beer and playing fuse ball with Pakistani immigrants, Japanese thugs dressed in American gangster apparel, driving around in American cars, eating hamburgers in American-themed restaurants while talking about American actors and celebrities. It becomes readily apparent that the postmodern simulacrum influences the two filmmakers, contributing to a blend of images and culture within the two films, essentially calling into question what Japanese culture really is, or has become in this new era of culture swapping and mass media inundation.

*Tampopo* envelopes a postmodernist work of art: rejection of strict modernist form and content; pastiche; and parody. In terms of cinema, we witness the blend of an original genre - perhaps a western - as it becomes intertwined with the characteristics of a comedy, drama, or even a romance and morphs into a new identity of its own. *Tampopo* is an example of a film which embodies this multiple personality of film genre: the film exhibits multiple forms; the director Itami satirizes classic genres like the western and romance films. The blend of genres in *Tampopo* is prolific to the point that we are unable to categorize it specifically, and consequently the film reads as a satirical evaluation of Japanese society in the mid-1980s.

Marginalized individuals disassociate with social reality in terms of fictional interpretations of the world around them.<sup>161</sup> Some will turn to vices or objects, and as Hiroki Azuma posits, the *otaku* find meaning in devices like video games and animation,

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<sup>161</sup> Azuma, 26.

which produce alternate spheres of interaction in the social environment.<sup>162</sup> The characters in both *Tampopo* and *Junk Food* are representative of this idea in their formations of substitute realities. A quick catalogue of characters from these two films reveals marginal individuals contorting and manipulating through the use of devices and behaviour, their own realities in attempts to relate to the all-encompassing social forces around them. We can list from *Junk Food* peripheral social dissidents who use various devices, instruments and social conduct to form for themselves understandable external realities: the sex-crazed drug addict (need there be more said in terms of disassociation from reality?), the Chinese-American prostitute, the determined and felony-prone Pakistani immigrant, the street thugs, hooligans, and low-riding, low-level gangsters (their own realities heavily shaped by impersonations of American gang sub-culture, itself a form of simulacra – the identities, attitudes, and styles of these Japanese criminals very much influenced and intertwined with those of American street gangs to the point where the original identity is lost; expressing blended realities when they choose these contrived cultural images, acting out fantasies, re-interpreting their marginal realities); and a disenfranchised social dropout, riding alone in trains, his heart failing from an overdose of sleeping pills, his slumped-over corpse ignored and mistaken for a slumbering and socially withdrawn outcast.

In *Tampopo* there are individuals that express their defiance of the centrality of social narratives through their own external reality-making devices and behaviour. In their defiance of the centre, and in their own formations of identity, the characters observed in Itami's film are represented as functioning quite satisfactorily outside the social boundaries, whereas in *Junk Food* the general depiction of these peripheral

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<sup>162</sup> Azuma, 26.



individuals is decidedly bleak and depressing. Goro, the sympathetic truck driver unable to maintain a solid family life finds solace in his profession, physically and emotionally separating himself from the centralizing tendencies of society. Tampopo, the youngish, widowed noodle cook and her feeble and repeatedly bullied son are both marginal figures, alienated because of the absence of a stabilizing patriarchal figure. Tampopo's steadfast resolve is the tool by which she creates her own external reality. Betrayed by capitalism, the homeless vagabonds who befriend and assist Tampopo and Goro live happily in their collective disenfranchised identity, content with their existence on the outside, living "deeply", as one of them describes their way of living.

In both films, there are specific marginal characters that defy and contest the grand narratives of society, pushing the limits of social acceptability and conformity. The difference however, is the resultant representation of each of these peripheral characters. In *Tampopo* the social dissident is a rank and file male company employee who accompanies other high-ranking company executives to a lunch in a high-class French restaurant. The character equivalent in *Junk Food* is a female company employee, similarly taking part in a meal with other company executives. Both characters attempt to be socially complicit in that they are employed in large companies, participating in a Japanese socio-cultural narrative of capitalist productivity. It is in the different ways they contest the centre that the differing representations occur. While in the French restaurant the male character, through his overt demonstration of his knowledge of France and French cuisine, subverts his hierarchically superior executives by ordering a completely different meal than the rest of the men, who had one by one requested exactly the same meal because of their inability to understand French. His

superiors, showing obvious discomfort and displeasure appear humiliated and humbled, while the man basks in the glow of his satisfaction at having his peripheral identity temporarily supplant that of the centre, creating a positive representation by Itami of both the character's identity and his action. The female character from *Junk Food* however, is portrayed negatively. Irritable from a drug withdrawal, she shouts accusations at another employee, causing a disturbance inside the restaurant, creating a sense of animosity against her. As director Yamamoto explains in an interview, this peripheral character demonstrates a "reverse situation, looking at normal society with poison inside".

Yamamoto's use of milk as a symbolic agent of purity operates as a cinematic tool to establish emotional and physical stability within their identities as marginal characters. The first three Japanese characters we are introduced to in *Junk Food* are all seen drinking milk. In terms of the periphery, these characters are firmly entrenched in their identities as social outsiders. The first is a blind, aged woman who lives alone, practices Buddhism, and eats white bread and drinks milk; the milk sustaining her physically and emotionally as a stabilizing device in her marginal existence. The second is a professional businesswoman, punctual and productive in her company. Her status as an outsider lies in her addiction to drugs. Milk to her is an object of wholesomeness, helping to psychologically ground her identity as a functional member of Japanese society in spite of being dangerously addicted to narcotics. The third Japanese character we meet is seen drinking milk, perhaps to reaffirm herself of her normalcy in her Japanese identity, after an argument with her Pakistani boyfriend whom she refuses to marry, suggesting that he "go back to [his] shitty little country" because she doesn't "want any trouble", signifying that she isn't comfortable with her association as a

foreigner's girlfriend, and the associated stigma with dating outside the ethnic boundary. In these individuals we witness dualities of character. On one hand they are very much associated with some of the margins of society - alienated, drug addicted, abnormal – while on the other hand, through the use of stabilizing devices, they seek comfort and security in their marginalized lives, but eventually unable to feel comfortable with, or simply unacceptable to society's standards. Director Yamamoto portrays these characters in a negative manner, but enables the characters to display what amounts to certain forms of comfort, creating intriguing dichotomies of personality, both subversive and complicit.

In what resembles a microcosm of a cultural characteristic of Japanese society, the female drug addict, Miyuki (Ijima Miyuki) exhibits two distinct faces: her private face— her socially subversive real intentions, and her public face- the stoic reserved image of emotional stability, or in Japanese, this dichotomy is expressed as *honne/tatemaie*. She embodies this notion as she displays a dual personality. In the open, she is a dependable company employee. In private, amphetamines propel her through the day, leading her to sado-masochistic sexual liaisons, even dabbling in violent, drug-induced relationships of dominance and control, resulting in murder. To her weak, domesticated husband who cooks 'ethnic food', and who remains oblivious to his wife's seriously harmful habits, she is hard-working and loyal. Further along still the same line of thinking that has Miyuki, in her duality of character as a metaphor for Japanese society, she also represents innocent, child-like, naïve purity, which is obviously in sharp contrast to her detached, debauched lifestyle.

The music of both *Tampopo* and *Junk Food* plays a large part in determining the positive or negative tone of the respective films, as well as adding another element to the

form and content of these postmodern films. In *Junk Food* the background theme music is made predominantly by DJ Krush, a Japanese hip-hop artist. Hip-hop and rap are well-documented<sup>163</sup> musical forms of social subversion that grew out of African-American resentment of the dominance of capitalist, white, protestant, American culture. From the black ghettos and slums emerged feelings of disassociation and disenfranchisement in mainstream American culture and a new socially subversive device was born in the form of gangster rap and hip-hop. Director Yamamoto's utilization of hip-hop (with its heavy percussion, record sampling and scratching, beat boxing, and eclectic blends, hip hop produces a quintessential postmodern musical tune), and its inherent subversive nature is thus analogous to the film's postmodern theme. Interestingly, and not unrelated, hip hop music and hip hop culture has moved beyond the margins of society to become accepted as a mainstream form of music and cultural expression,<sup>164</sup> thus entreating the question, when does the periphery cease to be peripheral and move towards a dominant centrality of identity? While this query is pertinent to this examination and one which calls into question the changing dimensions of the periphery, it does require its own separate study.

Director Itami uses classical music to score *Tampopo* throughout the film. Upon hearing classical music in a film's score, one's first impression of that film might be that of a sense of the dramatic, perhaps even images of an epic tale of heroism, pitting forces of good and evil against one another. The use of classical music in *Tampopo* performs two functions: Firstly, it establishes an element of the comedic, the music helping to satirize the content. For example, in the film's second scene, when Goro is seen guiding

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<sup>163</sup> Craig S. Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998)

<sup>164</sup> Derek Conrad Murray, "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle", in *Art Journal* Vol. 63, No.2 (Summer, 2004) pp 4-19

his truck through the driving rain, the classical music contributes to the feeling of a hero beginning an epic journey. Of course we soon realize that this is not a narrative of epic proportions – the pursuit of producing the perfect bowl of noodles far from being a dramatic and ambitious story. Secondly, the classical music adds a component of positivity in comparison with the rough, industrial, and somewhat draconian hip-hop beats in *Junk Food*. To be sure, *Junk Food*'s overall look and feel establishes a tone of contemporary and bleak; some years beyond Japan's post-economic bubble blow-out. Hyper-consumers, drug addicts, gangs, crime, and prostitution are all present in this postmodern incessantly dissolute surreal landscape of concrete, cars, skyscrapers and bars.

The mise-en-scene of *Tampopo* is, in comparison to *Junk Food*, unquestionably dissimilar. Whereas the majority of the narrative in *Junk Food* takes place in darkly-lit corridors, alleys and cars, hostile streets, and grimy, nefarious locales, *Tampopo* beckons the viewer to interpret its bright surroundings as places of contentment, pleasure and warmth. Itami seems to purposely create distinct environments of light and dark to parody the classic literary binary of good and evil. It is in the 'dark' scenes where we witness bullying, noodle house showdowns parodying gunfights from old western films, con artists doing their work, the homeless in their drab milieu, and a pesky old lady crushing and bruising the fruit in an up-scale market. But for the majority of *Tampopo*, the settings are glowing and sunny, warm and comfortable: the noodle tastings in friendly shops; Goro's training of Tampopo outside in the sun; the luminous hotel room where a white-suited gangster indulges in culinary eroticism with his mistress dressed in opulent white; on the sandy shore of a beach where the gangster's young mistress emerges from

the water, shimmering brilliantly in her wet swimsuit; in a sunlit park where a young boy enjoys a forbidden delicacy and a mother breastfeeds her small infant. The characters are well-dressed and jovial; the restaurants, hotels, movie theatres, beaches and parks places of security and happiness. Yamamoto on the other hand, chronicles in *Junk Food* the misadventures of his gloomy characters using settings which display a specific feeling of negativity and despair: the drug addicted woman crawls across a cold, hard, broken-tiled floor, and later, in a narrow toilet stall has an irrational fit of amphetamine rage, taking off her “dirtied panties”, disgusted by her own depravity; in the second-rate gangsters’ dress in American-styled gang wear, occupying dark, bloodied backstreets and dimly-lit bars; dingy tattoo parlours, and shady backrooms intended for the carnal pleasures of the socially immoral. The mise-en-scene of both films establishes entirely diverse realms of postmodern Japanese society – one celebrating a peripheral existence, and the other lamenting it.

Juzo Itami and Masashi Yamamoto both use their films, *Tampopo* and *Junk Food* respectively, to make statements about the social periphery in Japan. Both films in their form and content are demonstrative of postmodernist visual art. The difference however, is that these two Japanese filmmakers envision the periphery as two very divergent entities: Itami represents a positive periphery, while Yamamoto displays negative marginal individuals. This variance is demonstrated in the films’ settings, characters, music, lighting, dialogues, and outcomes. The result is a contrast of two postmodern films that emphasize and highlight similar social outcasts but suggest two very different futures.

## Negative Representations

### *Visitor Q*

Miike Takashi is not a mainstream film director in the sense that he makes violent, grotesque and edgy Japanese films that include images of incest, prostitution, bullying, drug abuse, rape, murder, and necrophilia. All that can be found in just one of his films: *Bijita Q (Visitor Q, 2001)*. Shot on digital video, this film gives off a hand-held, home-made vibe that adds a modicum of reality to an otherwise bizarre portrayal of a dysfunctional contemporary Japanese family. Excessive immorality permeates the plot, but an open-minded viewer peering past the initial shock of shattered taboos is likely to detect Miike's mocking consideration of social ills, both subtle and overt in its appearance.

Miike presents an overwhelmingly negative view of the margins; the characters' actions go far beyond what passes for 'normal' and 'acceptable' behaviour in Japanese society. *Bijita Q* provides dark comedic touches, comments on the absurdity of reality TV culture and the breakdown of the family unit, while the film's resolution is somehow strangely heartfelt and encouraging. Miike provides the narrative with such outrageous content that it is almost as though the viewer becomes de-sensitized to it. As postmodern subjects, we have become detached from the outcome of events as witnessed in the media-centric digital climate, that do not influence us directly, effectively creating people who are content to observe others' bizarre activities, knowing that we ourselves are far removed from it. *Bijita Q* seems to be Miike's contemplation of that theme.

The quintessential postmodernist film director, Takashii Miike is adept at making both a light-hearted comedy like *Zebaman (2004)*, as well as an ultra-violent gangster

narrative like *Ichi the Killer* (2001). Although one might be able to categorize his films as a comedy, drama, or horror (he has experimented with almost every film genre possible), he defies the constructed boundaries of film genres, often integrating elements of several in one film. His films are ground-breaking and controversial, often pushing the limits of acceptability, and usually portray characters outside of social boundaries. His directing style incorporates zealous use of surreal, over-the-top, grotesque and uneasy images and typically taboo themes. *Bijita Q* doesn't stray from this model.

Postmodernism is a practical theory to use in examining *Bijita Q*. But of course, labeling postmodernism as a theory is to do a disservice to one of its fundamental notions, the end of the grand narratives of history and the dissolution of the essentialisms of the Modern age. Moving past modernism ideally advanced scholars beyond labels and so-called grand narratives. However, if one were to isolate and define a key theoretical standpoint of postmodernism, one might suggest that there are no longer any strict boundaries. The lines between reality and imagination, serious and satirical, are often blurred. Postmodern productions are genre-defying; pigeon-holing directors and films as one category or another fails to account for genre-manipulators like Miike. As well, strict categorization inhibits creativity.

Kiyoshi Yamazaki (Ken'ichi Endo) is a desperate and pitiful television reporter intent on filming a sensational documentary that examines the unpromising future of Japanese youth. His visionary work brings him into contact with an underage prostitute and violent delinquents. Out of nowhere one day, Visitor Q (Kazushi Watanabe) appears, to literally and figuratively knock some sense into the members of the dysfunctional Yamazaki family, which includes Kiyoshi's abused, heroin addicted wife, Keiko



(Shungiku Uchida), his bullied and abusive son, Takuya (Jun Muto), and his runaway prostitute daughter, Asako (credited only as Fujiko). Although the Yamazaki family needs little help to bring about its own demise, the visitor slowly facilitates in ruining their already thoroughly impaired family. Yet somehow, demolition is exactly what the Yamazaki family needs in order to repair their broken bonds.

*Bijita Q* opens with a question appearing in text running down the screen: “Have you ever done it with your dad”? As a teenage girl undresses in what appears to be a ‘love hotel’ (convenient, anonymous, inexpensive, short-term, themed hotels ubiquitous in Japan) - the handheld camera jerky in its movement, providing a first person point of view - she asks her guilt-ridden father-client, “You want to know the truth about teenagers? They tell the future of Japan, that hopeless future”. Indeed, if the gravity of their morally reprehensible liaison fails to dissuade neither daughter nor father enough to prevent it, then Japan’s future, or the film’s plot, does seem suddenly hopeless. Money appears to drive Asako Yamazaki, but still leaves her wanting for more: Sitting on a toilet in a later scene, she counts her money, and then inexplicably tosses it aside. For Kiyoshi, his motive is to satisfy his uncontrollable libido, which, as we discover later, is also aroused by the spectacle of violence and corpses. Telling both himself and her that what they are doing is wrong, they nevertheless proceed to have sex. After a very brief time, and short of the required fee for her services, Kiyoshi tells his daughter he will pay the rest to her mother, while also suggesting she should not tell anyone. An indication of Miike’s tongue in cheek dialogue, Kiyoshi’s final words for his daughter indicate his lingering concern for her future well-being as he recommends Asako to do her homework in her spare time: Empty rhetoric from a depraved father.

Another text screen appears, saying, “Have you ever been hit on the head?” Kiyoshi waits in a train station, curiously observing, perhaps even jealously, a happy family, while a man behind Kiyoshi smokes a cigarette, looks at Kiyoshi, picks up a rock, and smashes Kiyoshi on the back of his head. Thus *Bijita Q* takes its viewers, its voyeurs, on a jolting ride into the private lives of one bizarre family. Which begs the question at the root of this film, do we really need to know all the details of every ‘real’ character we see on TV? How far does the spectacle of reality and the voyeurism need to go? This is a satirical film that questions how sensible it is to peer closely into other people’s lives.

Visitor Q is a voyeur, just as we are, witnessing the absurdity of the Yamazaki family. Some of the film’s scenes are shot through doorways, or through ripped rice paper screens, adding to the experience. After smashing a rock over Kiyoshi’s head for a second time, Q turns to face the camera and in a self-referential moment, gazes at us, clearly emblematic of the double voyeurism taking place. We get the feeling that for Miike, this film is fun in its boundary-bending and its experimental feeling. In an interview with Patrick Macias, author of *Tokyo Scope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion*, Miike explains that he doesn’t “have the common sense to acknowledge genres. Genres are for people who have to promote or critique films...To me, genre doesn’t impose any meaning. I just want experiment and create.”<sup>165</sup>

“Have you ever hit your mother?” This is the text that next appears on the screen. Keiko Yamazaki, bruised hands shakily putting together a puzzle and seated in a room replete with broken glass cupboards, and torn paper screens, retreats into a defensive

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<sup>165</sup> Patrick Macias, *Tokyo Scope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion*. (San Francisco: Cadence Books, 2001) 221.

position as her son Takuya storms into the room, whipping her across her back with one of his numerous torture implements that he keeps in a closet in his room, where he also spends time curled up in the foetal position, most likely recoiling in horror at the thought of the incessant bullying he is a victim of. His aggression toward his mother then is his outlet for the suffering he faces everyday at the hands of the school thugs, who are intent on fleecing him for all his money. Bullied youths at school is a common problem in Japan, but Takuya's battered psyche copes with the abuse in a very uncommon manner. More likely, a student will withdraw from school, or in worst-case scenarios one will commit suicide, as is witnessed in the depiction of a girl unable to cope with the anguish of being coerced into prostitution by a violent classmate in Iwai Shunji's, *Riri Shushu no Subete* (All About Lily Chou chou, 2001).

Keiko's own coping mechanism for her son's violent behaviour is drug abuse. Unfortunately, in order to support her heroin dependency she must resort to prostitution, not unlike her daughter. Keiko is meek woman, her body is covered in deep bruises, she walks with a permanent limp, and she lives in fear of her son's volatile behaviour. Her only recourse is to deaden the pain with the numbing effects of heroin, which she buys from drug dealers in a park near the love hotel where she turns tricks for half the price her daughter does. But Keiko isn't the only substance abuser in the family: Takuya resorts to inhaling kerosene fumes from his bedroom heater.

Without explanation, visitor Q joins the Yamazaki clan in their chaotic home. While Kiyoshi and Q eat dinner, Takuya continues to torment his mother, but only after he has received approval from his enigmatic house guest, who assures him that he doesn't mind. A TV provides commentary in the background about an off-colour remark made

by the Prime Minister. Kiyoshi is simply indifferent, seemingly desensitized to everything going on around him. Takuya retreats to his room, where he is confronted by Q a while later, who, after pulling Takuya into an embrace, harassing him affectionately, enquires about the girls' room. Takuya replies that it is his sister's, who has run away from home. Meanwhile, Kiyoshi is unable to sleep, and slips off to his car where he watches on videotape (a narrative within the narrative) the footage of himself interviewing some street punks about contemporary youth. They soon become belligerent. Grabbing his microphone and camera, they verbally harass and physically strip Kiyoshi, penetrating him with his own microphone. Watching this on tape, Kiyoshi cries.

The next morning, Takuya goes to school, while Q and Kiyoshi eat breakfast. On his way to work, Kiyoshi spots his son being beat up by some bullies and he begins filming, commenting that the footage is perfect. Again, Miike seems to be critiquing the social penchant for reality TV, and the subsequent numbing of reality. At a lunch meeting with Kiyoshi's co-worker-cum-mistress, his proposal of a new reality segment called "True Bullying" featuring a bullied son and his father is completely dismissed as unoriginal (Baudrillard probably wouldn't disagree, citing contemporary societies as having lost the real, endlessly parodying and copying). Kiyoshi counters, saying, "It doesn't get any realer than this!"

Meanwhile, at a love hotel, Keiko complies with the wishes of her customer, who wishes to be treated badly. To his utter enjoyment, she whips him repeatedly with his belt and then leaves the hotel in search of her next fix, which she promptly takes home and inserts into her bruised thigh. High on heroin, Keiko wanders down the hall of her

house, where puzzle pieces are strewn in a trail leading to her absent daughter's room, the pieces coming to an end encircling her daughter's picture on a table. On the bed, Q sits reading a book, and he invites her to join him in relaxation. Shot from a low camera angle, the picture of Asako on the table, and visitor Q embracing Keiko from behind are included in the film's frame. This low angle shot elicits in the viewer the feeling of being an observer at this strange and illicit event. Q quickly seduces Keiko, his fingers fondling her nipples from which a ridiculous amount of breast milk begins to spew forth, Keiko screaming in orgasmic ecstasy. From the hallway, Takuya listens to his mother's ecstatic moaning, and watches in shock as his mother's breast milk spouts out, covering the straw flooring.

At dinner, Kiyoshi, Q and Takuya are seated at the table while Keiko serves them. Kiyoshi exclaims that the food tastes sublime, unable to comprehend the reason for its amazing taste. By now, Takuya is incensed by Q's ongoing presence and retaliates by throwing a hot bowl of miso soup at Keiko's head. But Keiko is a changed woman, empowered by her re-discovered lactation ability. She warns him not to hurt her face, and hurtles a knife at Takuya which he ducks to avoid. Suddenly their house is lit up with fireworks thrown by Takuya's tormentors. Resembling a live war zone, Kiyoshi frantically records the spectacle, yelling, "They're here! This is my house! The big strong bullies are here! This is my wife, she's a lovely wife. Dinner was delicious! I don't know who this is (as he films Q)! My wife threw this knife. I don't know how I should feel, how should a father feel? But I know my family is being destroyed! What do you think? How do we judge this wonderful bullying?"

This particular scene speaks volumes to the themes at work in this film. Kiyoshi finally acknowledges the fact that his son is a victim of bullying, but yet he still aims to take advantage of the situation for his selfish plans to make a 'real' documentary. He realizes that his family is a mess, but is not even sure if he should feel bad or not. And he admits that he doesn't know who Q really is. This seems to be the turning point in the craziness that surrounds them, pushing them toward their breaking points.

The next day, as Takuya is beaten again by the bullies, Kiyoshi, Q, and the co-worker watch from inside a car, Kiyoshi detailing how he wants to film his own son being beaten. The co-worker however, has had enough, and leaves. Kiyoshi is furious at her refusal to participate and runs after her, his anger turning to hatred, which in turn leads to rape. Kiyoshi strangles her to death, and takes her home in the trunk of the car, while Q films everything. In the shed at the back of his house he marks where he will cut the corpse's limbs, and realizes that he has become aroused. In the house, Keiko has created a dress from garbage bags which she leaves open in the chest for her to lactate at will. Q watches her from under an umbrella, while outside Kiyoshi, who is now filming his own experience, turns to the camera and explains that while he watched his son get kicked and urinated on by the bullies, he realized that he what he felt wasn't anger or sadness, it was a sensation that was felt in his loins. Taking revenge on the dead co-worker for his past humiliation, Kiyoshi begins to have sex with the corpse, but rigor mortis sets in and Kiyoshi suddenly finds himself between a rock and a hard place. Keiko comes to his rescue, injecting him with a shot of heroin, which loosens his limbs, and Kiyoshi is freed from the corpse's deadly loin grasp. Kiyoshi exclaims that Keiko has never been so competent before, and Q responds, saying, "You just don't get it, do

you?” As they carry the body into the living room to prepare for lacerations, Takuya returns home, followed closely by his attackers. This is the moment Kiyoshi has been waiting for: Brandishing a blade and a screwdriver, he rushes to defend his son, throwing the screwdriver into one boy's head, and sawing through the skull of another. Keiko even takes part, throwing a knife into the head of one of the bullies, smiling as she watches him die.

Later, Takuya lies face down in his mother's breast milk in the kitchen, his emancipation from the bullies evidently transforming him, as he expresses to Q that from now on he is going to study, as the entrance examinations for high school begin next year. Takuya asks Q why he really came to their house. Answering his own question Takuya says, “You came to destroy it, didn't you?” But Q only smiles. Soon after, Q walks down a street, and is confronted by Asako, who solicits him for sex. Q answers her by picking up a rock and smiling at the camera. In the next scene, Asako has returned home, wearing a school uniform, her face badly bruised. She looks out the window to find her father suckling at her mother's breast, Keiko's bruises now mysteriously gone, perhaps signalling the restoration back to their own brand of normalcy. She smiles and joins her father, suckling her mother's other breast, their odd reunification now complete, thanks to the destructive influence of visitor Q.

Describing his film-making process, Miike claims that he doesn't set out to “create something that everyone is going to like.”<sup>166</sup> A shocking film like *Bijita Q* seems to validate that statement, as most likely anyone will find offense with any number of elements in this film. It's plausible that Miike might even liken this scattered, eccentric film to the randomness of TV. Referring to his time watching television, he remarks,

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<sup>166</sup> Macias, 216-17.

“There are so many things going on at once inside of that box, the only way to have control over it is to surf.”<sup>167</sup> Perhaps with *Bijita Q*, Miike exerts his directorial control by producing within the film a certain feeling of surfing: Similar to scouring the multitude of channels for the most entertaining, or perhaps the most shocking piece of ‘reality’ TV programming, *Bijita Q* surfs through themes and taboos, assaulting our senses from every moral direction. When the dust settles on this strange ride into depravity, what is left is a critique of ‘reality’ culture, and of the social issues (teenage prostitution fueled by over-worked men, bullying, and familial neglect) at hand in Japan.

### ***Harmful Insect***

*Gaichu* (Harmful Insect, 2001) is a stylistically unadorned and emotive film which makes use of the contrast between soft, serene silence and hard, aggressive music to represent the troubled emotions of a young girl straddling the precipice between an adolescent existence and a tentative, accelerated maturity. Forged and compounded several times over by the injurious advances of lubricious older males, the young female protagonist becomes increasingly jaded and emotionally desolate, the film’s narrative presenting a negative portrayal of her. One of the *Gaichu*’s major themes is social exclusion, and its destructive effects on the protagonist, an emotionally neglected junior high school girl. It is a film which observes the processes of social neglect in Japan, and the subsequent void into which a young girl falls. Director Akihiko Shiota’s film explores how exclusion can affect various marginal people in damaging ways. While the narrative might suggest that the ‘harmful insects’ are the depraved, predatory adults, the

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<sup>167</sup> Macias, 217.



films' title in fact refers to the characters who are outside of the norm, overlooked and ostracized, somehow different, and unacceptable. *Gaichu* depicts a number of social deviants: A husbandless, suicidal mother, a mentally-challenged homeless man, a juvenile delinquent scam artist, an elementary school teacher turned nuclear power plant worker, and most importantly, an emotionally confused teenager.

The film's main character is the middle school student, Sachiko Kita (Miyazaki Aoi). Mature beyond her years, Sachiko is a 13 year-old whose father has deserted his family, leaving Sachiko in the care of her mother. Depressed, and possessing very little desire to live, Toshiko Kita (Ryo) is incapable of performing her parental responsibilities and unable to offer Sachiko requisite guidance. Sachiko seeks out the male companionship that she has lost with her father, and this search leads her to both dangerous and comforting relationships with older men, or elder brother types. She skips school repeatedly, spending time reading letters from and writing letters to her grade six school teacher with whom she had an undefined, yet questionable relationship. Sachiko's family problems are often a topic of conversation among the other students at her school and the nature of her dubious relationship with her primary school teacher is widely-sSpeculated on among her classmates, effectively creating an insurmountable distance between Sachiko and her equals.

Director Shiota maximizes the subtly expressive body language and facial expressions of lead actor Miyazaki to infuse the film with a raw and sombre feeling, preferring to capitalize on her ability to captivate each scene, rather than using slick editing and an invasive soundtrack. The theme of exclusion and difference, represented by the individuals and groups in the film that either suffer and/or adapt to it, is dispensed

throughout *Gaichu*. Most apparent are the characters with whom Sachiko identifies with: The ginger-haired con artist who lives alone in a decrepit building, either selling or using drugs, drawing the life-threatening ire of gangsters, unable to receive treatment at a hospital after being badly beaten, presumably because he has no health insurance (a benefit of participation in majority society); and a mentally handicapped hobo partial to explosives. Difference is easily recognized in the two deaf women who communicate by sign language in the library where Sachiko writes a letter; and witnessed in the linguistic and cultural divergence by a family of second generation Japanese-Brazilians speaking Portuguese, dominating the background of the restaurant where Sachiko waits for Ogata (Tanabe Seiichi), her 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Exclusion is found more subtly in other scenes: Two teachers close the large iron gate of the school, locking out the truant Sachiko, who, from a far distance hears the sound of the school bell while reading the latest letter from Ogata; It is observed in the school choir festival, Sachiko playing the piano at the edge of the film's frame, while the rest of her class sings in unison, set far apart from the piano.

The ominous mood of the film and the dismal depiction of the film's main character is set off by the opening scene and contributed to through the use of tone-setting characters and images, as well as purposefully placed silence and sparingly used music. *Gaichu* begins soundlessly, pillow feathers falling like soft snow as Toshiko Kita pads across a hardwood floor, razor in hand, collapsing in a pathetic heap in the kitchen as she readies herself to draw the razor across her wrist. The impression one is left with is inevitably dispiriting. The narrative introduces Sachiko Kita as she sits across the table from her mother, whose wrist is bandaged. Unfortunately for Sachiko, her mother does little to offer positive reassurance or provide a steady, adult influence. Toshiko often

returns home drunk and depressed, pounding her fists into the floor. She drowns her sorrows at bars, where she meets misogynistic men, who take advantage of her fragile state of mind. She becomes involved with a man who increasingly takes on a role as a surrogate father, but Sachiko will have nothing to do with him. Toshiko is possibly the person least able to help Sachiko, oblivious to her truancy from school, and to her emotions. The two offer no conversation, Sachiko merely offering salutations as she leaves and returns home. Spending her days skipping school, she encounters lewd schoolboys and salacious adults. She dreams of dark nights without the moon and stars, surrounded by garbage, signalling a sub-conscious hopelessness and despair. An abrupt image of dark blue waves crashing thunderously on a shadowy shore further adds to the tone. The silent manner in which she spends her time prepares us for a lonely journey into her alienated environment.

Walking home one night after an entire day spent skipping school Sachiko is followed closely by an older man. His intentions are unknown, but the worse is expected. Further ominous indications of likely harm are represented by the dark, deserted streets down which she walks, as well as the street sign indicating 'caution!' that is strategically placed within the camera's frame. To her surprise and her rescue, a young man pointing a red laser pointer emerges from the darkness to thwart the older man's attempt at a likely assault. Sachiko glances at him quizzically, her expression suggesting both happiness and longing. They quickly become friends, and possibly lovers, although we are given no solid evidence, only hints. They form a close relationship, whittling away the time, both without parental/authoritative supervision or guidance, spiritually lost within the confines of an average industrial town. In one scene, Sachiko and Takao (Sawaki Tetsu)

are alone on top of a building, walking on thin metal rails, with a view of the sprawling freeway and industrial town below them. They bounce aimlessly from rail to rail, gazing down at the concrete jungle, uninterested in what continues on in an endless manner below, almost as though to express the pointlessness of the contemporary industrial complex. Both are unable or unwilling to connect with other people, the one exception being Kyuzo (Ishikawa Koji), a homeless, mentally-disturbed, man and therefore a part of the periphery. These three peripheral personalities form a camaraderie based on their common exclusion from the mainstream.

This small collection of social cast-offs find within their group identity a sense of belonging that they cannot find elsewhere. Not only are they socially marginal, but they are also physically marginal as well. Kyuzo, the vagabond, lives amongst the trash and decay of a deserted manufacturing center, while Takao and Sachiko find a quiet comfort along the river banks, fields, and rooftops, disconnected from school, parents and authority. The three are quiet in disposition, using few words, exacerbating their social exclusion through their silence. Sachiko's most expressive moments are not expressed through words, but rather through her actions: When a classmate that likes her asks about her past relationship with a teacher, she responds by dragging a desk across the classroom, creating a cacophony of clattering desks, the noise answering for her what she cannot put into words; alone in her room, she purposely tips a jar of marbles onto the floor, the loud noise the marbles make dropping to the floor an indication of the angst she feels but cannot express verbally. Similarly, we observe Kyuzo banging a metal drum, creating a deep echo across the deserted industrial junkyard, while Takao uses a red laser pointer to signal his presence, and offers candy to Sachiko as a physical gesture of his

fondness for her. Truly, Sachiko's most talkative moments are with Takao and Kyuzo, accentuating the comfort of inclusion within their group. In a similar vein to Iwai Shunji's film, *Swallowtail*, the social outcasts are seemingly most comfortable within their own clique of social cast-offs. In *Gaichu*, we observe Sachiko's most enjoyable and relaxed moments as those which are spent with her two outcast friends. Those moments include both subversive and criminal activities, including skipping school for days at a time and participating with Takao in scams to fleece unsuspecting people; with Kyuzo she playfully kicks a can in the street and firebombs her own house with Molotov cocktails produced by the gasoline siphoned from cars.

Sachiko moves listlessly through her days, desirous of companionship and a positive influence in her life. Her school mate, Natsuko (Yu Aoi) is the most sympathetic, 'normal' friend she has, and in spite of the rumours, negativity and doubt surrounding Sachiko's family and past, Natsuko graciously offers her support. Indeed, Natsuko is the lone ray of light in the darkness that is Sachiko's isolated life, which becomes even more lonely after Takao suddenly disappears, leaving only a bloodied weapon and the body of another man at his shanty apartment. His disappearance leaves Sachiko with little hope, and it is then that Natsuko prompts Sachiko to re-join school life, escorting, supporting and encouraging her along the way, even recommending her as the pianist to accompany their class choir. Natsuko eventually saves Sachiko from certain sexual violence, as Sachiko returns home from school one day to find her mother's new boyfriend waiting for her, duct tape in hand. Like a guardian angel, Natsuko arrives just in time to ward off the attacker, and upon Toshiko's return, implores her to do something for Sachiko. But all she does is crumble into a ball, shuddering and

weeping while Sachiko watches, realizing her mother's futility. In the following days, Natsuko continues to support Sachiko, but is unable to help her when the boy with whom a romantic relationship was developing asks Sachiko about the rumours of her and her sixth grade teacher. This final betrayal represents the turning point for Sachiko and for the film.

She sets off to find Kyuzo, the last remaining figure with whom she can relate. Together they experiment with frogs and fireworks, theft and explosives. At this point, loud background rock music, contributing a menacing tone, is added to the narrative, which had previously only been sporadically interrupted by the calm classical music which Sachiko played on the piano. The subsequent scenes of Natsuko at her club practice looking worried, of Takao's lifeless body lying in a heap in a junk yard, and of her and Kyuzo stealing gasoline, exploding frogs, and finally, destroying her own house are rounded out by the aggressive, ominous pitch of abrasive rock music, heavy on drums and guitar. The culmination of these ill-omened moments and crescendo of sound occurs when Sachiko and Kyuzo finally fling upon her own house the gasoline bombs which they methodically prepared. At first she revels in the splendour of the blaze and the satisfaction it brings her. But she quickly realizes her folly, and makes her escape, hitching a ride with a harmless truck driver who offers her an apple.

Hitchhiking her way north, all the while holding the apple, she arrives at her destination: A restaurant where she has made arrangements to meet Ogata. Waiting patiently for him to arrive she is confronted by a man she does not know, but who offers her a chance to make some easy money. She continues to wait for Ogata, but she does not know that he has been slowed up by a vehicle malfunction, and is desperately trying

to call her at the restaurant. As the camera pans over to the public phone inside the restaurant we see that a woman is having an emotional conversation, blocking the line of communication between Ogata and Sachiko. Panning back to the table, Sachiko and the man are now gone, only the apple remaining on the table, symbolizing her complete loss of innocence. Getting into the man's car and driving away, Sachiko notices Ogata hurriedly pull up to the restaurant. She turns her head and watches him, a forlorn look on her face, making no effort to stop the car, resigned to the fact that everyone who once cared for her have let her down.

Shiota utilizes (a lack of) sound and the unvoiced emotions of young actors to help construct a riveting portrayal of a depressed and ostracized adolescent in Japan. He depicts a confused girl who cannot find a comfortable social space. But Sachiko can hardly be blamed for her ambivalent composition, as she is a product of her environment and the negative influences around her. Nonetheless, she cannot adapt, and consequently falls outside of the idealized social space which she should inhabit. Shiota explores this theme of exclusion in *Gaichu*, ultimately leading to Sachiko's refusal to submit to the forces of social construct. As Shiota explains in an interview with Tom Mes of *MidnightEye.com*, there is,

A gap between the ones who can fit the rules of society and the ones who choose to stay outside these social rules...On the outside they look satisfied with their lives and the way things are going, because everything has been organized in every detail, but in their inner personality they can have some very violent aspects. There is an ambivalence between the two...<sup>168</sup>

Shiota expertly and objectively portrays the conflict of emotions between innocence and maturity in Sachiko's emotionally tortured character, and seems to blame

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<sup>168</sup> Akihiko Shiota, interview for *Midnight Eye: The Latest and Best in Japanese Cinema*, published November 21, 2001. [http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/akihiko\\_shiota.shtml](http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/akihiko_shiota.shtml), Accessed December 2, 2010.

the immoral, lecherous adults of the film for her fall from grace. The result is a volatile, dangerous, scarred and alienated young girl. Certainly Sachiko represents a burgeoning number of contemporary youth whose inability to conform to standardized Japanese society are viewed as deviant and harmful despite the fact that society's ills have had a hand in creating their confused peripheral identities.

## **Neutral Representations**

### ***All About Lily Chou-Chou***

With his 2001 film, *Riri Shoushou no Subete (All About Lily Chou-Chou)*, director Shunji Iwai depicts the melancholic lives of Japanese teens experiencing the growing pains of maturing within the damaging milieu of economic and family breakdown, peer pressure, bullying, and ostracism. The adult figures portrayed in *Riri* are ineffective as the voices of reason and authority, oblivious to the cruelty the teenagers face. In its aesthetic form, *Riri* is a postmodern film, utilizing flashbacks and flash-forwards, extending the disjointed plot over several years; and bright, vivid, sometimes jerky digital video camera shots that distort the perception of reality. But it is in the film's content where its most revealing postmodernist moments are found: The portrayal of Japan's troubled and alienated youths, the disheartened and emotionally stranded individuals unable or unwilling to find positive human connections. These nihilistic youth live and interact in the margins, are irreverent of age and authority, and cannot emotionally connect with friends or family. Their only solace is the faceless communication with internet chat room members who share a fascination and love for an ethereal, fictitious



pop music icon, Lily Chou-Chou, who is the embodiment of ‘ether’, a mystical energy force. The film’s overall impression is bleak and depressing in its articulation of familiar social crises that youth suffer through in contemporary Japan. Through Iwai’s illustration of the difficulties these emotionally isolated youths face, the film places its representation of them into categories of the commonplace, their severe teen angst a widespread product of the downfall of social stability and prosperity in Japan.

The film’s protagonist is Yuichi Hasumi (Ichihara Hayato), a quiet, stone-faced junior high school boy, a moderator for a website devoted to the enigmatic musician, Lily Chou-Chou. His life changes when he becomes a bullying victim at the hands of his former friend Shusuke Hoshino (Oshinari Shugo), an academic standout whose family’s business and parents’ relationship have dissolved, leaving him subconsciously scarred. The two boys meet in their first year of junior high school, where Hoshino reluctantly becomes class representative, much to the annoyance of his classmates, who believe unjustly, that Hoshino holds himself above everyone. Yuichi’s problems stem implicitly from the fissure caused by his parent’s divorce. Yuichi and Hoshino join the school’s kendo club, becoming friends after Yuichi spends the night at Hoshino’s house and introduces Yuichi to Lily’s music. The following summer, after stealing a large sum of money, Yuichi and Hoshino, along with some friends take a trip to Okinawa. Their otherwise enjoyable trip is punctuated by the near drowning death of Hoshino, and the bloody traffic accident they witness involving a laid-back hippie they had befriended. This experience seems to affect them profoundly, particularly Hoshino. Back in school after their trip, Hoshino assaults the class bully inside the classroom while other students watch, horrified by his aggressive and violent actions. Hoshino becomes the de facto

school bully, coercing others into acts of petty theft, prostitution and pimping, and even organizing the gang rape of popular girl. Meanwhile, Yuichi finds salvation in the moments spent listening to Lily's hypnotic music. He also finds empathy among the anonymous users of the message board he administers under his moniker *philia*. In particular, Yuichi makes a connection with a user named *blue cat*, who he agrees to meet at a Lily concert. When Yuichi discovers that *blue cat* is actually Hoshino, Yuichi's last semblance of hope disappears, and he murders Hoshino outside the concert venue.

The film is presented non-linearly, and begins by introducing Yuichi during his second year of junior high school, standing in the middle of vibrant-green rice field. The camera angle shows him alone, totally immersed in his own world, surrounded only by distant foothills, listening to the sorrowful melodies of Lily Chou-Chou, a sound reminiscent of Icelandic musician, Bjork, and Japanese singer-songwriter Ua. His chin is tucked into his neck, his earphones emitting Lily's ethereal music. The tapping sound of a keyboard is heard and text appears on the screen; Bulletin board system (BBS) users discuss the essence of Lily and the 'ether', which in its abstract tone is symbolic of human morality. One person writes, "The things you hold dear, friends, family, lovers, hurt you the most, you live with that, that's why we have ether, a place of eternal peace, that's the ether". The narrative continues in this way, interspersed throughout the film, providing a transition between the actual, painful, physical relationships and the illusory nature of communication between BBS users. Iwai also utilizes flashbacks to introduce scenes integral to the comprehension of the plot, but none are more important than the lengthy narrative which brings Yuichi and Hoshino together during their first year at junior high school because we witness their blossoming camaraderie. By using a

discontinuous timeline, Iwai is able to instill an omnipresent sense of disconnectedness, emphasizing not only the protagonist's anonymity and nihilism, but many of the other youths in film as well.

*Riri* is visually and aurally evocative of a music video, which stems from Iwai's use of digital video to shoot the film, as well as his background as a director of music videos and television programs.<sup>169</sup> The story of Lily Chou-Chou first began as an online novel in Japan, where readers were free to submit messages, which were ultimately incorporated into the film as messages on the fan site. The participatory nature of the film is congruent with Azuma's rendition of postmodernity in Japan, in which individuals are free to add their own preferred settings into a 'database', in this case, the film itself.

The camera swoops above the characters standing in the electric-green rice fields, and dives into close-range, observing the contemplative expressions of the troubled characters. Divided into three segments, the film's middle part is shot with a handheld video recorder, the sequences choppy and jerky, suggestive of a first-person experience. The music is hypnotic and surreal, sung by Salyu, a pop artist, and written by Kobayashi Takeshi, a song-writer that has collaborated with Iwai on other films, including *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996).

The youth depicted in *Riri* are outside the boundaries of parental and teacher control, and indeed beyond any urban areas - literally and figuratively on the periphery. Disconnected from authority, they steal from senior citizens, shoplift from stores and roam freely at night, lingering in the dark fields. It is in a scrap junkyard where they torment and scheme; a pivotal scene is filmed there, where Hoshino calls Yuichi out to

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<sup>169</sup> A Shunji Iwai Film: All About Lily Chou-Chou, "Staff", <http://www.lily-chou-chou.jp/world/htm/staff.html>, accessed December 14, 2010.

face his punishment, breaking Yuichi's treasured Lily CD, and subjecting him to physical abuse at the hands of his lackeys, forcing him to masturbate while they pelt him with rocks. During a flashback, they vacation in Okinawa, perhaps the epitome of the Japanese periphery, an area where residents are regarded as ethnically different, and where the local dialect is unrecognizable to mainland Japanese. And, as a man explains to the boys, "Okinawans say that man was made from woman's rib, so women here are very powerful".

The youth in *Riri* are very much peripheral, and the authoritarian figures remain ignorant to their problems. Yuichi's homeroom teacher is almost pathetic in her ignorance of the problems her students face, suggesting that Yuichi's poor marks are a result of trying too hard in his first year at junior high; When Kuno Yoko (played by Iwai favourite and *Swallowtail Butterfly*'s protagonist, Ito Ayumi) comes to school with her head shaved after she has been raped by Hoshino's gang, the teacher can only recommend that she wear a wig or a hat; And when a group of girls ostracize Kuno for her popularity with boys and her piano playing talent, the homeroom teacher consults with a student about the problem, unable to comprehend and solve the issue herself.

Iwai displays this lack of authoritarian control and adolescent rebellion both subtly and overtly in numerous instances: Yuichi's mother (a hairdresser) and a customer watch on TV the news about a young teenager who has hijacked a bus (referencing an actual event in 2000); Yuichi gets caught shoplifting a Lily CD, and a meeting is held with his homeroom teacher, his mother, and the gym teacher. At the school, the frame shows the homeroom teacher standing in the dark hallway, metaphorically in the dark as well, having no idea what her students are capable of, and having no control over them.

The gym teacher (typically the most authoritative force at Japanese schools) makes a half-hearted effort to reprimand Yuichi, saying, “You got caught shoplifting, didn’t you. Was it fun?” And Yuichi’s mother reacts by hitting him, yelling, “What the hell is wrong with you?” In another scene, Yuichi and his friends urinate off a bridge, where below, an older man looks up at them incredulously; After Hoshino humiliates the school bully, the homeroom teacher informs the class that the student won’t return to school. She walks around the silent classroom, while Hoshino grabs a drawn picture of her, on which he crosses out her face and scribbles across it, “Execution!”

Yuichi is portrayed differently from the other adolescents, perhaps representative of a group of contemporary teenagers with changing values that Iwai depicts as strange, increasingly violent and rebellious. Commenting on the bus hijacking, an adult remarks that “kids these days are very scary”. Taking home a poster of Lily from a record store, Yuichi’s friend pronounces his interest in the musician as “lame”. Yuichi’s homeroom teacher comments that he has “different tastes”, after he gets caught stealing a Lily CD, while the gym teacher attempts to console Yuichi’s mother by saying, “Kids these days have a lot of strange ideas”. In the Lily fan site that Yuichi operates, a visitor comments, “This sounds like a cult”, while another person says, “You’re all brainwashed”.

*Riri* illustrates the ways in which individuals are ostracized, and highlights as a direct consequence the emotional withdrawal, emblematic of contemporary Japanese youths. The processes of social isolation and the resultant consequences differ from various perspectives, but all are damaging to the individual. Yuichi, tormented because of his passivity, retreats into the cathartic melodies of Lily, and he is able to fully express his raw emotions with other Lily fanatics on the Internet message board. Hoshino, once a

victim of bullying, becomes the oppressor, and through his calculating acts of aggression he directs his anger, disappointment and sadness at his victims. Iwai introduces two other important characters so as to dramatize the emotional and mental damage produced by the similar acts of bullying and ostracizing. Hoshino coerces Tsuda Shiori (Aoi Yu of *Harmful Insect*) into ‘compensated dating’ (a social phenomenon in Japan called *enjokosai* whereby young girls meet with older men who pay for their meals, gifts, etc in return for dates and sexual favours) and she carries her burden silently, eventually committing suicide, unable to bear the shame and mental and emotional turmoil that comes with her rapid and coerced maturation. Kuno, raped by Hoshino’s gang after incurring the wrath of other girls in the class for being too popular and talented, is stoic in her response, shaving her own head to avoid the same fate as Tsuda, who was forced into prostitution.

Many of the characters share the same sense of being lost in a society which has become less secure, and they disassociate with the environment that seemingly has no positive future in store for them. They have no outlet for problems besides violence and/or emotional withdrawal, as witnessed by the actions of Hoshino and Yuichi respectively. They have a shared resentment of the social structures like school and its clubs that configure their regimented lives, as indicated by their boredom with school events, and in a scene where after a single, grueling kendo practice they consider quitting. They are disenchanted with the social narratives of harmony, respect for elders, and hard work that are at the core of Japanese society. Money is viewed as both worrying and oppressive, the acquisition of it a stressful burden, and the loss of it detrimental to individuals and families: Hoshino’s family is rumoured to have been broken apart by the

failure of the family business, and while discussing how they can raise enough money for a trip to Okinawa, they realize they can't ask their parents, and are stressed about needing money. They talk about getting jobs, but don't want to work hard. They discuss stealing, but can't accept the consequences if they are caught. One boy obsessively chants, "Money, money, money", as he paces frenetically. Symbolic of grief and suffering the pursuit of money causes, money is shown being destroyed or thrown away. While on a boat in Okinawa, Hoshino tosses into the air all the money they stole in order to realize their trip. One of the tour guides, shouts, "Don't throw garbage!" In another scene, Tsuda discards the money she earns from forced prostitution, stamping it into the dirt, crying exasperatingly.

Technology acts as a connecting device for the characters that cannot communicate with 'real' people. Again, this is similar to what Azuma identifies as the importance *otaku* place on alternate, fictitious realities so as to help them relate to 'real' people. The internet chat-room for example, provides the characters with an alternative voice through which they can communicate their true feelings that otherwise they wouldn't be able to in Japan's emotionally repressive cultural milieu. The portable Discman allows them the freedom to move but still be connected to the inner voice of their true feelings, allowing them to remain in marginal rural solo sites where they are able to explore their troubled feelings. For the unsettled youth, the only stabilizing voice of concern is the ethereal Lily, whose followers subscribe to the abstract idea of the 'ether', providing moral guidance in their otherwise nihilistic lives. As Yuichi expresses on his Lily fan site, "For me, only Lily is real". The youth portrayed are products of their

unstable environments in which economic certainty and family values have become empty rhetoric.

This film is very much a postmodernist portrayal of contemporary youth. *Riri*'s important scenes take place on the margins: The bullying of Yuichi in the junk yard, where they can escape all manifestations of control; In Okinawa, itself a marginal site in relation to Japan, where the discourse of difference results in a central/marginal dichotomy; in the rice fields where rural Japan is contrasted to the urban metropolis. Japan's social ills are exposed in the film: teenage crime, bullying, *enjokosai*, economic hardships, breakdown of families, divorce, conformity, and suicide. There is a surreal tone to the film, a kind of hyper-reality, as displayed by the digital camera work. Frequently blurry, disorienting shots make it seem as though we are observers at the scene. The internet chat site is ubiquitous throughout the film, as though it is an electronic display of reality. The representation of reality is difficult to follow: Different cameras represent different viewpoints, making it unclear which is the reality being presented. And *Riri* is a film of mixed genres: Coming-of-age/awakening/teen; thriller; drama; psychological; love story/quasi-documentary. The 'ether' is an example of the hyper-real: What is the ether? Is it some fantasy element that the fans of lily strive to see, or achieve? They desire it, talk about it, defend it, but can it be experienced?

The young, relatively inexperienced actors Iwai employs to portray these peripheral characters as part of everyday life in Japan do so in an unadorned, quotidian fashion, exhibiting a richness of character and a naturalness that provides *Riri* its unique and genuine ambiance. Their transgressions are part of the commonplace experiences of disenfranchised teens, a growing group of youths that commit terrible and violent acts.



The youths who suffer bullying, humiliation, ostracism, and peer pressure adapt to their hardships in different ways, emotionally withdrawing from their respective environments.

*Riri* is a film that examines the postmodern age where youths have become less connected to corporeal relationships, have become increasingly disconnected from their family and authoritarian figures, and find alternative ways - namely the anonymous communication of the Internet, and the soothing comfort found in popular music - in which to connect to others experiencing the universal aches of adolescence.

### ***Vibrator***

*Vibrator* (2003) is a road movie/love story adapted from the novel of the same name by female author Mari Akasaka, befitting a generation of increasingly independent and disenchanting Japanese. Director Ryuichi Hiroki (a former director of soft-pornography films) subtly critiques social narratives like consumerism and corporate allegiance, the film symbolizing a search for identity and connection in a society in which the stress of conformity has produced individuals that have developed damaging patterns of self-doubt and self-loathing, resulting in self-destructive physical acts, and the burden of emotional baggage that can plant seeds of doubt into any potential relationships. In spite of this dismal context, *Vibrator* is a touching film that delves into an impromptu liaison between two lonely outsiders with shadowy secrets, who have shunned majority society, chosen paths less traveled, struggling to find happiness and meaning in their marginal social spaces. Hiroki utilizes close-up shots of the two protagonists to emphasize their uncommon perspectives, while also using songs with lyrics of ambiguous meaning to infuse a sense of uncertainty. The two characters emotionally and sexually

embrace each other in their marginality, an important premise which underlies the film's theme of acceptance. While the film does not present the two characters in a negative light, it also does not however offer any solutions to their identity crises, and consequently reads as a neutral view of the periphery, the two characters having adapted to their marginality. Given the embittered social environment in which they exist, it is difficult to imagine that these two are the only people who are having difficulty adapting to the postmodern landscape.

When we first encounter Rei (Terajima Shinobu), she is entering a convenience store, bundled heavily, perhaps to keep out the cold Tokyo chills, or perhaps to ward off other people. Both are plausible, as she admits to being afraid of people she can't touch, or those who don't know how to touch. We quickly sense her dissatisfaction with social standards: Upon seeing advertisements and products for 'White day' (reserved annually on March 14<sup>th</sup> for males to present a tangible token of their affection to their female love interests), she mentally castigates people who are gullible enough to buy into this capitalist-inspired, consumer-driven, Valentine's Day spin-off. She admits to having created formidable self-defences, and indeed worries she might actually hurt someone if backed into a corner.

Rei is thirty-one, a freelance writer, bulimic, an alcoholic, and a single woman consumed and confused by her own complexes, as well as by the voices inside her head. As an unmarried woman in her thirties, she already represents a break in social convention. That her occupation does not confine her to a 9-5 working schedule further adds to her peripheral status. She is absorbed in herself, but perceptive of others, a steady stream of neuroses flowing through her brain, resulting in an occasional verbal outburst.

Rei meanders up each aisle of the store, wondering what people think of her. Is she a secretary looking for a snack after a late company party? Is she viewed as normal? Perhaps she just worries too much. She reminds herself that she is there to buy wine, becoming easily distracted by images and voices. We are privy to her inner thoughts, the film's narrative from her point of view. We hear her continual voice-over, the voices in her head, and we are also observers of the textual manifestation of her thoughts as well, sometimes appearing on screen, silent but powerful as a direct link to her inner thoughts. She informs us that she consumes alcohol to quiet the voices of others, and of those in her head. Leafing through magazines, she knows that eating disorders and alcoholism are widespread but those genuine social ills aren't discussed in magazines. She is able to relate to teen biker gangsters, and understands how girls addicted to amphetamines feel, but still, she wonders if she is alone.

Frustrated with pervasive, unrealistic, idealized images in the magazines, Rei questions why women are forced to worry about putting on weight, losing weight, feeling and looking tired, or having enough sex. She grumbles that men never bother worrying about such things. But she doesn't care. She is herself, and will likely never change, her personal time frame for emotional and physical change past due. Or is it? On cue, into the store materializes Takatoshi Okabe (Ohmori Nao), a twenty-eight year-old bleached-blond truck driver whom Rei thinks looks tasty enough to eat. They lock eyes briefly. Exuding a sly confidence, Okabe walks by Rei, brushing his hand against her bottom. Simultaneously her cell phone vibrates in her jacket pocket, his touch symbolizing a lifeline buzzing at her heart as well as providing the meaning of the film's title. Rei ignores the cell phone, completely absorbed in Okabe's presence. As she watches him

leave the store, her heart tells her that she wants to live, that she is still alive. Bravely, she follows him out of the store and into his truck, and the two of them embark on what are to be journeys of uninhibited, emotional and sexual connection.

Rei walks slowly and cautiously to the transport truck where he is sitting inside. Okabe beckons her in whilst a 1957 song by Pat Boone, “April Love” plays in the background. This song symbolizes the possibility of romance, but also the possibility that one’s love can slip away. Thus it contributes a tentative tone to the scene, which, along with other similar songs of ambiguous allusion on the film’s soundtrack, emits a neutralizing effect that runs throughout *Vibrator*. Inside Okabe’s truck, while sharing alcohol and snacks, the two get acquainted. A police officer who requests that Okabe park his loud truck elsewhere remarks, upon inspecting his driver’s license, that Okabe’s first name, Takatoshi, is an unusual name; perhaps subtle confirmation from an authoritative figure that he is indeed a socially peripheral person. This is the only time in the film when another character provides any dialogue outside of the two protagonists, further enhancing the theme of their omission from majority society.

Answering her question as to why he became a freelance truck driver, he explains to Rei that he never graduated from junior high school – the final stage of compulsory education in Japan - and that his experiences as a drug runner, as a bar manager, and as a pimp were not suited for him, quickly losing interest in those unconventional occupations. Truck driving allows him freedom, not tying him down to a company or a gang. Besides, he says, “you never know what is interesting until you try it”. To this, Rei suggests that he isn’t exactly normal, confirming his peripheral identity. The transient nature of his job allows him to meet different people. He can’t relate to lifetime

company employees – the so-called *salaryman* – because the only life they know is that of the company and the home.

Rei describes to Okabe that her eating disorder is a combination of bulimia and anorexia. For a job assignment, she explains that she once interviewed a young woman who introduced this condition to her. In justifying her actions, the young woman blamed a lack of self-confidence and excess stress as the reasons behind the development of her condition. Rei is empathetic, aware of social pressures and standards. Drinking heavily to help her sleep, she begins to gain weight. Ever aware of the omnipresent media images encouraging svelteness, she fears she will be insulted for putting on a few pounds, so she tries vomiting, which is physically straining at first, but she adapts to it, even looking forward to it, and eventually treats it as a hobby. Thus, she is able to gorge herself on anything she wants to eat, savouring the tastes, and enjoying how it makes her feel. But upon finishing, fearing that she will gain weight, she induces herself to vomit, afterwards feeling relieved that she will not gain weight. Okabe, listening sympathetically, does not take issue with her disorder, accepting her the way she is, but also observing that she is strange, after she admits that her dependence on alcohol is to quiet the voices in her head. Having expounded on her condition, she admits that she hasn't vomited since the day before, flashing a smile, feeling that her connection with Okabe has helped her feel secure.

Their physical intimacies inside the truck cabin are hurried and slightly awkward, reflecting the nature of their dalliance. But Rei learns that Okabe is sensitive and caring, and because of that she quickly falls for him, able to connect and share with him her personal hang-ups. When Okabe learns that Rei is a freelance writer, he remarks that she

is similar to him in that respect. In his recognition of their similarity and in her exuberant realization, as she yells out the window of the truck that, “with a travelling companion the world smiles upon you”, they find solace in each other’s companionship, knowing and accepting of their peripheral statuses. Despite Rei’s bulimia and alcoholism Okabe genuinely likes her, but she cannot grasp why. Her defence mechanisms and inner demons block any concrete and rational reasoning she might have.

*Vibrator* is punctuated by frequent shots of industrial cityscapes, highways, car lots with decrepit vehicles, power lines, empty fields and warehouses, and factories with billowing smokestacks, which all complement the atmosphere of bleak, decentred, post-economic boom, post-industrial Japan. The intimate and confined space of the truck and the expansive exterior beyond the cabin’s interior produces a symbolic dichotomy between their socially unconventional identities and the monotonous lifestyle of corporate cogs. But in spite of their self-isolation and occupational freedom, their lives both seem to be devoid of any deeper value, and they struggle to locate any profound meaning, a common theme found among many of the films in this study.

The causes of Rei’s emotional and mental incapacities are never fully explained, leaving open to interpretation the reasons for her fear of people and commitment, as well as her puzzling idiosyncrasies. At a rest stop, Rei wakes up beside Okabe, needing to exit the truck to go to the bathroom, but not wanting to separate from him. She flashes back to a time when during a telephone conversation she urinated into a cup in the kitchen because she did not want to hang up the phone to relieve herself in the bathroom. This time however, she does what is ‘normal’. Before climbing back into the truck though, she witnesses a Shinto festival nearby. Scores of candles burn and people pray.

It appears to be what is called a ‘*hi matsuri*’, or fire festival. This is a festival which takes place in the middle of January, where the action of burning candles functions as a form of prayer. In this case, people are praying for the start of a healthy year, whereby impurities will be cast off. This is a symbolic scene because Rei is ritually impure according to social conventions: No one in their right mind, anywhere, would urinate into a cup in the middle of a kitchen, let alone in Japan, where social conventions concerning purity and cleanliness are stringent and highly codified. She watches people at the festival from afar, spatially peripheral, as well as in her mentality and actions. But as she watches, she smiles widely, content in herself. The song that plays in conjunction with this scene is sorrowful and melancholic, including lyrics that exclaim, ‘dreams never come true, time never passes’. As she urinates on a barren river bed the next morning, Okabe throws an empty can at her. Both her carefree act of urination and his act of littering are signs of impurity, indicating that they are both transgressors of the cultural narrative of Shinto, but transcendent in their attitudes, both smiling and happy to be outsiders together.

As the truck rolls through a small town, the camera pans out to follow it as a contemplative, cynical bluesy song (*Shin, Shin, Shin* by *Happii Endo*) is laid over the scene. Director Hiroki’s decision to use this song provides further insight to the theme of disillusionment and loss of purity, as the lyrics indicate:

A yellowed, timeworn soul falls onto the dirty snow,  
 (古ぼけ黄ばんだ心は汚れた雪のうえに落ちて)  
 Mixing with the trash on the side of the road. (道の端の塵芥と混じる)  
 Everything becomes offensive, even one’s self melts in the dirty snow  
 (何もかも嫌になり自分さえ汚れた雪のなかに消えて)  
 I wouldn’t care if I also melted into this mire. (泥寧こなればいい)

As the song finishes, the truck reaches its destination. Interestingly, and not unconnected to the periphery, the truck passes by Russian signs (the camera slows right down to almost slow-motion to clearly display the foreign language printed on the large signs) on the way the truck's drop-off point, an industrial port where, as Okabe informs Rei, Russian ships are docked. Neither Rei nor Okabe make any remarks about this somewhat anomalous characteristic, perhaps indicating their ability to be accepting and adaptive to situations outside of the norm.

Okabe introduces Rei to the CB (citizens band) radio in his truck; his method of conversing with other truckers. Okabe allows Rei to try her hand at communicating with other drivers on the CB, and in doing so she inadvertently begins to hear the voices in her head again. In a flashback to a time as a young student, the voices tell her to see a shrink, but her mother tells her to stay home, fearful of people gossiping, and she suggests moving to the country. Back in reality, Rei panics, and tells Okabe she is going to be sick. They pull into a gas station, where she has a breakdown, vomiting and crying on the cold pavement, as Okabe stands by her helplessly, unable to comprehend her actions, but comforts her nonetheless. Later, in a hotel bathtub, as he gently pours water over her, she tries to drown herself, unable to understand why he likes her; asking him to hit her; the unexplained and deep psychological problems stemming from her experiences as a young girl, affecting her current temperament. The next day in a café, Okabe confirms that he likes her the way she is, accepting of her issues. An awkward silence now dissolved, they bond further as he allows her to drive the truck.

Dropping Rei off back at the store in Tokyo where they first met, she exits Okabe's truck, and they exchange a long, desperate glance. There is no dialogue to



suggest why they don't remain with each other; no smiles to indicate a future relationship. They only seem confused. Rei watches Okabe drive away, wearing a forlorn expression, the textual thoughts appearing again on screen, indicating that she only wanted to eat him, but in the end, she was the one that was consumed. In spite of that, she felt that she had turned into something good. For now, the voices inside her head are gone, but she supposes they will return, inevitable cynics planting seeds of doubt in her turbulent mind. Rei connected with Okabe for a brief dalliance, satisfying her immediate desire, but unable to procure anything more substantial from their time together. In a similar fashion, the postmodern consumer satisfies one's immediate commercial desires, but is often left feeling devoid of any deeper meaning in one's consumptive act. *Vibrator* finishes with Rei where she was in the beginning – alone, buying wine and vodka, but perhaps slightly less cynical, although still very lost as she stands at the cashier, the expression on her face changing from a vacant, far off look to tranquil and finally to sadness.

Rei and Okabe are both socially marginal characters, and in their commonality of social divergence, they are able to find comfort and acceptance. As the film is seen from Rei's perspective, the emphasis is placed on her feelings and experience, which could be argued are more marginal and transgressive than Okabe's, given her identity as an unmarried Japanese female. Rei's spontaneous adventure has seemingly helped her to accept and feel comfortable with who she is, something she questioned at the outset of the film. Yet, as he drives off into the darkness, Okabe's compassionate caress is just a memory, and Rei is forced to return to her unaccompanied life of cynicism and confusion, forever adapting to the consumer-fed desires of post-industrial Japan.

## Positive Representations

### *A Snake of June*

*Rokugatsu no Hebi* (A Snake of June, 2002) is a visual and conceptual oddity exploring themes of sexual repression and alienation during Japan's sodden monsoon season. A slight twist on film noir, director Tsukamoto Shinya (*Tetsuo, Tokyo Fist*) utilizes a blue-tinted monochrome hue, a voyeuristic lens, and incessant rainfall to infuse this avant-garde film with a steamy sensuality, the female lead shown either sweaty or repeatedly soaked throughout. Thematically, *Rokugatsu no Hebi* exhibits a postmodern mood as an alienated Japanese female takes control of her sexuality, challenging social narratives of female sexual conformity.

The film is set in a contemporary Japanese urban environment, several shots of a drenched cityscape confirming its grey metropolitan character. The young female protagonist, Rinko (Kurosawa Asuka) is a demure, sympathetic counsellor working at a suicide prevention hotline, married to the much older Shigehiko (Kohtari Yuji), a short, balding workaholic businessperson with an obsession for cleanliness. Their congenial yet emotionally and physically distant marriage is interrupted one day by the sudden appearance of several sets of illicitly taken photographs of Rinko, seen masturbating as well as browsing vibrators on the Internet. Along with the set of pictures, a cell phone is also included, through which the cancer-inflicted stalker Iguchi (played by producer, director, writer, and actor Tsukamoto Shinya) contacts Rinko, coercing her to act out her sexual fantasies in public, which she reluctantly agrees to, fearful of Iguchi revealing to Shigehiko her sexual secret. *Hebi's* narrative is one of surreal and dangerous erotic

exploration, but the film's final note of contented resolution in which Rinko and Shigehiko overcome their alienation to each other offers a positive representation of the periphery.

The erotic, personal tone of *Rokugatsu no hebi* is set during the opening scene, in which a photographer is seen taking close-up pictures of a naked woman, foreshadowing the film's voyeuristic theme. The photographer declares, "a big flash with a big is camera is what gets women in the mood". Next we are introduced to the female protagonist, Rinko, talking supportively to a caller who feels he may want to kill himself. Rinko is filmed from close range, providing an intimate view of her and her surroundings. Indeed, this is par for the course in *Snake*, as Tsukamoto seeks to create a voyeuristic experience. The film is shot in black and blue, in what Tsukamoto describes in the DVD's extras as a wanting to give the film a "wet feeling". Tsukamoto has certainly achieved that goal. Throughout the film, rain permeates almost every image, the blue hue helping to fulfill the desired damp ambiance. Indeed, June is the month of monsoonal rains in Japan.

Both Rinko and Shigehiko face varying degrees of alienation. In the context of Japanese society, people who are unable to connect to one another within their own in-group are thus unable to feel completely comfortable in outside society. Japanese society has a strong emphasis of the inclusionary and exclusionary. The character of Rinko is severely isolated from her husband. They eat and sleep separately, and cannot agree on something as simple as having a pet. The age difference between them creates a father-daughter dynamic and perhaps leads to the situation in which they are both unaware of how one another feels or thinks: Shigehiko is preoccupied with his own bodily

excretions, fastidious in his desire to rid the drains of any lingering stray hairs, and taking pills to mask the smell of his own feces. Rinko cannot understand why their relationship is distant, even suspecting her husband of being adulterous, as we see her snooping through her husband's suit jackets in an effort to uncover the reason for the physical and emotional distance between them.

Shigehiko is alienated because of his inability to show emotion or concern for his ailing, hospitalized mother, whom Rinko checks on regularly. She apologizes, and blames a promotion at work for his absence. It is here that we can perhaps observe a critique of the excessive work and loyalty to one's company in Japan and its unfavourable effects on familial relationships. It is through the failure of this significant relationship that it is possible to draw parallels to his emotional incapacity with Rinko. Their home meanwhile does not lend itself to a traditional Japanese aesthetic with its concrete, high walls and an absence of *tatami* mats. They are almost strangers to one another, peripheral in their own relationship. Within Japanese society, the family is at the core of the in-group, but for Rinko and Shigehiko there is very little emotional support at home nor in the extended family.

Structurally, the film is divided into three sections, demarcated at points in the film by the usage of the symbols for female and male, and indicating a narrative emphasis on the respective characters in the film. The third section combines the two marks, the narrative conjoining the female and male leads. In the first segment Tsukamoto introduces Rinko. The camera lurks behind her, eavesdropping on a conversation between her and a troubled caller. The development of her character begins here, as we observe the soothing, kindly words of advice she gives to the caller. Rinko's advice to

the suicidal caller establishes personal desire and the power to express one's self as one of the film's major themes: "Once you find what you really want to do, you'll be OK...I know what you mean, I really do...Go for it...Nobody can stop you". We soon realize however, that Rinko's advice to the caller is somewhat hypocritical. Rinko is in fact sexually and emotionally repressed with her husband, sacrificing her emotional and physical self for the benefit of a harmonious relationship.

On a crowded subway on the way home from work, Rinko slaps a man standing directly in front of her, presumably because he has molested her, a common occurrence on crowded commuter trains in Japan. Her steadfast denial of the man's intrusive action indicates her strong character and confirms early on in the film's narrative her refusal to assume the role of the stereotypical submissive Japanese female. Returning home, Rinko finds her husband, Shigehiko painstakingly scrubbing the kitchen sink. Rinko asks him if he has eaten already, announcing that she has only bought food for herself. This one scene alone bears witness the uncommon (in the Japanese case) dynamics of their relationship: she is not a stay-at-home wife; she has not prepared a meal for her husband; and he is taking on a domestic role, traditionally reserved for the wife in Japanese society.

Unsurprisingly, Rinko succumbs to her own constrained desires, exploring her sexuality on her own terms. If she is frustrated and saddened with her marriage, she doesn't let it show, appearing to function normally outside of her private life, concerned with the image she presents to the public. The exploration of her sexuality is a closely held secret, something she cannot reveal to her husband, fearful of humiliation and shame. Rinko's alternate reality is expressed through masturbation, and role play in

which she applies make-up and dresses in a tight micro-mini skirt - although the viewer is unaware of this alter ego until she is confronted by photographic evidence sent to her via the mail in an envelope entitled “a secret from your husband”.

Included in the package is a cell phone and some photographs. In the pictures the stalker has sent to Rinko, we witness an unfamiliar characteristic of her sterile, reserved persona. The first set of pictures reveals Rinko sexually frustrated and masturbating. Seen in the second set of pictures cutting the length of an already short skirt, and applying a deep hue of red lipstick to her eroticized lips, we become aware of an alter-ego Rinko seeking a temporary escape from the sexual repression she is faced with at home.

Examining the pictures Rinko becomes increasingly agitated, realizing that someone must have been spying on her. Suddenly, the cell phone rings, and she answers it, wanting to get to the bottom of this perplexing turn of events. It is the voice of the caller to the suicide hotline. In a raspy, creepy tone, he gives her some of her own advice, imploring her to do what she really wants, to find something to live for. He explains that he only wants to help her, and not - as is inevitably suspected from such a situation - have sex with her. In spite of his putative concern for Rinko, the stalker threatens to send the negatives to her husband if she doesn't fulfill his demands. He urges Rinko to wear her short skirt, and to walk around in public. He is aware that what he requires of her could damage her image within her community, so he tells her to bring the skirt to change into at a place of his choosing, so that the “neighbours don't see”. At first she refuses, but the stalker fulfills his threat, sending more photos to her husband of Rinko masturbating. Rinko, however, intercepts this package, and the cell phone rings

again, the omnipresent stalker again demanding her to lose her inhibitions in order to free her inner-self. This time, she does what he asks. She goes to great lengths to hide this information from her husband, complying with the demands of her stalker, which become increasingly daring as the blackmail experience moves forth.

Played convincingly by Tsukamoto, Iguchi functions as a catalyst for Rinko, and later for her husband, to metamorphose into the identity she secretly covets. Rinko's repression is obvious to Iguchi, and as the voice of transgression he is persuasive in convincing Rinko not to worry about how people will react to her because, as he instructs her, "you should show them who you are". Wearing the tight black skirt, Rinko reluctantly emerges from the narrow toilet stall of a train station where Iguchi has directed her to, and obeying Iguchi's orders by way of an earpiece, she embarks on a mission to buy a vibrator.

Tsukamoto uses the background characters' negative gazes at Rinko to instil the viewer with the sense that Rinko is somehow abnormal, a threat to majority society through her explicit exploration of her sexuality. Slinking through the department store in her short skirt, she is aware of the glares from conservatively dressed women; Rinko can feel the cold glares of the people she passes by, her brazen sexuality on display. Her bold, sultry appearance causes women to stare at her in disbelief, while the men ogle her. This is Rinko's first experience as an outsider, as someone who has crossed the line of acceptance, as a woman confident enough in her feminine sexuality to disturb the prescribed social imbalance between male dominance and the desired female propriety. The peoples' gazes confirm this, enunciating distinct displeasure with Rinko's act of social transgression.

The jumpy camera work adds to the scene a further feeling of being the voyeur at this socially transgressive episode. But she perseveres with her mission, her stoicism propelling her forward. We catch glimpses of negativity directed at Rinko in the passersby in the street as they stare at her exposed skin and sultry appearance. A suicidal boy whose life Rinko had saved through her consolation and support, recognizes Rinko during her public self- exploration in her ultra-short skirt and dark glasses, and he appears to have a disappointed look in his eyes. The shopkeeper who sells her some phallic vegetables looks at her in disbelief and disapproval. Three men inside a sex shop where she must go to buy a vibrator as per the stalker's demands, glare at her, threatened by her presence inside a traditionally male-dominated space, insecure by her facade of sexual confidence. Rinko's initial inhibition, developed over a lifetime of repression and through an emotionally and physically distant marital relationship, prohibits her from publicly expressing herself in the same manner as in her private life. But we realize that the uncomfortable process Iguchi puts her through is really a process of enforced maturation, from repressed sexual reserve to liberated sensual self. Back in the bathroom stall, Iguchi requires of Rinko further participation in this emancipating episode. He tells her to insert the vibrator and walk through the streets. Rinko is adamant in her refusal, but he admonishes her for being a hypocrite, advising people to do what is best for them, but unable to do what she desires for herself. Iguchi incites her only to do what she wants, urging her to break out of her shell, like an endogenous blossoming bud in the sodden, muggy atmosphere.

Tsukamoto's voyeuristic slant allows us to observe Rinko's explicit public sexuality as well as her private expression of sensuality, filming Rinko from a high angle



in the shower, directing our attention to her nape - a classic depiction of Japanese female eroticism. Circles are used as a theme throughout the movie, because it represents a kind of voyeurism, being that we see various things through the opening of a circular frame. Tsukamoto comments that, “through a round hole, Shigehiko sees water, a copulating couple, and death. You see those kind of natural things”. There are two scenes from *Snake* where Rinko’s neck is exposed, inviting our gaze. Both scenes take place when Rinko is showering, but are quite dissimilar in their portrayal of her sexuality. In the first instance, Rinko is seen hurriedly showering after a shift at work. Her movements are quick, decisive, and sterile; her hands darting around her neck, indicating a cleansing action. On the second occasion (a point in the narrative after she has taken her liberated sexuality to the public sphere) we observe Rinko slowly and deliberately caressing her nape – a confirmation of her new-found sexual liberty and of the courage to explore it.

While Shigehiko is forcefully awakened through a surreal experience, resembling more of a dream than reality (he is beaten by phallic and robotic-like tentacles attached to Iguchi’s waist), to realize his cool degree of separation from his caring wife is detrimental both physically and emotionally, it is Rinko’s eventual acceptance of her sexually-charged self in which we find the most positive and overt representation of a marginal character. Overcoming a lifetime of strict social dictates and moral codes, Rinko is finally released from her lonely existence as a neglected wife. We begin to see the changes almost immediately after her harrowing display of public sexuality. Returning home from her transformational experience, she showers in a slow, methodical, almost erotic way, in contrast to a previous scene in which we observe her quickly showering after a day at work, almost sterile in her approach. With her newly-

found blossoming self-awareness, she turns the tables on Iguchi and demands of him something in return. Flashbacks and flash forwards are laced into the narrative, giving us three different perspectives (Rinko, Shigehiko and Iguchi) as well as providing ambiguity and suspense. We are not quite sure what she demands of Iguchi as the narrative eases out of her perspective and turns to Shigehiko's point of view as he spies on Rinko in an effort to discover her secret.

From Shigehiko's perspective we witness him being drugged by Iguchi, and in a bizarre, surreal scene he wakes up to find himself tied up, a conical, phallic contraption attached to his head, and forced to watch, alongside numerous other men in suits, a snuff-like situation in which a young man and woman are trapped inside a small tank, filling rapidly with water. The narrative jumps across time and space as next we see him confronted by two police officers as he waits for Rinko outside the apartment, hoping to follow her, the voyeur theme taking a criminal twist. Interestingly, the officers are presented as abrasive harassers, perhaps a sardonic nod to the authoritarian nature of Japanese society. Somehow, Shigehiko escapes, and in another jump cut the future, he stealthily follows Rinko to the subway station washroom, where she emerges again in a short black skirt, a sleeveless shirt, face heavily made-up, and the original dark sunglasses now absent. Stunned by her appearance, Shigehiko realizes he is witnessing Rinko in full embrace of her sexuality. Rinko now strides confidently through the same department store where she once felt ashamed, stopping to bend over and browse at merchandise, lavishing in the attention. The jerky hand-held camera shot follows her through the store, seeing as Shigehiko would see, the lens following as he would. Out in the watery street, she ducks down an alley, vibrator and Rinko both turned on. She

glances in the direction of the vegetable seller, this time self-assured, the seller shocked. She continues on down the street, stopping in a deserted area. There she begins masturbating, while a car pulls up, Iguchi inside, snapping pictures of her as she sheds her clothes, masturbating in the rain. Shigehiko has followed her there, and seeing her, he also begins to masturbate. Rinko, Shigehiko, and the scene climax, Rinko fully undressed, a look of complete satisfaction upon her face, content in her new sexualized identity. We now realize Rinko's demand upon Iguchi: She orders him to take the pictures in hopes of eliciting a sexual desire within her husband.

With Rinko's pent-up sensuality now unconstrained, and Shigehiko now cognizant of her new sexual identity, their relationship enters uncharted territory where they dine at home together, smiling, cheerful, and content in each other's company. Finally, mutually desirous of each other, the film draws to a close as they embrace in sexual union, Rinko's released repression the concluding indication by Tsukamoto of a positive representation of her marginality.

### ***Kamikaze Girls***

Through an assault on traditional filmic genres and conventional stylistics that combines both postmodern content and form, and owing to a slate of highly saturated hues, comedic, playful and occasionally animated tones, *Shimotsuma Monogatari* (*Kamikaze Girls* 2004) offers a positive representation of two alienated high school girls forging their own isolated paths to happiness. Enforced by the vivid and colourful imagery, the playful and poppy soundtrack, the not-so-subtle critiques of contemporary Japanese society, and the ridiculous portrayal of the films 'normal people', Director

Nakashima Tetsuya blatantly satirizes pervasive Japanese consumerism and fashion by employing short, flamboyant jump-cut editing to intermingle various styles and genres, providing the film with aspects of parody and pastiche, two of the more easily recognized hallmarks of postmodernist cinema. The protagonists endure their social exclusion contentedly, resulting in director Nakashima offering moviegoers a sympathetic and encouraging depiction of two outsiders who take charge of their marginal identities, and develop into strong, courageous, self-satisfied individuals.

Momoko (Fukada Kyoko) is the 17 year old daughter of an adulterous mother and a useless father, who lives her life in a dreamlike state. In her fantasies she frequently floats away to a happy, isolated world, the camera following her as she literally drifts away into her own dream space. She subscribes to the hedonistic ideals and lifestyles of 18<sup>th</sup> century French aristocrats who, during France's decadent rococo era, wore frilly lace dresses, frolicked endlessly, and took shaded strolls through the countryside. Momoko's reality however, is mired in the backwater town of Shimotsuma (the origin of the film's Japanese title), removed from the metropolis of Tokyo, where the boutique, "Baby The Stars Shine Bright" (an actual retail outlet), provides the frilly dresses and embroidered bonnets that defines the Lolita style - common among the sub-culture fashion enthusiasts in Tokyo's Harajuku district.

Momoko and her good-for-nothing, ex-yakuza father live in the rural town of Shimotsuma with her mysterious, dragonfly-catching, eye-patch wearing grandmother. Rice fields, cabbage patches, cow dung and tracksuit-wearing hicks are the norm in this countryside town. She is surrounded by irritating and completely crazy (in her opinion) townsfolk who model their Jusco (a ubiquitous Japanese supermarket chain) garments as

if they are actors advertising products: side lighting, camera flashes and script suddenly invade the screen, as though the film has become a TV commercial for the latest styles and sales at Jusco.

The narrative begins with Momoko frantically racing on her grandmothers' scooter to aid her friend. Accidentally colliding with a farmer's truck, she is flung high into the air, her life flashing before her eyes. Assuming her own death is imminent, she recounts the salient details of her life until that moment, director Nakashima exploiting a rapid rewind technique to allow the narrative to describe the events leading to her conception. As the film's narrator, she describes the ridiculous chance encounter between her mother (a hostess with a weak stomach) and father (a low-ranking gangster without the testicular fortitude to succeed as a cold-blooded killer); she details her subsequent birth; her mother's adulterous relationship with the gynaecologist who delivered Momoko; her parents' divorce (the 6 year old version of Momoko tells her mother to embrace her happiness by getting breast implants, receiving beauty treatments and by entering a beauty pageant because, she explains to her bewildered mother, "it's fun"); she describes her father's expulsion from the mob for drawing the ire of large corporations by being overly successful selling cheap, brand name knock-offs, combining Versace and Universal Studios to create a "double-brand" that the track-suit wearing 'Yanki's' (a Japanese subculture of delinquents, both female and male, who are characterized by pompadours, shaved eyebrows and embroidered leather jackets) consume with vigour; and finally her and her father's reluctant escape to Shimotsuma.

Had Momoko been born in the rococo era, she could have led an idyllic life. But she wasn't, and thus she finds happiness as the only child of a broken marriage, dressing

in the style, and acting out in character, of self-indulgent French aristocrats in a bygone era. In an effort to fund her expensive Lolita fashion taste, Momoko serves a series of elaborate lies to her father (she admits her soul is rotten, caring only about her own happiness). Tapping her father's financial resources to the limit, Momoko is forced to take steps to fund her frilly habits, advertising her father's homemade ersatz goods in a magazine. Enter Ichiko (Anna Tsuchiya): a 17 year old Yanki girl with the writing skill of a 10 year old, and the garbled linguistic utterances of an undereducated delinquent with a desire for faux designer goods. She responds to Momoko's advertisement, and comes spitting and cursing into Momoko's life. The two form an unlikely pair, at polar opposites of the feminine spectrum. Ichiko is an androgynous, head-butting all-girl gang member, while Momoko aspires to a delicate femininity, eschewing sports, disgusted by tough girls and fueled by sweets, repulsed by other girls who have experienced both the sweet and sour of life.

Their friendship is tenuous and their time spent together in French-themed restaurants and pachinko parlours (Japan's version of slot machines) is tiresome and cantankerous, their distaste of each other's hobbies and styles equal in its robustness. Punctuated by animated background stories, (at one point Momoko turns to the camera, breaking through the fourth-wall in a self-reflexive moment, and announces an interlude "to keep you kids from getting bored", director Nakashima seemingly poking fun at a needy MTV generation that requires constant visual stimulus) the film embarks on short stories within the main narrative about a mythical girl gang leader, and about Ichiko's troubled childhood. Through this mini-narrative we discover that Ichiko was cruelly ridiculed and ostracized during a younger period. In contrast, Momoko's own route to

marginalization was in part a product of a dysfunctional family, as well as her own disinterest in anything beyond her own environment.

Their lifestyles and interests are strikingly dissimilar, and through different processes they arrive at a common marginal identity. Momoko's mantra gives us a clue to her thinking process: Justifying herself to a group of other high students during a daydream, she exclaims in a somewhat existentialist tone, "we are born alone, we live alone, and we die alone!" Her tone takes a decidedly nihilistic twist, denouncing the grand narratives of life and society, further explaining her own ideology, "I don't care about other people, I don't need friend or lovers, they are just meaningless words just like 'janitor' and 'president'". Momoko defines her external position in society, unequivocally confirming her own isolation, aware of her outsider status, taking pride in it, and enmeshing herself within it. Momoko curbs conformity, an indifferent and ultimately neglected individual who embraces selfishness, but who is nonetheless content with her identity. It is her character that offers a positive image of the periphery.

Ichiko's character also provides the film with another positive element. Through flashbacks we become aware of her ostracism within the mainstream via the bullying and teasing she bore through middle school, ridiculed for being shy and obtuse. Ichiko's personal redemption comes during an emotional breakdown, when riding her bicycle and sobbing, she is confronted by an all-girl gang leader who instructs her to only cry when alone, so as to disguise her weaknesses. Ichiko takes the advice to heart, accepting it as a core value to guide her identity. The prideful acceptance of her peripheral position emerges from this chance encounter, her personality morphing into a strong, head-butting all-girl scooter gang member. Ichiko buzzes confidently through the rural roads of

Shimotsuma on her modified scooter, flying the gangs' flags, clothed in the omnipresent Jusco tracksuits that Momoko finds stylistically appalling.

Increasingly, Ichiko spends more time with Momoko, recognizing and admiring in her a strength of character beyond the ultra-feminine exterior. Ichiko literally drags Momoko along with her to a pachinko parlour, where they win enough money to enable Ichiko to pay for the services of a legendary embroiderer who can stitch into Ichiko's gang jacket a tributary message for the gang's retiring leader. Momoko becomes a reluctant participant in Ichiko's search in Tokyo for the embroiderer, but welcomes the opportunity to visit her favourite Lolita boutique, "Baby, The Stars Shine Bright", where she finally meets its' clothing designer. After leading Momoko on a fruitless quest (at one point Ichiko deserts Momoko suddenly to chase after and spy on famous film critic, the late Mizuno Haruo (played by himself), a deliberate and playful self-reflexive ploy by Nakashima to acknowledge the film's fictionality), Ichiko decides to entrust Momoko with the responsibility to stitch the message into her jacket .

Surprised by Ichiko's acceptance to allow her to stitch the jacket, Momoko works tirelessly for days to complete the embroidery. Ichiko is impressed by Momoko's handiwork, and Momoko admits to herself that she felt like crying when she saw how happy Ichiko was upon seeing the jacket. This change brings forth in Momoko a complicated feeling that she cannot suppress. It is the feeling of confusion, no longer being able to understand what makes her happy. Is happiness found in wearing clothes, or is it found in the ability to make other people happy with her exceptional sewing skills, Momoko wonders. To add to her confusion, the boutique designer requests her embroidery services to help fix a batch of dresses that arrived at the shop without their



frills. But Momoko simply loves wearing the clothing, and had never imagined working as an embroiderer. Faced with a dilemma, Momoko calls Ichiko, telling her she wants to see her, and Ichiko, surprised at Momoko's sudden sensitivity, skips a gang meeting to be with Momoko.

Ichiko advises Momoko to take the job embroidering dresses at her favourite shop, and Momoko listens. But when Ichiko is issued a challenge by her scooter gang, Momoko contemplates forgoing her dress-embroidering deadline to help her. In a conversation with the dress designer, Momoko apologizes for not being able to complete her job by the deadline. The designer asks her if she likes embroidering clothing and she answers that she does. The designer then tells Momoko that he too used to have a love of design and embroidery, but because of his obsession with his work, he lost all his friends and became a loner. In what amounts to a critique of the Japanese proclivity for favouring work over personal relationships, to the detriment of family and friends, he tells Momoko to help Ichiko, who has been summoned by the gang members to be "challenged".

The non-linear nature of the narrative thus brings forth the film's climax, merging with the film's beginning, when Momoko is seen hitting a truck, flying high into the air. But instead of dying, she lands in the trucks' soft cargo of cabbage, and continues on her way to try to save Ichiko from a certain beating at the hands of the irritated girl gang members. Arriving on the scene, she unceremoniously crashes her scooter, the gang barely acknowledging her. Meanwhile, upset with her dissension, the gang surrounds Ichiko. In what amounts to a miniature model of Japanese society, with the gang representing 'majority society' and Ichiko as the ostracized 'other', the scene and the

dialogue symbolize the non-conformist characteristic of the periphery. Scrutinized by the gang members for associating with the too-feminine Momoko, Ichiko responds by questioning why two rival girl gangs merged, “getting bigger and pushing people around”. “Orders from above”, the girl gangs’ delinquent leader replies. “Things have changed, small gangs just don’t cut it”. Ichiko is indignant, responding angrily, “society chucked us out. Common sense and decency - all that junk. Didn’t we want to escape from that? But now boss makes demands, and you follow along, no different from the world we left behind, just like outside society”. Ichiko likens the group of outcasts to sheep, blindly following the leader, while praising Momoko as one who “follows her own rules”.

With the gang’s fury boiling over, Ichiko challenges the new leader to a fight. After gaining the upper hand, Ichiko is attacked by the whole gang. But when Ichiko is hit on her face, blood splatters across Momoko’s white lace dress, and she unleashes her own brand of anger. Grabbing a baseball bat, she begins swinging frantically, attempting to ward off Ichiko’s attackers, bringing the bat to rest between the leader’s legs. Momoko averts any further physical harm to her and Ichiko by telling the gang an elaborate lie about the mysterious origins of their untraceable, and unseen former leader, who disappeared many years before after she assassinated a misogynistic yakuza boss. As the founding leader was nothing more than a mythical narrative, the girl gang must accept Momoko’s declaration that she is the daughter of the founder. Having defeated the gang, which serves as a metaphor for majority society, Ichiko and Momoko are thus able to safely leave, their victory representative of their own personal successes as exemptions from society’s grand narratives.

Momoko is content to dismiss the prevailing social structures of Japanese society: cooperation, groupism, conformism, labor. Instead, she espouses individualism and independence. Ichiko also exists outside normal boundaries as a member of an all girl scooter gang. Ichiko's gang doesn't subscribe to majority society's larger narratives, instead preferring their own requirements for gang participation, like an absence of hierarchy, ability to fight and ride, and an emphasis on not being "loose". These notions, marginal in terms of values that majority society does not keep, are similar to the smaller narratives that Azuma Hiroki identifies in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*.

Imitation is a key theme in *Shimotsuma*, and indeed a defining part of postmodern film. Pastiche and parody are both forms of imitation, the former being almost non-judgmental in its mirroring of films or culture, while the latter often takes a humorous or critical approach to representations. The film is acts as a pastiche of Japanese popular culture eccentricities: unique fashions, pachinko parlours, motorcycle gangs, yakuza, snack bars, themed restaurants, animation, the rural/urban dichotomy, TV talk shows, flashy advertising. Nakashima parodies excessive consumerism, archetypical social cliques, social ills like bullying, reality TV, and the obsession with observing people. This is demonstrated by the scene in which Ichiko watches a famous critic through a shop window, watching him as he buys his dinner and asks to have it heated. Momoko then admonishes Ichiko for wasting her time, and somehow it feels as though Nakashima is critiquing contemporary Japanese society for wasting *its* time.

*Shimotsuma* incorporates a distinct contrast into its narrative. Momoko's aristocratic, refined and frilly tastes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French, and Ichiko's vulgar, contemporary working-class mentality serves as the backbone of the conflict that

resonates between the two incompatible styles, creating a high/low class distinction characteristic of a postmodernist piece. Yet they find commonalities in their marginal status, evidenced in their refusal to toe the social line in order to suit the conventions of majority society. Similar to many contemporary adolescents, Momoko and Ichiko feel as though they are alone in the world. They are both lonely individuals: Ichiko, despite belonging to a girl gang, finds comfort riding alone, while Momoko's own hobbies do not endure her to any friends. But together, within the limits of their individual personas, they find a common ground – the recognition that they need not be lonely in their individuality, that it is possible to find acceptance among the margins, and as Momoko's grandmother suggests, they will follow their own paths and discover their own niches. It is from that recognition that the film's positive representation springs forth.

### ***Swallowtail Butterfly***

In the first scene of Iwai Shunji's 1996 film *Suwaroteiru (Swallowtail Butterfly)*, a whimpering group of Chinese immigrants gather around the corpse of a murdered prostitute inside a darkly-lit morgue, while two irate Japanese police officers question them about the woman's identity. Iwai shoots the scene (and throughout the film's entirety) with a handheld digital video camera. The angles and shots are erratic and jumpy, the mourning women placing burning cigarettes upright in a bowl of rice, representing a transgression of traditional Japanese funeral rituals. The sheet covering the body is accidentally torn away, and the deceased woman's Japanese-born Chinese daughter stares expressionless at her mother's dead-white face, and denies her filial connection when an officer asks if the woman is her mother. This scene accomplishes

two things: First, it embodies the film's postmodernist aesthetics and content, illustrating the foreigner as the strange, transgressive 'other', and the Japanese officials as representatives of the unsympathetic and oppressive State. Secondly, it also produces *Suwaroteiru*'s central theme, that is, the ambiguity and development of identity, the protagonist eventually evolving metaphorically from a caterpillar into a butterfly. This heavily saturated and suggestive film portrays a de-centered view of the geographic and cultural periphery, the characters representing an acceptance of their identities.

*Suwaroteiru* opens with a montage, which effectively introduces the setting and tone. An overhead view of an industrial cityscape is shown in black and white, while English text scrolls over the footage. "Once upon a time", a female's English narration begins, describing the city, 'Yen Town'; a fictional dystopian Japanese city, where immigrants from all over went to earn as much of the almighty Yen possible before going back to their mother countries. But the Japanese hated that name and derogatorily referred to the 'yen thieves' as 'Yen Towns'. Yen Town's success relies on the immigrant labour force, but yet they are not conceded the corresponding privileges. They live on the city's margins, a multicultural community, surviving any way they can; criminally, collectively, and courageously. They are caught in social and economic limbo, unable to earn enough to return home rich, and ethnically and culturally restricted from joining Japan's majority society.

The main object of the film's gaze is a nameless, orphaned young girl (Ito Ayumi) who is passed from one person to another - a burden - nobody willing to help her, until a Chinese prostitute named Glico (Japanese pop star Chara) takes her under her wing, giving her a name, Ageha, and introducing her to a mixed group of foreigners who

salvage junk on the outskirts of the city. Ageha is welcomed into the fold, helping salvage saleable rubbish by day, and serving drinks to thirsty foreigners at night. Tension is introduced into the narrative when, on a visit to Glico (aptly named after the candy which Japanese businessmen grow up sucking on), a Japanese gangster attempts to rape Ageha, and an African-American former boxer who lives in the next apartment, rushes to her aid, punching the Yakuza out of the window and into the street where he is squashed by a passing garbage truck. With Ageha and Glico in a bind, the outcaste ensemble band together to get rid of the body, burying it in a graveyard. In the process they uncover a cassette tape belonging to the dead gangster, containing a code which enables its owner to counterfeit Japanese Yen. Seizing the opportunity, the multiethnic group utilizes the tape to amass enough Yen to send some home to their own countries, while the others remain in Yen Town, hoping to achieve further success - legally. Meanwhile, Chinese gangsters are searching for the same tape – a recording of Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” - knowing that it holds valuable coded information.

Glico, Ageha and Feihong (Mikami Hiroshi) are able to purchase an old warehouse in the city, and proceed to open a nightclub, featuring an eccentric band of foreigners and Glico as the vocalist. The club is a big hit, particularly Glico, who is subsequently offered a record deal with a Japanese recording label, but with one stipulation: she must become Japanese. Glico surrenders her Chinese identity, but in the process loses the connection with her friends who are not accepted by the mainstream. The once solid trio is torn apart: Feihong is arrested and Ageha becomes the defacto leader of a gang of adolescents. Feihong is released from jail after some time passes because the deportation process is too costly. He returns to the club only to see that it has

dissolved and been sold, Glico pursuing her own path without him or the band. Ageha however, is adamant about buying back the club: re-acquiring the cassette tape, she enlists the help of hundreds of children, and she quickly and easily obtains another small fortune.

Glico's good fortune on the other hand, is short-lived, as her true identity is revealed to a meddlesome reporter who confronts Glico about her illicit past. But the gangsters also discover that Glico's rise to fame was made possible by the money accrued from the tape, and kidnap both Glico and the reporter, forcing Glico to lead them to "My Way". Feihong is also apprehended by the gang, but manages to escape in a bloody shoot-out, only to be caught by police. Mistakenly believing Feihong to be the mastermind behind the counterfeiting scheme, the police question him, beating him to a bloody pulp. He dies shortly after while still in custody, his death a direct result of the intense police brutality. Glico leads the gangsters to the salvage yard, where she thinks the tape might be, and with one accurate bazooka shot, Ran (Watabe Atsuro), the junkyard owner, and part-time assassin, demolishes the gang. Ageha, in possession of a new swallowtail butterfly tattoo on her chest, and the tape, returns it to Rio Ranki (Eguchi Yosuke), the Yen Town gang lord, and also Glico's long lost brother. With the gangsters all mortally disposed of, Ageha and Glico return to the junkyard, comfortable again in their original identities. In a final, demonstrative scene, they burn Feihong in a funeral pyre, along with the ill-gotten yen that threatened to transform their lives for the worse.

*Suwaroteiru*'s characters are part of the periphery, outcasts whose identities, languages, ethnicities, and occupations are distinct from the Japanese social core: They

speak a jumbled mix of Chinese, Japanese and English, the vernacular shift depending on who is speaking and listening; they are multiethnic in composition, characters from China, Africa, Italy, the United States; they are prostitutes, labourers, gangsters, unemployed. Iwai portrays the margins *from* the margins, dispensing with a Japanese-centric perspective, in spite of the Japanese actors who represent foreign identities in the film. Not only does the film privilege a marginal perspective of the multiethnic climate of “Yen Town”, but its style is also detached from the mainstream Japanese style of filmmaking. Traditional filmic conventions such as recognizable genres and the use of film (rather than digital video) is undermined by directors like Iwai, who has gained competency in his craft by directing music videos, commercials and TV programs early in his career.

*Suwaroteiru* is marked by a conspicuous absence of positive imagery in relation to Japan and the Japanese. Japan exists as a site of authority and rules, represented by malicious police officers, as well as gullible citizens, and pitiful gangsters. The Japanese in *Suwaroteiru* are characters of extremes: callous and violent, or weak and mindless cogs in Japan’s post-capitalist milieu. Conversely, immigrants flout social narratives of conformity and compliance, eager to extract as much Yen as possible. Comparison of the Japanese and the foreigners of the film results in an easily perceptible dichotomy that portrays the former negatively and the latter in a positive light. As mentioned earlier, there are the police at the start of the film that are exemplary of that appraisal. Other examples of Japanese character constructions are: A naive company employee whose car wheels are shot at by Ran and Feihong in order to force the man to procure the services at Ran’s auto repair/junkyard. They also succeed in selling the man the gasoline from his



own car after they discreetly siphon it. As a subtle knock against Japan's failing school system, Iwai introduces briefly a creepy brothel pimp who explains to Ageha (as he takes a 'hands-on' approach with her) that he was once an elementary teacher, and that she should call him 'teacher'. Yet another character is a Japanese businessman who because of large, overdue debts is forced into lending his name to the ownership of the club that Feihong, Glico and Ageha open ('Yen Towns' are not allowed to own property). And the police who capture and question Feihong are extremely violent, killing Feihong while under their supervision. These few examples illustrate the disparity between the positive representations of the foreigners and the negative portrayals of the Japanese in the film.

Not only does *Suwaroteiru* depict Japanese characters negatively, but the film also critiques Japanese institutions. Iwai uses the film's marginal characters to express cynicism of the Japanese education system, and of majority society's reluctance to accept within the social framework visible minorities. Iwai, who is not only the film's director, but also the writer, elucidates this position, utilizing a unique foreign character to act as the embodiment of his coined phrase, "third culture kids". During a scene in which musicians audition for the chance to perform in Ageha's Yen Town club as Glico's backup band, a Caucasian male waxes poetic when he describes to Feihong and Ageha his interpretation of the cultural identities of Yen Towns. Speaking fluently and naturally in Japanese, the man (Kent Frick) pontificates about the discrimination of second generation Japanese in Japan. He explains that he was born in Japan to American parents, raised and educated in Japan, and due to the terrible English education system he cannot speak a word of English. His cultural identity is undeniably Japanese, but he is treated as a foreigner because of his appearance. He asks them, what is my nationality,

American or Japanese? He asks Ageha if she thinks she is a Yen Town, and she replies that she is. He disagrees, suggesting that because of the facts that she was born in Japan and she didn't come to Yen Town to make money, then she is actually a second generation Japanese. However, he explains further, Japanese don't care, and thus they are treated as Yen Towns. To that end, he proposes a new term for their common and ambiguous identities: "Third culture kids".

As if to further illustrate Iwai's point that English education in Japan is sub-par, he has the film's unambiguous Japanese characters use to comic effect their English utterances, almost childlike in proficiency and vaguely intelligible ("I can't not speak English"). In contrast, the immigrants are able to communicate coherently in their native tongues and/or English and Japanese. Visiting Feihong in jail numerous times, Ageha learns enough Chinese to communicate very basic ideas, thus giving additional credence to Iwai's 'third culture kids' notion. For Ageha, learning a smattering of Chinese adds to her transformation and continued acceptance of her peripheral identity, as well as a further step away from Japanese majority culture. At the outset of the film, Ageha seemingly rejects her status as a dead prostitute's daughter, reluctant to answer questions from the women who pass her around, quiet in disposition, nameless, and above all, devoid of an identity. Her development begins when Glico gives her the name Ageha, and draws a caterpillar on her chest, similar to Glico's butterfly tattoo on her own chest. Her transformation into a young, confident woman who accepts and embraces her Yen Town identity takes shape throughout the film as she endures the hardships of Yen Town, each experience further solidifying her personality. She learns to defend herself and in the process knocks down an adolescent boy who challenges her. With that action she

gains a level of street credibility which endures her to a gang of boys, and she becomes their leader.

With a particular scene which culminates in Ageha injecting into her own vein some bad drugs, Iwai deftly comments on bullying and the hierarchical social roles which permeate the fabric of Japanese society. Ageha's gang of juvenile criminals stumbles upon a beached shipment of heroin, and are eager to test its potency. The boy whom Ageha knocked out earlier in the film with one punch tries to force a needle loaded with the drug on a smaller, unwilling boy, not unlike a bullying scenario one might encounter in any level of the school system. But Ageha becomes angry, saying, "he doesn't want to do it, so why don't you do it yourself?" This scene is exemplary of the film's larger theme of transgression. Ageha's refusal to allow one of her minions to coerce another weaker group member is indicative of a rejection of traditional hierarchical relationships and social expectations by rejecting the oppressor, taking an anti-bullying stance. Ageha then proceeds to try it herself, demonstrating her defiance of the given narrative. Unfortunately for her, the drug sends her into a coma and the boys flag down a car in which the legendary Yen Town gangster, Rio Ranki is riding in. In a surprisingly philanthropic moment, Rio Ranki saves her life by bringing her limp, lifeless body to a quack doctor who also moonlights as a tattoo artist. It is a reversal of character expectation because Rio Ranki was last seen giving the orders to have Japanese gangsters executed. In this scene his character goes against the traditional stereotype of immigrant criminals in Japan by helping save Ageha's life. Upon treating Ageha, the doctor cum tattoo artist gives voice to Iwai's critique of Japanese society, exclaiming, "What is this

world coming to?” commenting on the dystopian environment where children almost die from doing drugs.

Ageha's development and acquiescence of identity is finally realized when she returns to the doctor to have a butterfly tattooed on her chest. At the beginning of the film, Glico draws a caterpillar on Ageha's chest, indicating a figurative birth. Ageha's identity then is still in its infancy, and the tattoo of a swallowtail butterfly on her chest near the end represents her transformation. She changes from a metaphorical caterpillar to a butterfly. Ageha is able to accept her identity, finding her place among the marginal members of Japan's industrial complex, where she finds comfort and security with groups of fellow immigrants with whom she can identify, and they form a collective, peripheral existence. Along with identity, redemption becomes an important feature in her transformation. At the start she doesn't own up to being the daughter of a prostitute, but later, she confirms Fei Long's identity, whose body must be identified at the police station after he has been beaten to death by the police.

The margins depicted in *Suwaroteiru* pursue money as a means to an end, Japan as a place where people go to make some of the powerful Yen. Japanese authorities and the system merely distract the immigrants from trying to make money. Iwai critiques Japan as a capitalist society which fails to integrate the immigrants who help keep Japan's capitalist economy functioning. The characters disperse with centrality, finding their own identities in the fragments, accepting the social fragmentation. *Suwaroteiru* exhibits postmodernist characteristics, found predominantly within the content, but also within the form. Jerky digital video camera shots provide a detached, disorienting, saturated, and surreal environment. Along with the overall positive imagery surrounding

the peripheral characters, emblematic of acceptance and redemption, Iwai portrays a harsh and unsympathetic Japan that is unwilling to accept the periphery. But what is of more importance is that the periphery has accepted their impoverished marginal spaces. In Iwai's portrayal of the Japanese characters as cruel and violent, he critiques majority society's refusal to include immigrants. Despite the sometimes bleak and post-apocalyptic environment of the periphery, Iwai uses plenty of light, smiling faces and friendly characters to illustrate Yen Town as a hospitable environment of non-Japaneseness; a neglected social space where children born in Japan to their immigrant parents occupy a new space – 'third culture kids'.

### ***Zeburaman***

Miike Takashi is known to fans and critics for his extreme filmmaking style, often defying genre conventions, incorporating into his films black humour, shattered cultural taboos, over-the-top, intense bloody violence, and grotesque and shocking sexual acts that can offend even the most seasoned movie-goers. His films are eccentric and thought-provoking, feature predominantly marginal characters, and comment on Japan's contemporary decay. Social alienation, deteriorated family relations and civil chaos are pervasive themes within his films. Miike has experimented with a wide array of films, a testament to his directorial skill, and making his style difficult to categorize. With his 2004 film *Zeburaman* (*Zeburaman*), Miike tones down the ultra-violence, sexual perversions, and taboos in order to present a light-hearted, comedic, dramatic, fantastical narrative that satirizes Japan's *tokusatsu* (special effects) *sentai* (squadron) genre, in which superheros and computer-generated special effects are the focal points of a live

action television program or film. Miike's *Zebraman* exhibits postmodern content - integrating parody, satire and intertextuality, commenting on dysfunctional families, making light of authoritarian establishment - and portrays two marginal characters in a positive fashion.

*Zebraman*'s protagonist is Ichikawa Shinichi (Miike casting regular, Aikawa Sho), a pitiable elementary school teacher, disrespected by his students and fellow colleagues, and whose adulterous wife, bullied son, and sexually active middle school daughter also disrespect him. Ichikawa explains later that he has a wife and two children, "but [he] wouldn't call it a family". Ichikawa is the antithesis of a dominant Japanese patriarchal figure, having no control over his family or his students, placing him in a position as a social outsider, unable to maintain the proper hierarchical relationships that define status in Japan. Ichikawa is a failure as a father, husband and educator, who derives satisfaction from dressing up and role-playing as Zebraman, a superhero character from the TV program of the same name that was cancelled after only seven episodes during his youth. Ichikawa develops an unlikely friendship with Asano Shinpei (Yasukochi Naoki), a wheelchair-confined elementary school transfer student who shares his appreciation for Zebraman.

Venturing out one night in his Zebraman outfit, Ichikawa encounters a crime in progress, perpetrated by a scissor-wielding man in an over-sized foam crab-suit, whom Ichikawa subdues with the sudden, unexplained, physical capability of a superhero. Ichikawa's unexpected powers enable him to defend his town against increasing attacks by a group of aliens who inhabit both the gymnasium of the school where Ichikawa works, and the bodies of the town's citizens in order to commit serious crimes. The

government is aware of the alien presence (having built the school on top of the site where the aliens' ship originally crashed) and send out a team of officials to investigate. As the attacks increase, however, the officials realize that the only option to save the town is to have a bomb dropped on the school. Meanwhile, Ichikawa realizes (after discovering the script for Zebraman's original TV series, written by the rogue alien inhabiting the vice-principals body; the script and TV series to serve as a warning to mankind about the threat of invasion) that he must embrace his superhero identity, and acquire the ability to fly so as to save the town from certain destruction. In a final battle with an alien that has grown to Godzilla-like proportions, Ichikawa saves Asano and defeats the alien, saving the town from both nuclear obliteration and certain destruction, gaining the respect of his son, and the town.

The film's opening scenes express its narrative tone, providing a humorous view of authority, critiquing a contentious aspect of contemporary society, referencing an old *tokusatsu* series, parodying a contemporary Japanese horror film, and establishing its multi-genre approach. *Zebraman* begins with two Japanese Defence Agency officers relaxing in the foyer of a public bath, watching news reports of the Yachiyo ward of Yokohama where recently, the ward has experienced bizarre incidents of sudden, unnatural deaths of wild birds, numerous rapes, kidnapping, and arson. But more importantly, says officer Oikawa (Watabe Atsuro), "my groin itches". He disregards his colleague's suggestion to stay away from brothels, commenting that, "cheap sex is the epitome of the big city". Afterwards, in the top secret conference room of the archaic and dimly-lit Defence Agency, a senior official explains to the two officers that nonhuman life forms have inhabited Yachiyo ward. Unable to contain his scepticism of such an

event, Oikawa sarcastically and irreverently remarks that, “this isn’t *Ultra Q* (a *tokusatsu* TV series from the 1960s) you know”. In his home, Ichikawa takes a break from sewing his Zebraman costume to watch on TV a super-ranger battle an enemy that closely resembles the long, dark-haired apparition from the Japanese cult classic horror film, *Ringu* (1998). In what is unmistakably a parody, the power ranger inexplicably produces a radioactive gun, shooting the ghost as it crawls back into the well from whence it came, exclaiming, “I won’t let you have the earth!” Ichikawa is incredulous, his reaction of disbelief seemingly echoing the viewer’s sentiments. Following that, there is a shot of little green aliens hiding away in the gymnasium of the school where Ichikawa is employed. The title screen then becomes visible, the accompanying music dark and ominous.

This opening sequence establishes the film’s overall intention: To produce a humorous and dramatic satirical narrative which lightly comments on social ills while parodying the horror and the *tokusatsu* genres. Miike manages to keep his (oft-repeated) criticisms of social problems light yet serious, while peppering *Zebraman* with comedic touches and not-too-violent action scenes. One need not delve too deep into dialogue and imagery to discover a narrative that highlights the margins’ status and transgresses the mainstream. The remainder of this analysis is devoted to identifying the periphery and generating interpretations of various scenes that illustrate the postmodern features of this film: parody, pastiche, satire, and the figures of authority that are depicted as silly and incompetent. Finally, I illustrate how Miike expresses the positive representations of the two peripheral characters.



With *Zebraman*, Miike returns to a theme observed in his 2001 film, *Bijita Q*: the contemporary dysfunctional family headed by a failing father figure. However, unlike *Bijita Q*, *Zebraman* only briefly examines the family's issues, rather than highlighting them throughout the entire film. As mentioned above, Ichikawa is a disappointment as a father, husband and educator, the negative results of which are witnessed in his wife's alleged adultery and his son, Kazuki (Mishima Yoshimasa), as a victim of bullying (his fellow classmates are seen throwing his notebooks at him from three stories above, calling him a loser and an idiot, claiming that Kazuki's father creeps them out) who ignores his father. Because of Ichikawa's inability to control his junior high school-aged daughter Midori (Ichikawa Yui), she is able to carry on an implied sexual relationship with an older man (while not engaging in paedophilia, he moonlights as the alien-possessed crab-man) whom she met on the Internet. During one scene, Midori (dressed in a school uniform in a *kosupure*, costume-play scenario as requested by her crabby confidant) provides diegesis, explaining to her older lover the miserable state of her family: Her father is gloomy and unpopular as a teacher, her brother bullied because of him, and her mother is cheating, while she claims, ironically, that she is the only one who has it together. While the father in *Bijita Q* is clueless and amoral, and shares with Ichikawa a similar lack of respect from his family and co-workers, Ichikawa still maintains his self-worth, as well as a hobby that allows him escape his workplace and familial discord.

Asano Shinpei is the second peripheral character identified in *Zebraman*. His physical incapability separates him from his classmates, unable to participate with the other students in a game of soccer, instead relegated to shooting baskets in the deserted

school gym with Ichikawa. Asano Kana (Suzuki Kyoka), Shinpei's mother, however, is adamant in her request for Ichikawa to treat him as he would the other students, so as to lessen the ostracizing effect that special treatment would have on him. When Ichikawa discovers that Shinpei is also a fan of *Zebroman*, they form a swift, solid bond, based on their mutual superhero appreciation and common peripheral identities. Their marginality is emphasized by their environment: Standing alone on the roof of the school building they peer down at the students playing soccer while they discuss the merits of *Zebroman*, a long-forgotten TV series with terrible ratings. Their conversation on top of the school is filmed in several long takes, adding a touch of the dramatic, underscoring the moment when Ichikawa and Shinpei find companionship; the long take also allowing Miike to link the two characters to their peripheral surroundings.

*Zebroman* is in large part a pastiche, or homage to the *tokusatsu* genre that permeates Japanese television programming. Miike takes into account the conventions of that specific genre, incorporating numerous clichés. The hero is dressed in his black and white costume (replete with cape, mask, shin-guards, and gloves), fighting villains like the crab-man, whose own campy disguise is a red foam costume complete with an oversized crab-claw. *Zebroman* attacks his enemies while shouting out the names of his fighting techniques (Zebra-Screw! Zebra-Bomber! Zebra-Back Kick!); his identity is never revealed despite the inevitable fame he garners; and he saves the town from an absurd, impossible danger. *Zebroman* even has his own sidekick –Zebra-Nurse- who comes to his aid wielding an enormous needle which she injects him with, allowing him miraculously to grow back a new arm after having it severed by the crab-claw. Miike even produces the show's 1970s advertisement, the opening theme song and credits

parodying the actual shows of that era: ridiculous lyrics (From Africa a new hero emerges! Black and white ecstasy! Fight Zebraman! Fly Zebraman!), fight scenes with no actual contact, smoke billowing from where Zebraman manifests, and alien enemies crumbling in his wake.

Miike exploits the superhero genre, maximizing comic effect, parodying every detail possible. When a crime is in progress, Ichikawa's hair suddenly stands on end, alerting him to danger which must be confronted. More than once Zebraman appears at the right place and time, guided by his Zebra-sense. Miike pokes fun at how a superhero always seems to appear when needed, for example, emerging in the snack aisle of a grocery store where two villains are busy carrying away a young schoolgirl. Peering down from the second-storey of a building at an alien-possessed criminal about to set ablaze a building, Zebraman doesn't fly down to him – he must climb down from the railing where he stands, and descend the flight of stairs to the criminal. During a scene in which a group of schoolchildren attack a vegetable seller, Zebraman runs through the streets in his costume, arriving at the location of the crime. Far from being stealth, Zebraman appears in broad daylight, running into a crowd of police and on-lookers who are just as shocked seeing the violent children as they are seeing a grown man in a zebra costume.

Despite the comedic touches and extensive lampoonery at the expense of the *tokusatsu* genre, the camera's gaze allows the viewer to empathize with Ichikawa. Clinging to his alter-identity at first to escape his miserable family and workplace relationships, and later, to save the town from peril, Ichikawa is seen as slightly eccentric but at least noble and serious, with his heart in the right place. The figures of authority

however, are portrayed as silly, incompetent, and overzealous, which allows the viewer to interpret this portrayal as an emphasis of the transgressive nature of the periphery, a decentred view, and renunciation of the assumed social narrative of control. From the outset of the film the government officials admit the futility and irony of their activities, as the senior official at the Defence Agency admits that “We, the Defence Agency, while simultaneously suppressing the truth, have set up a special-ops unit to investigate the truth.” Inhabiting the same apartment to set up a spy operation, the two officers in charge put on a homosexual front to avoid suspicion. The underlying joke here is that they would probably attract more attention as a gay couple in a small town in Japan. Not only that, but they live like irresponsible bachelors in a chaotic, messy apartment, teasing one another about their romantic relationships. Moreover, they drive around in a heavily modified station wagon with antennas and solar panels that resembles the car from the 1984 film, *Ghostbusters*. The lead officer is continually sceptical of the operation and its handling, his consternation obvious, expressing that, “I’m just following orders, I can’t speak my mind!”, illustrating his dissatisfaction with the incapacitating process of hierarchy. Another scene indicates the ineffectiveness of the police: A group of possessed schoolchildren in a high-jacked bus drive by a police officer on a bicycle, almost hitting him. The officer can only stare at the bewildering sight, stuttering as he radios in to his supervisors. The Colonel in charge of the military, while not seen being attacked or harmed, is repeatedly injured somehow, his face increasingly bandaged, until the final scene when his face is completely covered.

The most obvious manifestation of Miike’s positive portrayal of the periphery can be summarized by the film’s deliberate theme: “If you believe, your dreams can come

true". Ichikawa is not a conformist by nature, and with this somewhat clichéd premise as his guide, he has honourable and artistic license to follow his own path, to exert his individuality in a society where cooperation and compliance are commonplace. With Shinpei and Kana Asano, the two of them marginal in their social identities (Kana is a single mother whose husband committed suicide) both providing moral support, Ichikawa bravely confronts his dual destinies: On one hand, as Zebraman he fights against his scripted destiny as a superhero who cannot fly, he and the town suffering possible defeat at the hands of the enemy aliens if he cannot protect them. On the other hand, as Ichikawa he fights against his family's, colleagues' and students' contempt and disregard for him. In the end, Zebraman succeeds at flying, saving the town in the process. As well, Ichikawa is successful at winning over his son, who knows the truth about his father's secret identity, and being the son of a social loser, has more at stake than his mother or sister, both of whom applaud Zebraman, but cringe at the thought of Ichikawa and Zebraman resembling each other. Nevertheless, it seems to Ichikawa more significant having lived up to the Asano family hopes (for young Shinpei, at the end standing with the help of crutches), providing a moral victory for social outsiders like himself.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through an examination of the social, cultural, and historical processes that led to the creation of a marginalized community outside of the 'normal' parameters of Japanese society, I have been able to provide a contextual background for the analyses of ten contemporary postmodern Japanese films. Postmodernism has been particularly effective as a cultural and literary analytic theory, the socio-cultural conditions seemingly representative of the post-economic boom of Japan in the 1990s and beyond.

Identifying the Japanese 'core', 'mainstream', or 'centre' has proved to be an effective approach in locating the 'periphery', or 'margins', because the periphery is a constantly transforming body of individuals that cannot be located as easily as the core. In the films that have been analyzed here, the periphery has been comprised of drug addicts (*Junk Food*), rebellious and irreverent company employees (*Tampopo*), an incestuous, pathetic father (*Visitor Q*), an abused and alienated young girl (*Harmful Insect*), a bullied and isolated teenager (*All About Lily Chou-Chou*), a psychologically damaged, 30-something, single, part-time employed female (*Vibrator*), a repressed but sexually awakened wife (*A Snake of June*), a selfish, social misfit (*Kamikaze Girls*), an identity-challenged, and ethnically-combined girl (*Swallowtail Butterfly*), and a socially isolated, father-failure, superhero enthusiast (*Zebraman*). While this list does not identify the complete array of peripheral characters that have emerged from within these films, it does indicate the extensive range of those who are located on the outside of social acceptability.

Examining Japanese filmmakers' representations of the periphery through analyses of their postmodern films is one way in which it is possible to observe the

comments on Japanese society and its perceived problems like xenophobia and the alienation of dissimilar individuals. The filmmakers' perspectives are valuable as alternate opinions because their artistic portrayals of some of Japan's less visible socially marginalized groups and individuals can contrast the often universalizing views of the media.

Outside of academia and filmic criticism in mass media, consumers everywhere are content in simply consuming these cultural products without searching for meaning. Or as one scholar suggested, “[v]ery few spectators seek to read texts...[t]hey want to loot them.”<sup>170</sup> My concern here with interpretations of contemporary Japanese films has been to offer to Japan-scholars another perspective from which to observe socio-cultural trends, as depicted by Japanese filmmakers. In the words of one film scholar, “moving images have been of increased importance in the construction of culture and society and for the ways in which we interact with reality and with each other.”<sup>171</sup>

It is interesting to note that many of the representations found within the film analyses are positive or redemptive in nature. It is possible that this points to the increasing acceptance of the margins in contemporary postmodern Japan. Beyond the various representations I have unearthed in the film analyses, there remains the contentious issue of the demarcation of the periphery from the core, and the consequences of differentiation. For the purposes of clarity and organization within this thesis it has been imperative to categorize social groups, but for future scientific research I seek to disengage from such generalizations. A new study would address the

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<sup>170</sup> Raymond Durnat, *Nostalgia: Code and Anti-code: A Review of Jonathon Rosenbaum's "Moving Places: A Life at the Movies"*, *Wide Angle*, 4/4, qtd in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds., John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)212.

<sup>171</sup> Ib Bondebjerg, in introduction to *Moving Images, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Ib Bondebjerg (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000) 1.

complicated issue of peripheral identities in Japanese society, examining individuals from a social sub-culture well-known to me from my experiences in Japan – the tattoo community, including artists, apprentices and clients.



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