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**Imaginando o Este: Representações do Japão no  
Cinema de Hollywood**

**Imagining the East: Representations of Japan in  
Hollywood cinema**

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**palavras-chave**

Representação, estereótipos, o “Outro,” Hollywood, Japão

**resumo**

O presente trabalho tem como objectivo investigar as representações do Japão e da cultura japonesa no cinema de Hollywood, incidindo em particular nos filmes mais recentes. Para uma melhor compreensão das imagens mais recentes do Japão, uma perspectiva cronológica e o respectivo contexto histórico são apresentados. Uma vez que as representações do povo japonês por parte do cinema de Hollywood têm por base estereótipos que se formaram nos primeiros contactos entre o Ocidente e o Japão, esta dissertação inclui uma possível definição de estereótipo, bem como uma análise sobre a percepção do Japão como o “Outro.” Finalmente, algumas novas direcções na representação do Japão e as razões que motivam essa mudança serão tidas em consideração.

**keywords**

Representation, stereotypes, the “Other,” Hollywood, Japan

**abstract**

This present study aims to investigate the representations of Japan and Japanese culture in Hollywood cinema, focusing particularly on more recent films. In order to better understand recent images of Japan, a chronological perspective and its historical context will be discussed. Since representations of the Japanese people in Hollywood cinema are based on stereotypes, which were formed in early contacts between the West and Japan, this dissertation includes a working definition of stereotyping as well as an analysis on the perception of Japan as the “Other.” Finally, some new directions in the representation of Japan and the reasons that underlie these changes will be taken into consideration.

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# **Introduction**

Since the very beginning of motion picture history, Hollywood has revealed a great interest in Asian cultures. Hollywood's fascinated use of Asian settings, Asian characters and Asian themes has led to different and contradictory portrayals of Asian peoples. Hollywood's depictions of Asians are significant manifestations of how American society has perceived eastern cultures. The evidence suggests that Japan has been particularly attractive to Hollywood. Symbolic of exoticness, associated with adventure, mystery and forbidden desires, Japan has been the perfect setting for western audiences eager to satisfy voyeuristic pleasures. Depicting traditional Japan as picturesque and exotic has functioned as the perfect scenario for some of Hollywood's big budget productions. Colourful landscapes, peculiar architecture styles, detailed wardrobe, all contribute to the appeal of the romanticised view of "old" Japan. These idyllic scenarios contrast with contemporary Japan, where high-tech metropolises have suggested a different kind of appeal, that is, the excitement of high-paced modern urban life. Cinematic illusions allow the public to indulge or confront their anxieties and fantasies without taking serious risks. For instance, Robert Sklar in *Movie –Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* describes cinema as "a way of pleasing audiences with glimpses of the forbidden or impossible without upsetting conventional values or beliefs" (206). Asian countries, especially Japan, as I will attempt to show, have been used on the big screen as a means of dealing with a range of problematic social matters from an American perspective.

Hollywood films which depict Asian peoples have tended to be commercially successful, since popular and fruitful analogies between Japanese and American societies can be made. Films dealing with Japanese themes are not only about Japan, but are also a reflection of the American social order. The audience sees images of Japan, but is largely confronted with issues related to their own preconceptions and conditions. For instance, within an agitated political and social context in the nineteenth century due to the abolition of slavery, Hollywood used Asians as an analogy for wider racial issues, such as the confrontation between whites and blacks, thus avoiding a direct approach to dealing with social conflict. Asian characters embodied therefore western fears and anxieties provoked by the possibility of mixture between whites and non-whites. Recently, *The Last Samurai* (2003) was successful at the box office because a parallel between the samurai and the American cowboy could be drawn. On the other hand, it could be argued that *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) was not a commercial success because there is no easy comparison to be

made between the stereotypically submissive geisha and the modern independent American women. Moreover, in *Memoirs of a Geisha* there is no white protagonist with whom the audience can identify, as there is in *The Last Samurai*. In this way, the scope for analogy and for contrast was greatly curtailed in this film.

This dissertation sets out to study the representation of the Japanese people in Hollywood cinema. My interest in the execution of this research comes from my curiosity about how cinema has been representing foreign cultures in general. Since the category “western cinema” includes many different countries and their national cinemas, to analyse the great diversity of western images of other cultures could not be efficiently explored within this framework. This study will focus then on Hollywood cinema, in the sense that due to its long domination of international markets, Hollywood has been playing a prominent role in disseminating western public attitudes. My personal choice of analysing how Hollywood has been representing Japanese people in particular is related to the recent revived interest in Japanese culture and to the release of several Hollywood films portraying Japan. This thesis is therefore motivated to explore the reasons behind Hollywood’s present fascination by Japan. I am aware that there is a vast, rich and challenging Japanese cinema itself that would have contributed to the analysis of the films here discussed by comparison. This work therefore might have a different perspective if it had been written by an expert in Japanese culture and cinema. However, since this dissertation is part of an English Studies programme, Japanese films fall out of the scope of this thesis.

My main interest is to analyse how Japanese people have been portrayed in mainstream cinema and how Hollywood images of the Japanese have been changing and adapting to America’s newly multicultural society. Globalisation and internet accessibility have had a great impact on our society. Images and cultural products from Japan took a while to penetrate western markets and then became more generally accessible to the western public. Representations of Japan were certainly influenced by these fast changes. It will be helpful and interesting, therefore, to analyse whether American perceptions of Japan have modified much in the light of this modern context and should this be so, to determine what the main differences are. Moreover, the recent revival of interest in Japan and in its culture has led to the release of several films which depict the Japanese from a

western perspective. It is useful to analyse how these recent films differ from previous attempts to represent the Japanese people.

Gina Marchetti in *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"- Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, asserts that since early contacts "America has had a particularly strong and peculiarly contradictory relationship with Japan and the Japanese" (18). Hollywood cinema manifested this conflicting connection by representing the Japanese in a paradoxical way; films have been deploying surprisingly stable images of the Japanese people in both the positive and negative sense.

Therefore, I repeat, this study intends to analyse stereotypical representations of Japan and to discuss whether these stereotypical images have evolved. I purpose to argue that despite living in a multicultural society, and living in an age of political correctness, the Japanese are still represented as being largely subordinated to western norms, and that recent portrayals of the Japanese have remained obdurately stereotypical. It is my intention to demonstrate that recent Hollywood films still portray the Japanese based upon old ideas developed during the very first contacts between the West and the East, indicating that there has not been much progress or improvement in the treatment of Japanese characters on the big screen. I will therefore focus my attention on certain recent films to illustrate this point and develop my argument. These films will be considered in chronological order to emphasise the evolutionary process. I will also maintain that Hollywood's present interest in Japanese culture is the result of western perceptions of Japan as a new type of threat or challenge. I would like to argue that Hollywood cinema has focused its attention on the Japanese, setting quite a few films in Japan, in order to deal with the phenomenon of Japan's success and the proliferation of Japanese cultural products in western societies. This theory is also supported by the fact that Hollywood studios have released several western versions of Japanese films. Examples of this tendency will be given in the final part of this dissertation.

In order to demonstrate that the Japanese are still depicted in stereotypical ways, it is useful to offer an overview of how the Japanese were represented in Hollywood cinema throughout the last century. Therefore, the second chapter of this dissertation provides a chronological view of Hollywood films which deal with Japanese characters and themes, and the significance of those portrayals. Since Hollywood films are products of the historical, economic and social context in which they are produced, this chapter also refers

to some of the most important historical (or at least extra-cultural) events which have influenced western depictions of the Japanese people.

Since this dissertation deals with stereotypical representations of Asian cultures, it is necessary to define basic critical terms and notions such as “stereotype” and the “Other.” The study of stereotyping related to cinema is significant since several authors believe that the media promotes stereotypes, contributing to the permanence of stale and usually false images of cultural groups. The first part of this study not only offers a working definition of the stereotype and reflections on the uses and abuses of the “Other”, it also includes a summary account of the first western notions of Japan and the main recurrent Asian images in Hollywood cinema. Theories of Orientalism and stereotyping as a social practice will be analysed and related to western representations of Asian cultures.

The word “Asian” basically refers to a native or inhabitant of Asia. Nevertheless, this term does not mean exactly the same in every country. While in some countries “Asian” refers to people from the Asian continent, in others it refers to people who come from a specific part or sub-region of Asia. In the United States, the term “Asian” refers to people from the Indian subcontinent, Far East and Southeast Asia and to their descendants. On the other hand, the word “Oriental” was first used to classify the peoples from the Near East. It was later used to refer to South-eastern Asians, especially to the Chinese and the Japanese. This word became associated with a derogatory meaning, being replaced with Asian. The word “Asian” is very limiting, giving the impression that all Asian peoples share the same language, religion and values, and that they are all part of the same ethnic group. This term does little to suggest diversity, reducing the complexity of the various nations that compose the Asian continent. In this thesis, the word “Asian” refers to peoples and cultures which derive from the Asian continent, although this study focuses on the Chinese and the Japanese peoples in particular.

The word “Ethnicity” refers to a social group that has a common cultural tradition and that shares a sense of identity. Michael Pickering, in *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*, provides a possible distinction between “Ethnicity” and “Race,” stating,

The category of race denotes a form of labelling imposed on certain groups by those who base their sense of difference from these groups on their self-arrogated superiority. It is an exclusive form of categorisation because it attempts to define groups as inherently inferior to those who command the

labelling, and on these grounds to legitimate their social domination. Ethnicity, by contrast, provides a means by which certain groups create their own sense of identity, which they characterise and express in their own terms rather than those used to justify their marginalized status. It is an inclusive form of self-characterisation, and is often used to counter the labelling of racial inferiorisation by putting in its place sources of cultural worth and achievement originating from within the group (114).

The word “Race” implies therefore categorisation and dominance from one group over others. While “Race” is a concept used by individuals to label others and is mostly a social construct, “Ethnicity” can be used by groups to classify themselves. In this dissertation, the word “Ethnicity” is used to refer to social groups that consider themselves or are considered by others to have certain characteristics in common, which are distinct from the other groups.

Hollywood films have been indicative of American attitudes towards other peoples and of America’s opinion of other cultures. The depiction of Asians in Hollywood cinema has been for the most part crude and insensitive, revealing limited western knowledge of Asian culture and traditions. Stereotyping seemed to be an easy way to characterise and represent distant nationalities. Hollywood’s industry is based on and promotes western capitalistic values. Since films are centred on American patriarchal society and white imperialism, other peoples and cultures were considered “inferior” and therefore had to be dominated. Asian characterisations in western films were used to justify white dominance. From this imperialistic perspective, the West was seen as progressive, modern, rational and sophisticated, while the East was depicted as subordinated, fragile, and retrograde. Accordingly, the West imposed itself on the East, validating its imperialistic actions by portraying Asia as needing western guidance. For example, although Japan was forcedly made to open up to the western world, this historical event was often presented as Japan hopefully and acutely seeking westernisation and modernity.

For this dissertation, studies of the representation of minority groups in western cinema were taken into consideration, since several authors have been discussing how different cultures are portrayed in Hollywood films and a number of useful comparisons between these studies and my own can be made. At the heart of these depictions are the processes of stereotyping and othering as well. Specific studies on stereotyping and the

“Other,” such as Craig McGarty’s *Stereotypes as Explanations – The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups* (2002), Charles Stangor’s *Stereotypes and Prejudice: Essential Readings* (2000), Neil Macrae’s *Stereotypes and Stereotyping* (1996) and Michael Pickering’s *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (2001) will also be discussed and applied to cinematographic representations of the Japanese. However, there are only a few book-length studies I have come across discussing Hollywood’s representation of Asian peoples specifically. Gina Marchetti’s already mentioned work focuses on cinematic representations of romance between white and Asian characters, and Eugene Wong’s study, *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in the American Motion Pictures*, was published almost thirty years ago. Therefore, the few studies which analyse western images of the Japanese in the media in general were taken into consideration. Sheila Johnson’s *The Japanese through American Eyes* (1988) and Ian Littlewood’s *The Idea of Japan: Western Images, Western Myths* (1996) proved to be very useful in the formulation of this dissertation. Some other books, though not cited at all in this dissertation, were quite useful to my general understanding of the topic here discussed. For instance, LaFeber’s *The Clash: U.S. – Japanese Relations throughout History* (1997), Giffard’s *Japan Among the Powers. 1890 – 1990* (1997) and Dower’s *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986) were helpful as far as historical background and political relations between the United States and Japan are concerned. Denzin’s *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence* (2002), Xing and Hirabayashi’s *Reversing the Lens: Ethnicity, Race, Gender, and Sexuality through Film* (2003) and Friedman’s *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (1991) contributed to my general comprehension of how minorities and ethnicity are portrayed in American film in general and Hollywood film in particular.

Although there have been a few authors interested in studying western representations of Asian peoples in the early film industry, there are only a few studies concerning recent Hollywood portrayals of the Japanese. Hollywood representations of Japan from the mid 1990s until present date have not been extensively explored, and so these films are not widely documented yet. For that reason, recent film commentary is mostly based on the opinion of reviewers. Still, only popular and accredited reviewers were taken into consideration. For similar reasons to those stated above, and since the happenings involving Hollywood’s film industry discussed in the final part of this thesis

are still very recent, when arguing the motives behind Hollywood's present interest in Japan, only recent newspapers articles and commentators' observations were available and therefore taken into consideration.

In the sixteenth century, merchants began introducing representations of the Japanese into western society. However, only in the late nineteenth century did these representations become detailed and prolific. Depictions of the Japanese in travellers' journals and in literature were adapted to motion pictures, influencing cinematographic representations of Japan. It might therefore be helpful to analyse the works that promulgated these early depictions and the way that they set the scene for how the Japanese would be represented in Hollywood cinema. The first chapter of this study will analyse the earliest western impressions of Japan following the first contacts made.

# **Chapter I**

## **Stereotypes and “Otherness”**

## 1. First Western Impressions about Japan

Marco Polo, the thirteenth century traveller and writer, was seventeen years old when his father and uncle, two Italian merchants, took him on their travels to the Far East. While in prison at one stage in his career, Polo dictated to a fellow prisoner a complete report of his travels. His book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, provided vivid details about distant countries that no other European had visited before. During the Middle Ages, this narrative was the first contact with remote civilizations and for a very long time it was the only source of information in Europe about life in the Far East. Polo's narration offered significant knowledge of China and information in relation to other Asian countries, including Japan. However, Marco Polo had never been to Japan. What he wrote about this country was based on accounts made by other Asian peoples, notably the Chinese, who were Japan's leading commercial partners. César dos Santos in *O Japão na História, na Literatura e na Lenda* supports this idea, stating, "o veneziano Marco Polo apenas falou do Japão pelo que ouvira contar na China" (77).

Therefore, several scholars believe that the first foreigners to reach Japan were Portuguese sailors. Fernão Mendes Pinto also believed that his two companions and himself were the first Europeans to set foot on Japan. Although there is no exact date for their arrival, the commonly accepted year is 1542. Fernão Mendes Pinto registered his first impressions of this new people he was meeting. In *Peregrinação* he portrayed the person he believed to be the prince of that island as "homem curioso & inclinado a cousas novas" (390). He also mentions other particularities of the country itself, such as architecture, commenting that the temples were "de muyta magestade & riqueza" (392). Fernão Mendes Pinto also points out that the Japanese had never seen fire weapons and that they were extremely curious about European advances and progress. Consequently, Portuguese merchants introduced rifles into Japan, which the Japanese copied and produced in great numbers. Referring to this, Mendes Pinto comments, "por aquy se saberá que gente esta he, & quaõ inclinada por natureza ao exercicio militar, na qual se deleita mais do que todas as outras nações que agora se sabem" (394). In this case, the author compares the Japanese he had met to other peoples, pointing out the characteristics that distinguishes them, namely their military instinct.

In the following years, many merchants and missionaries arrived in Japan taking advantage of the new market opportunities and seeking to spread the Christian faith. Nonetheless, an incident occurred that would lead to religious persecution. That is, in 1596, a Spanish galleon ran aground in Shikoku. In order to impress the *daimyo*, who wanted to confiscate their cargo, the Spanish navigators showed him a cartographic map revealing the extensiveness of the Spanish empire. The same navigators explained that the Spanish king was able to rule over so many different peoples because the converted natives helped the army to conquer and dominate their own nations. The notion that the missionaries induced subjugation to Spain was generalised throughout the country, and many missionaries were expelled and churches destroyed. However, these measures seemed not to be particularly effective. Concerned about the advances of Christianity, in 1639 Tokugawa Ieyasu, the ruling *shogun*, decided to prohibit relations between Japan and the external world, submitting the country to almost complete isolation for more than two hundred years. Indeed, the only permitted trading entity was a Dutch company, which was allowed to dock in an artificial island, called Dejima.

Consequently, Japan's "awakening" occurred only 153 years ago, when the American Commodore Perry arrived with gunboats in Japan, forcing it to open up to the modern world. Wenceslau de Moraes poetically expresses this moment stating in *Fernão Mendes Pinto no Japão*, "no ano de 1853, o comodoro Perry, americano, vinha com a sua esquadra de navios negros acordar bruscamente o Japão da modorra em que jazia, julgada incompatível com o espírito da época e com os interesses mundiais" (75). Even during this period of seclusion, Japan was still part of westerners' imagination. The country continued to be portrayed in books mainly written by Dutch trading company workers. After the opening up of Japan, deep changes occurred not only in Japan itself, but also all around the globe. For instance, western interest in this distant country led to the visit of many foreigners who wanted to experience it first-hand. It became a common practice to publish travellers' narratives at this time. For example, Katherine Schuyler Baxter's *In Bamboo Lands* (1895) became widely known, as well as Mary Crawford Fraser's *A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan* (1899) and Margaret Ballagh's *Glimpses of Old Japan 1861 – 1866* (1908).

It should surprise no one that these accounts were superficial and impressionistic. This was partly because westerners were not allowed to freely visit the country. Therefore, their knowledge was based on their limited contact with the Japanese people. Since only

very few westerners knew the language, it was difficult to obtain trustworthy knowledge about Japanese culture. For that reason, Japanese isolation facilitated the creation of myths and fantasies related to their society; it was no easy task to transmit a concrete and informed idea of Japanese customs. On the other hand, a few travellers were enchanted by Japan to such an extent that they decided to stay there permanently and some even married Japanese wives. These authors had a different attitude towards Japan, since they had adopted its culture as their own. In their writings, they tried to clarify and explain diverse aspects of Japanese culture.

One of these travellers, whose writings became popular in the West was the Portuguese Wenceslau de Moraes. Moraes's passion for Japan and its culture is perceivable from his writings. His works include *O Dai-Nippon* (1897), *A Vida Japonesa* (1907) and *Relance da Alma Japonesa* (1925). Moraes also points out how Japanese people perceived westerners, commenting in *Fernão Mendes Pinto no Japão*, “os japoneses e as japonesas encaram e encararam sempre os europeus como seres caricaturiais, pelas alambazadas proporções do corpo, pelas mãos e pés enormes, pelo grande comprimento dos narizes” (71), among other characteristics that he mentions. He contrasts the European lack of grace with the extremely delicate nature of the Japanese, stating, “são e foram sempre o requinte da harmonia estética, comedidos nos gestos, graciosos nos meneios, atentos observadores de uma etiqueta complicadíssima de mimos” (71). Moraes also mentioned the difference in cultural habits. Referring to the arrival of the Portuguese in Japan in the sixteenth century, he remarks on the shock the noble *daimyo* and his family must have felt when they saw the Portuguese merchants eating with their hands, revealing that they had no manners when meals were served, while the Japanese, according to Moraes, delicately took the food to their mouths with ivory sticks. This seems to indicate that westerners were not the only ones to find the Japanese a peculiar people; westerners were also regarded as having strange and “uncivilised” habits. However, this narrative refers to the encounter between Portuguese merchants and a noble Japanese family. The distinctions of refinement and barbarity are almost certainly the product of the different social classes involved in the encounter.

Nonetheless, Japan's policy of seclusion led to a poor understanding of its traditions. As a consequence, a dual image of Japan was formed in western minds. On the one hand, Japan was seen as a powerful country, wealthy, with new and exotic

merchandise. On the other hand, it was perceived as a weak nation since it was considered pagan and non-white. This dual image of Japan was also transposed to literature. Referring to several books written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ian Littlewood in *The Idea of Japan: Western Images, Western Myths*, remarks, “all of them reflect the tendency to package Japan in terms of paradox and contradiction” (7). This double characterization of the Japanese people has remained in the western imagination throughout the twentieth century.

In 1946, Ruth Benedict reinforced this dual characterization of the Japanese in the book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, listing what she considers to be the most relevant contrasting aspects. From her point of view, as an anthropologist, “The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways” (2). Asian cultures were seen from a western perspective, and were characterised according to what the West already knew about the world. That is, they had to fit into categories previously established by westerners. Ian Littlewood suggests that the Japanese defied the distinction between western and Asian. According to him, “Part of the problem was that Japan never quite fitted the images of oriental decadence which seemed to serve so well for the rest of Asia” (6). To the eyes of the westerners, the Japanese were a contradiction: they corresponded to the description of the “savage” peoples (they were unchristian and they had “unusual” habits), while at the same time they challenged those criteria (they were polite and concerned with etiquette). Since the Japanese did not readily fit into the “Oriental” category already established in the West, they were depicted in a paradoxical way.

However, other authors opted for a different strategy. In their representations of Japan, the country is presented in opposition to the West. That means these authors tend to portray those aspects that clearly contrast with western society. For example, a married upper-class woman would be depicted as having extremely white powdered face, no eyebrows and black teeth, revealing distinctly different ideals of beauty between West and East. According to Littlewood, the main goal of such works was to portray Japan as the extreme opposite of the West, as he remarks, “The Japanese way is not just different from the European or American, but the reverse of it” (11).

Several early travellers to Japan focussed on the portrayal of Japanese women. These observers depicted the beauty of Japanese females and tried to portray the mysterious geisha world. Western men were attracted not only to their physical attributes, but also to their “submission” to men. Consequently, many male visitors to Japan eventually married Japanese women. However, many of these marriages were not considered legal in the West and the Japanese wives and their children were often left behind when they returned to their home countries. This situation was the inspiration for Pierre Loti’s book *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). His work was imitated in the following decades and his theme became recurrent not only in literature, but also in other arts, culminating in Giacomo Puccini’s opera, *Madama Butterfly* (1904). This tale became the basis for the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype, where the Japanese female is portrayed as subservient and willing to sacrifice for her white lover.

Beginning with Marco Polo and Fernão Mendes Pinto, and over the centuries with other travellers’ narratives, Japanese images were shaped according to western perceptions. From the many western writings about Japan, one might conclude that when a westerner spent a long time in Japan, his/her vision of Japanese culture was different from that of the short-term visitor. In other words, those who stayed in Japan for a short period perceived the Japanese as the reverse of the West, supporting western superiority. However, long-term visitors were capable of criticising certain aspects of their own culture and found themselves defending Japanese society and its values.

Nevertheless, most of these accounts contributed to the formation of a non-white representation of Japanese society. What western visitors depicted does not correspond to Japan itself, but to an image of it, since westerners had limited understanding of the complex Japanese hierarchical system, nor could they totally understand its “rigid” patriarchal society. Their image of Japan was the product of their appreciations as observers and not as participants. Therefore, their depiction of Japan corresponds to an idealised country, where each author focuses on the aspects that interest him/ her the most. It was this kind of vision of Japan that was adapted from literature to motion pictures and a wider constituency of westerners was thereby introduced to this “imagined” Japan.

Westerners’ representations of Japan were based on stereotypes and restrictive images. It is useful then to analyse how stereotypes are used in perceiving others, how they are formed and maintained within a group. Representing the East as the exact opposite of

the West is to categorise it as the “Other,” another concept that needs to be clarified. It is also useful to evaluate whether this stereotypical way of portraying the Japanese has evolved, especially as far as newer generations are concerned.

## **2. Stereotypes**

In 1935 Gordon W. Allport in his book *Attitudes* considered the importance of attitudes in social relations. Attitude might be defined as the predisposition to react to a person, object or situation in a positive or negative way. Attitude must not be confused with behaviour, in the sense that it is only the potential to respond in a certain way to a person or social group. Positive or negative attitudes towards a certain social group may determine the individual’s opinion and behaviour towards that group. Accordingly, to characterise that group is to manifest an attitude toward that same group. Attitudes allow the individual to organise and classify surrounding objects, in this particular case, social groups. Therefore, they facilitate the individual’s adaptation to reality and contribute to emotional stability. One process used to characterise social groups is stereotyping. Researchers have manifested an interest in studying stereotyping because it reveals a lot about how individuals make sense of the world and react to each other. Stereotyping is not only related to attitudes, but also to personal perception, social cognition, and group behaviour.

The word “stereotype” has its origin in two Greek terms: *stereos*, which means “solid”, and *typos*, which signifies “mark.” Initially, it was used to designate “print.” It was Walter Lippmann, in his book *Public Opinion* (1922), who gave the concept a new meaning, by applying it to the mental pictures human beings form about objects and which are resistant to change. Lippmann perceived stereotypes as derisory and unjust, only benefiting those who used them. He also viewed stereotyping as a necessary process to perceive the world and assimilate a considerable quantity of information.

The early studies related to this subject generally consider stereotypes erroneous because they portray social groups as homogeneous. Certain aspects of character, propensity or behaviour are isolated, decontextualised and given to everyone associated with a specific group. Perceivers tend to see individuals from the same out-group as more

identical to each other than they really are and to see members of different groups as very diverse from each other. To categorise others gives a sense of security or superiority and these mental images are able to create the illusion of order and stability. As a result, this process is used in power relations because it legitimises domination over others. Michael Pickering in his already mentioned work, describes this classical view of stereotypes in the following way: “social stereotypes exaggerate and homogenise traits held to be characteristic of particular categories and serve as blanket generalisations for all individuals assigned to such categories” (10). Pickering also points out that in the classical study of stereotypes, they are basically considered deficient because stereotypes alter the way social groups and individuals are perceived and restrict the complexity of these groups or individuals. Therefore, from this classical perspective, one might conclude that stereotypes are simultaneously inevitable and reductive.

Nonetheless, some scholars did not entirely agree with Lippmann’s definition of the stereotype and consequently other attempts at clarifying the concept were made. For instance, one of the most known theories concerning stereotypes is the “kernel of truth” suggestion. Pickering explains this idea, commenting, “although stereotypes deindividualise, they nevertheless validly depict certain basic characteristics of social or ethnic groups” (25). This assumption was found inadequate in the sense that it justified racist stereotypes. On the other hand, Pickering believes that it is pointless trying to determine whether stereotypes are authentic. In his opinion, the most important aspect about them is how they circulate and their consequences.

However, a few authors support the theory that some aspects of social stereotypes correspond to reality. Charles Stangor in his introduction to the book *Stereotypes and Prejudice: Essential Readings*, differs from Pickering’s opinion, stating, “Stereotypes would probably not continue to exist if they were completely inaccurate. (...) cultural stereotypes about many social groups appear to have at least some ‘kernel of truth’” (7). Stangor recognises the fragility of this statement, adding that not all stereotypes are accurate, and that some studies revealed that individuals are wrong about what stereotypes are true of a given group. Moreover, individuals express stereotypes about groups with whom they have never had contact. The main point is that Stangor supports the idea that some stereotypes are actually accurate, while Pickering seems to favour the idea that stereotypes cannot be exact in the sense that they are influenced by the perceiver’s

background. David Schneider in the article “Modern Stereotype Research: Unfinished Business” draws our attention to the problematic of measuring accuracy. For instance, how can one determine if a person or a group is egocentric, for example? What defines egocentric behaviour? Each individual has a personal definition of egocentrism. Schneider presents another reason why it is difficult to validate stereotype accuracy, remarking, “we know little about whether stereotypes are true or false, because there have been few attempts to study their accuracy, and those studies that have been done have mostly been poorly conducted or have multiple interpretations” (436).

Early research focused on stereotyping as a psychological process and neglected the social and contextual dimensions of the process. On the other hand, research that recognised the social dimension of stereotyping tended to disregard the explanatory psychological process involved. Studies that approach stereotypes as explanations attempt to connect social perception with the perceiver’s experience. For example, McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears in their article “Social, Cultural and Cognitive Factors in Stereotype Formation” suggest that society needs order or structure. By perceiving themselves as belonging to groups, individuals contribute to society’s organisation and, according to these authors, these perceptions of groups are denominated stereotypes. Accordingly, their definition of the stereotype has an extensive meaning, as they clarify, “We use the term stereotype for any impression of groups held by anybody regardless of whether the accuracy of that belief is disputed. Stereotypes are impressions of groups held by people” (5).

Furthermore, these authors and several others consider that there are three principles, which are fundamental for the social psychology of stereotyping: stereotypes are used as a means of selecting information, they save energy and are shared by the members of a group. Thus, for these authors the aim of stereotyping is “to provide a useful fit with reality rather than an exact match with reality, and in particular, to allow people to interact with other people” (8). Other scholars maintain the idea that this interaction between groups is established through a compare and contrast process. For instance, Craig McGarty in his article “Stereotype Formation as Category Formation” remarks that stereotypes are based on categories and according to this author, the term category refers to “a perception that two or more things are the same in some way and different from other things” (17). For McGarty, stereotypical knowledge is explanatory, helping the individual

to understand groups and groups' relations. We cannot understand what an object is without understanding what makes this object different from other objects. Consequently, when an individual divides people into different categories he/she is evaluating similarities and differences.

Vincent Yzerbyt and Steve Rocher seem to share a similar opinion. In their article "Subjective Essentialism and the Emergence of Stereotypes" they support the idea that individuals divide people in social categories in order to make sense of their social surroundings. According to them, "stereotypes refer to the features that are thought to be associated with a particular group" (38). The characteristics associated to a group become meaningful only when compared with other groups. Stability is achieved by trying to find similarities within the in-group and differences with the out-group. They also claim that individuals play an active role by pointing out the characteristics that delineate the diverse social groups they have to deal with, although they are not very aware of this.

It is important therefore to analyse just how individuals form stereotypes. Patricia Brown and John Turner in the article "The Role of Theories in the Formation of Stereotype Content" point out three possibilities as far as stereotype formation is concerned. Stereotypes may form as reflections of direct observation of a particular group; they may form as manifestations of expectations; or they may form as a combination of the two previous processes. Early researchers believed that stereotypes reflected "real" differences between groups. Recent researchers are reluctant to affirm the validity of those previous statements. Brown and Turner comment that "to some extent stereotype content is based upon direct observation and experience with group members, whether that observation is accurate or filtered by cognitive biases" (70). Nevertheless, their investigation seems to indicate that stereotypes are the result of the individual's perception of reality and his/her cultural background and knowledge, noting, "all our stereotypes of others will be from the perspective of our ingroup, and will be influenced by the norms of our ingroup. Presumably they are also influenced by knowledge, theories and ideologies shared within our ingroup" (84).

Several authors suggest that stereotyping is not an individual process, implying that stereotyping is a group activity, in the sense that groups share stereotypes. Haslam, Turner, Oakes, Reynolds and Doosje in the article "From Personal Pictures in the Head to Collective Tools in the World: How Shared Stereotypes Allow Groups to Represent and

Change Social Reality” comment that stereotypes are not mere personal images, they are also tools developed and shared by groups. In their point of view, stereotype formation is a “joint endeavour through which groups develop shared explanations of the world that allow them to represent social relations veridically and manage them appropriately” (184).

Mackie, Hamilton, Susskind and Rosselli, in the article “Social Psychological Foundations of Stereotype Formation” suggest that since each individual’s experience and interpretation of stimulus are unique, each individual’s group stereotypes will possibly be different. Nevertheless, since many of the influences on stereotype construction originate from a common social background, members of the same group share the content of several social stereotypes. Referring to the importance of group belonging in stereotype formation, these authors state, “Because stereotypes are deeply embedded in the fabric of a group’s culture, people learn them as part of growing up. To participate in a culture means, at least in part, learning and accepting what the culture believes about one’s own and other groups” (60). One might conclude that stereotypic constructions of groups are often socially transmitted and shared within a group.

Moreover, group belonging is also significant in other ways. For instance, belonging to a group and believing that group is better than other groups generates social identity and increases self-esteem. Since we inherently want to feel good about ourselves, we tend to value our own group more than other groups, leading to in-group favouritism. Steven Fein and Steven Spenser, in the article “Prejudice as Self-Image Maintenance: Affirming the Self through Derogating Others”, comment “negatively evaluating others has the potential to restore a positive self-image” (186). They also suggest that when the group’s self-image is threatened, negative evaluations of others increase. This idea will be useful when analysing the historical context behind Hollywood’s depiction of the Japanese people.

Another important characteristic of stereotypes is immutability. Stereotypes are difficult to change and once they are activated, they seem to be self-maintaining. Stereotypes are hard to change for several reasons: they are reinforced by society as a whole and because individuals are frequently not aware they are using them. Patricia Devine and Andrew Elliot in their article “Are Racial Stereotypes Really Fading? The Princeton Trilogy Revisited” comment on this immutability problematic, stating, “One of the main impediments to the fading of racial stereotypes is that they remain deeply

embedded in the cultural fabric of our nation” (98). They suggest that stereotypic images of minority groups are still prevalent in the media. Consequently, stereotypes persist within a culture not only in subtle but also in efficient ways, decreasing the possibilities of change.

Nevertheless, it **is** possible to change stereotypes using two different methods: providing individuals with information indicating those stereotypes are not true and, through direct interaction, where individuals come into contact with members of out-groups, and realise their stereotypes are not accurate. However, Allport had already suggested that direct contact could decrease but could also increase stereotyping. For this reason, Miles Hewstone in the article “Contact and Categorization: Social Psychological Interventions to Change Intergroup Relations” suggests that this sort of contact should be established under conditions of equal status, or else it could lead to negative consequences. Hewstone also suggests that the contact hypothesis is both appealing and naïve, as he explains, “It is appealing because (...) attitudes based on direct experience are relatively strong, held more confidently. (...) But the contact hypothesis is naïve, because it represents an inappropriate selection of target beliefs to be changed” (404). Although many scholars agree with the limitations of the contact hypothesis, they also support the idea that stereotypes can only evolve when the perceiver acquires knowledge and develops a new set of beliefs about that group.

As has been mentioned before, stereotyping involves a compare and contrast process. For this reason, several authors argue that when we categorise others, we implicitly categorise ourselves. Therefore, one might ask, how do we perceive others and ourselves and how do we express the existing relations between others and ourselves? Most scholars agree that “we” define ourselves in opposition to “them,” that is, we determine the characteristics of our in-group and contrast them with the characteristics we attribute to out-groups. From this perspective, we perceive other groups as the “Other.”

### 3. The “Other”

According to Michael Pickering, the concept of the “Other” has tended to replace the previous notion of the stereotype. However, the author believes that both concepts complement and enhance each other, exemplifying this in the following way,

to designate someone or some group or collectivity as Other parallels what is involved in stereotyping in that it is an evaluative form of naming or labelling which defines someone or some cultural grouping in reductive terms. The Other also parallels stereotyping as a strategy of symbolic expulsion, a mundane exorcistic ritual, used to control ambivalence and create boundaries (47-48).

Pickering’s explanation also seems to indicate that this notion is used in colonial and imperial discourses, in the sense that individuals attempt to separate themselves from the “subjugated” Other. The “Other” is, then, excluded and not allowed to integrate in the individual’s group, remaining apart for the purpose of comparison. For this reason, Pickering suggests that “Identity is in this way dependent on the difference that has been translated into Otherness” (49). What is socially rejected is projected onto the “Other;” fears or a lack in the group’s identity may result in using the “Other” as a solution to these concerns. Pickering explains how this process occurs, arguing, “The Other can be drawn into fantasies of desire, longing, envy and seduction in the interests of compensating for some perceived deficiency of cultural identity or estrangement from inherited cultural values” (49). These fantasies reinforce the power relation over the “Other,” denying them their true identity. Perceiving difference as “Otherness” is rejecting communication and contact between groups.

Throughout history, the “Other” was perceived in different ways. Pickering suggests that progress was the “measure” used to determine the stage of development of different societies. Comparisons were made between different cultures, establishing different phases of development; these were also made between the “dominant” group and the “Other.” The “dominant” group was advanced in terms of progress, allowing it to feel superior, using the “differences” found in other societies as explanations or definitions for the establishment of its own self-esteem.

This process of differentiating others and evaluating their stage of development led to the assertion of European supremacy and justified the right of “more developed” societies to rule over “less developed” ones. Nevertheless, different scholars consider classifying cultures according to stages of development an illusion, as Pickering states, “Primitive society has never existed” (57), meaning that “primitive” societies themselves are a western invention. Therefore, one might conclude that one cannot limit a society’s value to the place it occupies in the scale of progress.

Western societies constructed the “Other” in order to achieve self-definition, that is, definition was obtained by comparing “we” to “them.” The characteristics that classified the “Other” were the opposite of those which categorise the perceiver. However, this is a representation, meaning that the “Other,” as western societies perceive it, is an illusion. Pickering’s words clarify this point, when he claims that “Conceptions of the Other and the structures of difference and similarity which they mobilise do not exist in any natural form at all. There is no pristine, real Other out there” (72). Elaborating upon this idea, Pickering points out the importance of language, since it is through language that selves and others are characterised. It is through language and discourse that the construction of the “Other” is spread. Imperialist discourse, for instance, designates the “Other” as different, and this kind of classification reinforces dissimilarities between groups, because such discourse seems to confirm the solidity of those differences. Imperialist perspectives of the “Other” were disseminated by travel writers and novelists, as well as by social scientists.

One author that discusses many of the works written about the East as the “Other,” and who has contributed to the analysis of western dominance over the East and its consequences is Edward Said and his work *Orientalism* (1978). Although Said was primarily referring to countries of the Middle East, the notions associated with the term “Orientalism” might be applied in the case of the United States and its perception of Japan, since a relation of power and dominance was established between the two countries. Thus, it is helpful for this dissertation to consider Said’s arguments on this subject.

The term Orientalism, according to Said, refers to the collection of false statements and negative attitudes perpetuated by the West towards the East. The basis of his argument is the idea that western false and idealised images of the Orient served as a justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions. Said also argues in *Orientalism* that western writings on the Orient cannot be considered trustworthy in the sense that

Europe's colonial rule and political control over the East influenced the images western authors included in their works. These images do not aspire to objectivity, but are manifestations of western interests and power relations. In fact, Said suggests that concepts such as "Orient" and "Occident" are constructions, a product of western minds.

One of Said's main ideas is the notion of empires exercising domination through culture. He also supported the idea that the media themselves were imperialist. That is, empires tend to deliver through film and literature a certain set of values and conventions. In particular, Said focused on the dichotomy between "us" and "them" associated with the concepts of "superiority" and "inferiority." For Said, the West was interested in the East as a way to define and understand itself. Said also states that western scholars appropriated eastern history and culture and transformed them from their own perspective, that is, they created an Orient which was built to contrast with the West. According to this, Europe is the model or norm from which the Orient diverges. Said observes that western authors depict the Orient as feminine, submissive and irrational, contrasting with the West which is portrayed as masculine, dominant and rational.

Michael Pickering claims that the representation of Asians as the "yellow peril" provides a particular example of Orientalism. According to Pickering, "This is a term used to identify a long history and a huge accumulation of mythical representations of the East by the West" (148). Similar to Edward Said, Pickering argues that Orientalism is a western construction used for western interests, that is, to create a sense of superiority by contrasting itself with the East. Orientalism conceived the East through stereotypical images and ideas, making it **essentially** different from the West. Accordingly, Pickering remarks "Oriental stereotypes emerged as an attempt to control, through a unifying fixity of image, what was diverse and unfamiliar" (148). One might conclude that imperialist discourse tends to exaggerate differences between West and East and also to present those differences as permanent and absolute.

Representing others as the opposite of the self not only confirms self-identity, it also satisfies a wish for difference. The individual gratifies the desire for the exotic and mystery from a secure position. The perceiver observes the "Other" projecting onto it his/her fears, anxieties but also fantasies. The figure of the "Other" incarnates what is not allowed within the in-group. Pickering points out that in western minds, representations of the "Other" are attempts to make what seems to be strange look familiar, and what is

perceived as unsettling, comforting. However, this process has its reversal, that is, the stereotypical “Other” not only provides satisfaction in the exotic for example, but also generates apprehension towards what is unfamiliar. In both cases, the one who does the “othering” is in a safe position, since difference is outside his/her cultural boundaries. Pickering concludes, “Stereotyping attempts to translate cultural difference into Otherness, in the interests of order, power and control” (204). Indeed, stereotypes function as a way to maintain certain boundaries; categorising the “Other” allows the Self to separate what seems menacing from what is considered appropriate.

#### **4. Japan as the “Other”**

Throughout the last century, Japan was not depicted in relation with its own regional and historical context; it was portrayed in contrast with western culture. Therefore, Japan was represented as lacking western ways, qualities and abilities, instead of being portrayed within its own cultural framework. The Japanese were not represented with due regard to how they perceived themselves, but from a western perspective, that is, as the “Other.”

David Matsumoto in *The New Japan: Debunking Seven Cultural Stereotypes*, comments on the classic conceptualisations of Japan and its culture. From the several authors that became classics in the western understanding of Japanese culture, there are four that became widely known. For instance, Lafcadio Hearn in *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894) points out the Japanese ability to smile in the face of grief or danger and their sense of etiquette. Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) emphasises the Japanese tendency to be group-oriented and that they always take others into consideration before making a decision. Ronald Dore in *City life in Japan* (1958) prefers to highlight the strength and the self-discipline of the Japanese. Inazo Nitobe’s *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1969) emphasises the lack of spontaneity of the Japanese and exposes their self-control as a result of the samurai code and of its influence on the Japanese character.

All these authors offer a very similar portrayal of Japan. These concepts were probably grounded in the moral code of the feudal warriors, becoming idealised and institutionalised through time and through western perceptions. They represent the

Japanese as being polite, honourable, and loyal. Matsumoto explains the consequences of such similar portrayals, stating, “a fairly homogeneous picture of Japanese culture and society emerged (...). And these views undoubtedly influenced many contemporary perceptions of Japanese culture and psychology in important and fundamental ways” (9). After World War II, this portrait of the Japanese people did not undergo many radical alterations. In order to explain Japan’s success and economic recovery, western authors continued to use the stereotypic image of the Japanese as unicultural. Matsumoto believes that “Even relatively recent writing by noted scholars and authorities on Japan continues to portray Japanese people and culture as homogeneous” (13). In fact, Matsumoto maintains that even nowadays the Japanese are portrayed in a similar way to the way Hearn et al represents them. According to this author, the way the Japanese are portrayed has not changed or improved much over time.

Matsumoto affirms that the Japanese themselves also contribute to the dissemination of these stereotypic views about Japanese culture. He suggests, “This is what the Japanese want to think about themselves and this is how they want to portray themselves to the rest of the world” (20). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Japanese culture has been facing an evolutionary process and that Japan has been becoming a heterogeneous society. Previous characterisations of Japanese people are therefore no longer adequate representations of present Japanese society.

Matsumoto explores in his work seven known and generally accepted stereotypes about Japanese people. For instance, Japan is considered a collectivistic country. Its workers are described as valuing group interests, not individual needs or wishes. The idea of themselves as interdependent is another notion associated with the Japanese. Matsumoto clarifies this idea, commenting that they “are thought to perceive themselves in terms of the roles they play in society” (50). Moreover, people with interdependent self-concepts are thought to achieve things in life for the sake of others. Related to the stereotypes of collectivism and an interdependent self-concept, is the notion of interpersonal consciousness. The Japanese are perceived as being extremely aware of others and are known for considering others’ feelings and interests when making decisions.

The fourth stereotype that Matsumoto points out is Japanese emotionality. The Japanese are usually perceived as being emotionless or as hiding their true feelings, which contributes to the image of the Japanese as an inscrutable people. Another stereotypic

portrait is that of the Japanese “salaryman.” Commonly known as “samurai in suits,” this stale representation reinforces the idea of sacrifice for and devotion to the company. Matsumoto states, “This concept became extremely popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s, partially as a way to explain Japan’s economic recovery and boom” (68). Associated with this preconception, is the notion of lifetime employment, that is, employees work their entire lives for the same company. The company and the employee developed a relationship based on obligation and loyalty. This is one of the most prevalent stereotypes of Japanese culture, as Matsumoto indicates, “obligation, commitment, loyalty, sense of duty, and sacrifice are exactly those values and attitudes that have characterized Japanese culture in both classic and contemporary works” (75, 76).

The last stereotype analysed by Matsumoto is that of Japanese marriage. Traditionally, the male and female roles were clearly divided: men’s obligations were related to outdoors activities, while women were responsible for the household. According to Matsumoto, “The very structure and functioning of the Japanese household is firmly rooted in Confucian and other religious tenets concerning hierarchical relationships within the house” (80). However, research indicates that the Japanese no longer support these views of marriage or family life. On the other hand, there is an increase in the number of Japanese people who agree with independent lifestyles within the family circle.

Although some of the characteristics pointed out by Matsumoto have received some reliable scientific support, he emphasises the fact that there has been no support in recent psychological research to claim that these traits are still an integral part of the Japanese character, as he notes, “The evidence (...) challenges the validity of stereotypic notions about Japanese culture and society; rendering them more myth than truth, more fantasy than reality” (36). Indeed, Matsumoto argues that contemporary Japanese culture and society have changed in so many ways that it became problematic to accept the validity of previous stereotypical images, particularly the depiction of the Japanese as unicultural and homogeneous. Moreover, Matsumoto believes Japanese culture is in transition and that Japan is experiencing fundamental cultural change. In the Japanese case, the change of cultural values is happening so fast that is quite disorientating, especially in respect of the newer generations. For all these reasons, Matsumoto concludes, “Quite frankly, much (not all) of Japanese culture is simply different from what we have been led to believe – or want to believe” (174-175).

Stereotypical images disseminated by previous western works just do not apply as far as the newer generations are concerned. Young people are adopting new values and leaving behind the fundamental set of values held by the prior generation, that is, commonly held in Japanese society before the Second World War. This might be the result of the American Occupation, which tried to implant democratic and individualistic values in the Japanese society. For instance, Hiroshi Kitamura in the article “‘Home of American Movies’: The Marunouchi Subaruza and the Making of Hollywood’s Audiences in Occupied Tokyo, 1946 – 49” states,

During the period of American Occupation (1945-52), General Douglas MacArthur’s Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP) and the American film industry orchestrated a large-scale cultural campaign to promote democracy and pro-American values throughout Japan through motion picture exhibition. (...) the occupiers disseminated over 500 Hollywood features nation wide (99).

It is believed this exposure to American culture and values had a deep impact on Japanese society. Japan was commonly associated with chivalry and with other abstract values such as honour and pride. However, influenced by western cultures, Japanese society evolved into a hybridised culture, with different values, attitudes and behaviour. Conversely, Hollywood cinema itself continued to portray the Japanese, and Asians in general, according to the long-established stereotypical western view.

## **5. Orientalism in Hollywood cinema**

Has stated earlier, Asian characters are depicted in broadly stereotypical ways in Hollywood cinema. The use of stereotypes has specific purposes in the motion pictures industry. Gary Hoppenstand in the article “Yellow Devil Doctors and Opium Dens: A Survey of the Yellow Peril Stereotypes in Mass Media Entertainment” clarifies the use of stereotypes on film, suggesting that “Stereotypes function in highly formulaic story forms to 1) keep the action of the story moving, 2) detail character sketches without wasting time on unnecessary descriptions, and 3) create heroes and villains who are simply motivated, for good or for evil, and emotionally charged” (171). One might conclude that one of the

main aims in stereotype use in film is to reduce narrative complexity and save resources. Clint Wilson II and Félix Gutiérrez in *Race, Multiculturalism, and the Media: From Mass to Class Communication* seem to agree with this notion, stating that stereotyping “is a means of quickly bringing to the audience’s collective consciousness a character’s anticipated value system and/ or behavioural expectations” (61). The audience compares the value system presented to its own and fits the characters into established categories, such as “the hero” or “the villain.” Therefore, according to these authors, stereotypes function as “shortcuts to character development and form a basis for mass entertainment” (61).

Stereotypical portrayals of Asians were also part of the imperialist discourse in Hollywood films. Referring to the early decades of the film industry, Wilson II and Gutiérrez claim that almost every representation of non-whites was intended to reinforce white supremacy. They argue that due to “the low socio-economic status of working class Whites during the heyday of the industrial age, movie producers capitalized on audience insecurities by using racial stereotypes to bolster audience self-esteem” (73). While reassuring Americans’ confidence in themselves, these films allowed the audience to deal with its anxieties, which are often revealed to be fear of miscegenation and the disintegration of the western value system.

How Hollywood films portray Asians is a reflection of American attitudes towards the East. Thus, the representation of Asian peoples varies according to the political and economical context. In its characterisation of the East, Hollywood uses the process of contrasting Asians with Westerners. Since Asians are depicted as the “Other,” cinematic portrayals tend to focus on those aspects that are different or the opposite of western cultures; the Asian character represents everything the white character is not and vice-versa. Moreover, the East is depicted as exotic, enchanting and different because that is what the West is not.

Since the early decades of motion pictures history, Hollywood films have promoted white dominance, the protagonist usually was a white male and the values defended were those of white patriarchal society. Films generally associated being white, male and heterosexual with being successful and with ruling over others. Asian men were portrayed as evil, mean, treacherous because those characteristics were neither socially acceptable and nor morally sanctioned. The white male symbolised goodness and justice, and was

responsible for putting an end to Asian misdeeds. For instance, in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), the white protagonist fights against mystical evil Asian forces and frees innocent children enslaved by the Asian villain.

Another significant aspect is the portrayal of the Asian male as effeminate. This seemed to indicate Asian men's inability to attract white women, while white men were successfully paired with Asian women, indicating their fitness to liaise with and rule over other nations. When the Asian male played the role of a warrior, he was portrayed as a rapist or as a sexual predator. There is even a third strategy, the Asian male played a strong character, but still lacked masculinity in the sense that feminine companionship was denied to him. This representation of Asian males is still prevalent nowadays. For example, in films such as *The Replacement Killers* (1998), *Romeo Must Die* (2000) and *Kiss of the Dragon* (2001), the Asian male characters generally do not get romantically involved with the female characters, even though they save them.

In the female case, the way Asian women were characterised seemed to indicate possession of the necessary skills to conquer a man. Asian women were presented as a feminine ideal. In an age where western women were becoming emancipated, the western depictions of Asian females seemed to send the message that women had to be passive and submissive in order to please men. Western filmmakers idealised Asian females, and represented white males as being attracted to them, for that reason suggesting that western women had to follow this model in order to be attractive. Consequently, a following themes and motifs became popular in Hollywood cinema:

**\* Sacrifice narratives:**

Typical of these narratives is the interracial romance between a white man and an Asian woman. These stories generally have tragic endings. The Asian female usually commits suicide. She sacrifices herself in order to the white protagonist may be happy with his white wife. This storyline seems to support white imperialism; the white male conquers the "weak" East. The female suicide is used to legitimise western dominance. For instance, Lia's character in *China Gate* (1957), and Cho Cho San in *Madame Butterfly* are representative of female characters willing to sacrifice themselves for their white lovers.



**Figure 1. Cho Cho San (Sylvia Sidney) in *Madame Butterfly* (1932): the subservient Japanese female, kneeling beside her white lover, Lt. B.F. Pinkerton (Cary Grant).**

**\* Salvation narratives:**

In this kind of story, the white hero saves the Asian female from her own culture. The Asian woman is rescued from the dramatic consequences of being a woman in her own culture. These narratives were set in exotic scenarios in order to represent America's prominence in Asia. The male-female relationship is used as a metaphor to explore wider issues, such as white versus Asian or ruler versus ruled. Just as in the sacrifice narratives, the Asian character usually ends tragically. The dramatic ending supports the idea that western society did not wholly approve of interracial romance. *Japanese War Bride* (1952) and *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) are both examples of salvation tales. In both films, the white protagonist rescues the female characters from their difficulties.



**Figure 2. Mark Elliott (William Holden) rescues Dr. Han Suyin (Jennifer Jones) in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955).**

**\* Seduction narratives:**

Western filmmakers characterised Asia as mysterious and seductive. Distant locales, unknown cultures and “strange” habits appealed western curiosity. Since Asia was portrayed as feminine, the West desired to control it. This was depicted in film as the Asian female seducing the white hero, and the white male was dangerously attracted to this mysterious woman. Nevertheless, the fear of miscegenation determined that these stories had to end tragically. While the Asian seductress was killed or committed suicide, the seduced westerner had to find some way to redeem himself. Hollywood used this narrative structure to explore wider matters such as patriarchal society and female sexuality. For example, *Lady of the Tropics* (1939) is a seduction tale in the sense that the Euroasian female character, which is one of Hollywood’s archetypes of the mysterious East, seduces the white protagonist.



**Figure 3. Manon deVargnes (Hedy Lamarr) seducing William Carey (Robert Taylor) in *Lady of the Tropics* (1939).**

## **6. Recurrent Asian Images**

Hollywood usually limits its representations of Asian peoples to a restricted collection of clichéd characters. These characters are not explored in their full complexity or inner depth. That is to say, their portrayal is typically superficial and based on stereotypes. Besides being limited to a few stock characters, Asians are also not perceived as an integrated part of western society. The few possible Asian portrayals are constantly repeated in film industry, and Hollywood's storytellers recur to these stale representations, avoiding new directions or more challenging Asian roles. For that reason, it is useful to identify the most frequently portrayed roles for Asians in Hollywood cinema. What follows is an assembly of the most common Asian representations in film:

### **\* The Asian as a predator:**

Many different films have indicated that Asians are predators that invade America in order to exploit the country's resources. In more recent decades, Hollywood portrays Asians, notably the Japanese, as "samurai in suits," conquering American industry and

competing with American companies in unfair ways. Images related to the Asian mafia, such as the Chinese triads and the Japanese yakuza, have also contributed to this image of the “predator,” spreading crime and violence in American territory. This image was prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the appearance of Ridley Scott’s *Black Rain* (1989) and Philip Kaufman’s *Rising Sun* (1993), for example.

**\* The Asian as the villain:**

The Asian is not only the predator, but also the cruellest of villains. Indeed, several films use Asian characters to portray the villainous enemy of the white hero. They are often cast as gangsters and are frequently seen as aggressive, inhuman, violent and as ruthless men who have no mercy on their victims. They are most of the time associated with illegal activities, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and exploitation of illegal immigrants. One of the most enigmatic villainous Asian characters is Fu Manchu, created by Sax Rohmer in 1910, and adapted to cinema in several different versions. More recently, John Lone in *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and Jet Li in *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), are representative of Hollywood’s portrayal of the Asian as super villain.



**Figure 4. Wah Sing Ku (Jet Li) in *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998): the villain that smuggles illegal immigrants into the United States.**

**\* Asian males as asexual or sexually aggressive:**

The stories that portray romance between an Asian man and a white woman almost always have tragic endings, and Asian males are almost never successfully paired with white women. On the other hand, Hollywood often represents Asian men as sexually molesting white women, and as threatening figures trying to corrupt white society. Conversely, Asian males are not seen as a menace, but as sexually passive, effeminate males without sexual ambitions. Many Asian men are portrayed as not having love interests or family life, and when they do have a wife or family, they are seen as not valuing their wives and families. For instance, Charlie Chan, the detective created by Earl Derr Biggers and most of Jackie Chan's characters, are portrayed as asexual Asians. More recently, the film *Alfie* (2004) included a controversial character played by Gedde Watanabe, which corresponds to the stereotypical image of Asian men as being unsuccessful with the opposite sex. On the other hand, Asian males are also depicted as sexually aggressive as it can be seen in the film *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991).



**Figure 5. Chon Wang (Jackie Chan) in *Shanghai Noon* (2000): the asexual male, very uncomfortable with the idea of getting married.**

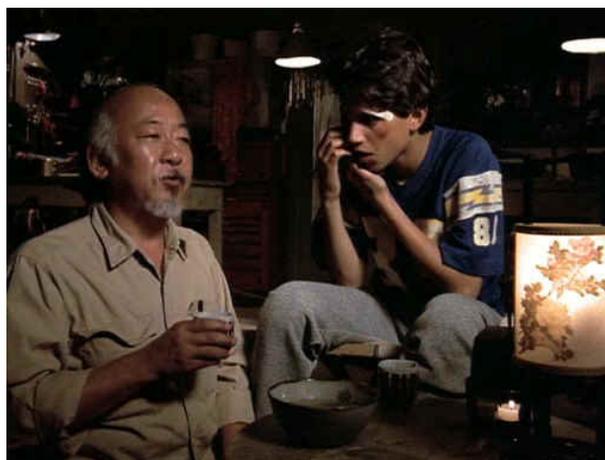
**\* The Asian as unqualified and undifferentiated labourer:**

Asian workers are widely seen as unqualified and are usually portrayed as lacking the necessary skills as professionals. Therefore, they are limited to a certain variety of clichéd jobs. They are often depicted in predictable occupations, which are frequently associated with unprivileged social classes, such as domestic servants, laundry men and

cooks (these labourers have been stereotypically known as coolies, who are usually associated with the Chinese). Consequently, audiences rarely have the opportunity to see Asians playing characters which have professions commonly considered to be prestigious, or even playing roles which reflect other aspects of everyday life, such as next-door neighbour, best friend, school colleague, and so on. John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924) establishes the Asian contribution to the building of modern America and perhaps best exemplifies the representation of Asians as unqualified labourers, during the construction of the transcontinental railroad.

**\* The Asian as the eternal foreigner:**

Asian people are portrayed as living in segregated communities (Chinatown or Little Tokyo), apart from American society. In fact, Asians are constantly portrayed as having thick foreign accents or speaking broken English. This seems to indicate that they cannot be absorbed into American community. Therefore, they are depicted as eternal new arrivals, which contributes to their representation as immigrants who are not able to assimilate within society. One of the best examples of this depiction is Pat Morita's character in *The Karate Kid* series (1984; 1986; 1989), Mr. Miyagi. Although Mr. Miyagi is a *nisei* (second generation), he is portrayed as not speaking English correctly and as living as traditionally as possible.



**Figure 6. Mr Miyagi (Pat Morita) and Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio) in *The Karate Kid* series: the eternal foreigner due to his limited use of English and dedication to bonsai trees.**

**\* The use of Asians as comic relief:**

Several films use Asian characteristics as raw material for easy gags. Distinctive elements, such as strong accents, comic names, facial features, short stature, among others, are used for humorous purposes. Indeed, some Asian characters in early films had no aim other than to provide comic relief. For instance, Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and Gedde Watanabe as Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles* (1984) are two examples of how Hollywood cinema used Asian characters as a form of ethnic parody for entertainment purposes.



**Figure 7. Mr. Yunioshi (Michael Rooney) in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961): the only purpose of his character is to provide comic relief.**

**\* The Asian female as “Lotus Blossom:”**

This stereotype, also known as “China Doll” or “*Geisha* Girl,” associates Asian women with exotic images. They are commonly portrayed as submissive, eager to please, extremely respectful and obedient, having a compliant attitude. Besides, they are widely seen as sacrificing themselves in favour of their beloved ones, especially if he is white. They are also represented as sexually available and favouring white men. In fact, many films seem to indicate that Asian women fall in love with white males at first sight. A few filmmakers, Sidney Olcott in 1915 and Marion Gering in 1932, for example, made different versions of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, the narrative of which clearly promotes

this stereotypical image. Machiko Kyo in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) is another example of the female character depicted as subservient.



**Figure 8. Lotus Blossom (Machiko Kyô) in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956): the Japanese female eager to please the white male.**

**\* The Asian female as “Dragon Lady:”**

Asian women are often viewed as double-crossing characters. They incarnate mean characters, traitors with no conscience or regret. They are depicted as scheming, dishonest, not to be trusted and manipulative. They also use their sexuality to deceive the white hero. Therefore, they are the female version of the Asian villain. They can also have mystic powers, which they use to seduce and control their enemies. The daughter of Fu Manchu, Fah Lo Suee, also created by Sax Rohmer, and adapted to film, is the archetype of the “Dragon Lady.” Anna May Wong in *Daughter of a Dragon* (1931) plays the role of a treacherous female. More recently, Ziyi Zhang in *Rush Hour II* (2001) also plays the villainous character.



**Figure 9. Princess Ling Moy (Anna May Wong) as the Dragon Lady, the treacherous female, in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931).**

**\* Asians as supernatural:**

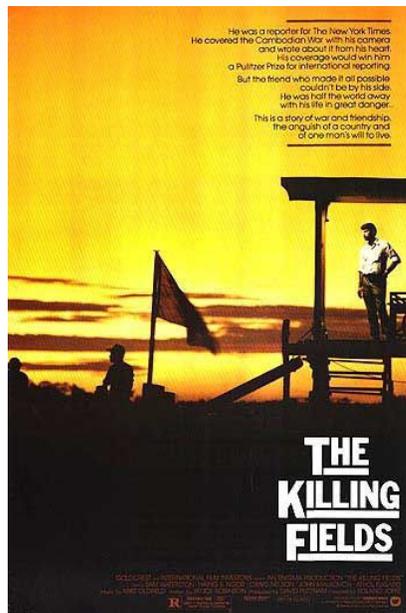
Asia is frequently associated with magic and enchantment. Consequently, Asian characters often have mystic powers. The mysterious characterization of Asians is used as a justification for magical elements in a film and no further explanation is required. For instance, John Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986) and Paul Hunter's *Bulletproof Monk* (2003) include Asian characters with mystical powers.



**Figure 10. Monk With No Name (Chow Yun-Fat) in *Bulletproof Monk* (2003): the mystical monk who does not grow old while protecting the sacred scroll.**

**\* Asians as background figures:**

It is noticeable that even in a film concerned with Asian settings and matters, the Asian character is relegated to a supporting role. Films that deal directly with Asian culture still have a white protagonist, pushing Asian characters into the background. Films such as *Come See the Paradise* (1990), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) and *Anna and the King* (1999) illustrate this point. These films seem to indicate that historical events such as American internment camps for the Japanese or the Chinese occupation of Tibet become meaningful to the West only when a westerner witnesses and testifies to it on the public stage. The British film *The Killing Fields* (1984) is a prime example of this phenomenon. The genocide in Cambodia becomes known only because a western journalist reported it. A Cambodian character, the guide played by Haing S. Ngor, is necessary to “authenticate” the suffering and this experience, but it must be refracted through a western character (and hopefully then taken to some place of redemption), which cannot be meaningful to those who endure the experience first-hand, since how the West feels about their suffering must be the least of their concerns.



**Figure 11. The western journalist reports the genocide in Cambodia in *The Killing Fields* (1984).**

This recollection of stereotypical representations of Asians demonstrates how restrictive Hollywood's portrayal of Asian peoples has been throughout the last century. It also exemplifies that western depictions of Asians has been constructed in a paradoxical way, that is, Asian males can be both sexually passive or aggressive, and Asian females are portrayed in extreme ways, both passive/ submissive and active/ manipulative. It is useful then to determine what motivates Hollywood's positive and negative images of Asians. The next part will demonstrate that American perceptions of Asian countries, focussing on Japan, vary according to the cultural, political and economical context. For instance, positive or negative images of the Japanese have as a common basis competitive commercial or political relations, which the United States and Japan have established between themselves. Edward Said supports the idea that "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relation of power, of domination, of varying degree of complex hegemony" (5). Such a relation of power and domination was established between the United States and Japan. However, the roles of the "dominant" and that of the "dominated" were not always stable. The variations in which country was in a perceived position of dominance certainly has influenced perceptions the West chose to transmit about the East. That is, American images of Japan vary according to the power relations between these two countries. Vincent Yzerbyt and Steve Rocher in their article previously cited, seem to support this idea, stating, "History and social psychology work alike show that dramatic changes in the social relations between two groups indeed affect their stereotypic views of each other" (66). The purpose of the next chapter is therefore to consider which events have motivated contradictory representations of the Japanese in Hollywood film and to present a historical perspective of the portrayal of the Japanese in mainstream cinema.

## **Chapter II**

# **Representations of Japan: A Brief Historical Contextualisation**

## **1. The 1900s and the “Yellow Peril”**

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the United States of America was one of the most desired destinations for immigrants from several parts of the world. The Chinese were among the first Asian peoples to arrive on the West coast. Chinese immigration began around 1848 with Californian gold rush. Japanese immigration began after 1855, when the Japanese government legally allowed its citizens to emigrate. The Chinese immigrated in such great numbers that in 1876 Senator Aaron Sargent asked the Congress to restrict the admission of Chinese immigrants. Sargent’s statements created feelings of hatred against Asians, which led to riots in several western states. This atmosphere of fear and suspicion towards the Chinese culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Japanese immigrants were similarly perceived in a negative way, especially after Japan inflicted a heavy defeat on Russia in the Japanese-Russian War of 1904-1905. In 1908, President Theodore Franklin struck an agreement, known as the “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” with Japan, restricting Japanese immigration. However, Anti-Asian sentiment still prevailed within American society, leading to the 1924 Immigration Act, which banned Asian immigration indefinitely.

Within such a social context, one would inevitably expect that the early depictions of Asians were not favourable. One of the first portrayals was the Asian as the invader, or the Asian hordes, popularly known by the offensive collective term the “yellow peril.” This portrayal was prevalent in early films, indeed seems to have been the dominant concern of filmmakers, since Asian expansion challenged western notions of imperialism. Different Asian cultures were represented as a homogenised mass, which was determined to conquer and rule the world. According to Gina Marchetti in her already mentioned work, this representation of Asian peoples has its origins “in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian Invasions of Europe” (2). Esther Ghymn in her article “Asians in Film and Other Media” also clarifies the meaning of this expression. According to her article, “yellow peril” refers to the fear felt by westerners in relation to Asians: fear of losing their jobs, fear of their relatives marrying Asians and fear of their neighbourhoods being “invaded” by Asians. As Ghymn states, “The phrase ‘yellow peril’ loomed like dark clouds over the general public’s sense of security” (136). This image not only prevailed in early cinema, it has also remained a recurrent theme throughout the following decades.

Another historical event stimulated western interest in Asia during this period, namely the Boxer Rebellion in China. In 1899, a secret group of Chinese Nationalists, known in the West as the Boxers, began this insurgency by terrorising foreigners and Christian missionaries. Their main goal was to expel all foreigners and Chinese Christians. One of main causes of this rebellion was Chinese resentment against the economic exploitation of China by several western nations and the military defeats imposed by Great Britain during the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and by Japan during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The character Fu Manchu appeared in this historical context, as a manifestation of western interest in Asian happenings, especially because Christian missionaries were being massacred. The Boxer Rebellion was also the inspiration for a series of films released by the Lubin Company in 1900. The short film *Beheading of the Chinese Prisoner*, which was publicised as a truthful testimony of the war, was in fact wholly shot at the Lubin studio in New York. Jan-Christopher Horak in *Before Hollywood: Turn-of-the-Century American Film*, asserts, “the exclusively Caucasian actors are dressed in traditional Chinese, rather than modern, dress, thus reinforcing contemporary stereotypes” (101). From the very beginning of motion pictures, Asian peoples were depicted in this stereotypical way.



**Figure 12. *Beheading of the Chinese Prisoner* (1900): the use of traditional costumes instead of modern Chinese dress indicates how foreign cultures were “imagined.”**

These films also started a long tradition, that of yellow facing. For several decades, Asian actors did not play Asian leading characters. Hollywood films resorted to well-known white actors in make-up to play Asian roles. This strategy was not exclusively used to play Asian characters; white actors in blackface also played black characters, most famously in *Birth of a Nation* (1915). However, while the history of blackface is well documented and analysed by film historians, yellow face is insufficiently discussed, indicating a minor interest in this phenomenon. Long after black facing was considered unacceptable, white stars still played Asian roles and were not criticised for doing so. Indeed, white actors continued to use yellow face characterisation long after it was considered to be politically incorrect to pretend to be black, because filmmakers believed Asian actors were not qualified enough to play the characters. The yellow face process was quite complex. It implied long hours of make-up and characterisation, as Ghymn points out, “After hours in the make-up studio, these stars emerged with bandaged eyes, bogus wigs and layers of yellow cream to look Asian” (135). In the case of male Asians, this technique also included buckteeth and thick round glasses.

Many well-known star and character actors were cast to play Asian roles. For instance, Warner Oland, Peter Lorre, Sidney Toler, Peter Ustinov and Boris Karloff played several Asian characters such as Charlie Chan, Mr Moto, Mr Wong and Fu Manchu. Myrna Loy became known for playing Asian characters in several films. Mary Pickford, Louise Rainer, Lana Turner, Fred Astaire, Paul Muni, Peter Sellers and others, all played Asian characters in Hollywood films. John Wayne, Marlon Brando and Alec Guinness also played Asian characters in films such as *The Conqueror* (1956), *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) and *A Majority of One* (1962) respectively.

Asian immigrants were first depicted in films as unskilled workers. They were distinctively portrayed as wearing long silk robes. Asian occupations were generally associated with cleaning, cooking and laundry services. Asians were restricted to these kinds of jobs partly because they were not allowed to execute other functions. Apart from establishing Asians as villainous characters and representing Asian immigrants as unqualified workers, early films also used the Asian character to provide comic relief. The film *The Terrible Kids* (1906), for example, shows a boy assaulting a Chinese man and pulling his hair. One might conclude that from the very beginning of motion picture

history, the stereotyping of Asians has been part of American films. In the early years, Asians were used in films essentially to present local colour and to provide cheap laughs.

### **The 1910s and Miscegenation**

Narratives involving interracial romance have been particularly popular in Hollywood film throughout the decades. According to Marchetti, Hollywood recurs to the topic of miscegenation “for complex reasons that seem to be related to economic, social, and cultural issues that have been part of the fabric of American history” (5). She also points out that these films are very lucrative, adding that they “use classical Hollywood narrative patterns to deal with issues ranging from racism to changing attitudes toward gender and class relations” (5). The miscegenation topic portrayed on film allows American audiences to reflect upon and revise conceptions of their identity. Representations of interracial love confront Americans with contradictory feelings: ideals of acceptance and tolerance towards other cultural groups, and the conservative notion of a homogeneous, white American society.

Marchetti also points out that Hollywood has demonstrated a particular interest in stories involving romance between whites and Asians, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. She argues that these groups were used “as signifiers of racial otherness to avoid the far more immediate racial tensions between blacks and whites or the ambivalent mixture of guilt and enduring hatred toward Native Americans and Hispanics” (6). Nevertheless, early depictions of miscegenation were illustrative of western anxiety towards Asian immigrants. Asians were perceived as being predatory in western society. Hoppenstand comments, “Their hunger for world domination – for the destruction of the Anglo-American and his civilization – was only matched by their hunger for the Anglo-American woman” (174). The threat of rape, the loss of white “purity” and consequently white society’s corruption, was the main argument in the films featuring miscegenation scenes.

Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat* (1915) and D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919) are illustrative of narratives related to the threat of rape of a white woman by an Asian man. Marchetti claims that “both narratives use the fantasy of rape and the possibility of

lynching to reaffirm the boundaries of a white-defined, patriarchal, Anglo-American culture” (10). According to Marchetti, *The Cheat* deals with ambivalent western feelings prevalent during this decade towards Japan. The male character, Hishuru Tori (Sessue Hayakawa), personifies the contradictory characteristics related to Japan, as Marchetti comments, “Like Japan itself, Tori is powerful, threatening, wealthy, and enviable; however, his racial difference also codes him as pagan, morally suspect, and inferior” (19).



**Figure 13. Tori (Sessue Hayakawa) and Edith (Fannie Ward) in *The Cheat* (1915).**

*Broken Blossoms* seems to suggest a more tolerant attitude towards certain interracial relationships. Opposed to *The Cheat*, which perceived Asians as a threat to the white patriarchal family, *Broken Blossoms* “sees the Western patriarchy as a site of violence, decay, and exploitation” (34), as Marchetti suggests. In this film, the Asian character, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), is associated with western perceptions of Asia as passive and submissive. As Marchetti remarks, Cheng Huan is a feminised character, and his “femininity” is reinforced by his costumes, gestures and posture.

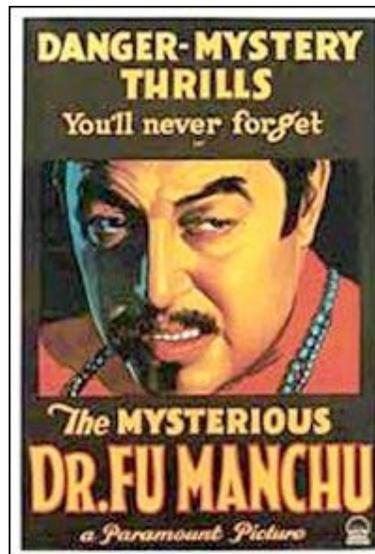


**Figure 14. Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess) and Lucy (Lillian Gish) in *Broken Blossoms* (1919).**

Several authors suggest that *Broken Blossoms*' message of tolerance might be partly the result of the Versailles Treaty and League of Nations discourse of acceptance and respect for other cultures prominent after World War I. *The Cheat*'s attitude of exclusion towards Asians seems to be linked with certain aspects of the suffrage movement, such as the emergence of African-Americans as a political threat. The film also deals with changes within women's social roles. Nevertheless, the tragic ending of both films (the Asian character is shot by the white female in *The Cheat*; the white female character dies and the Asian male commits suicide in *Broken Blossoms*), ensure that conventional values are re-established and that white "purity" is not corrupted. In *The Cheat*, Tori's intentions of possessing Edith (Fannie Ward) and Edith's wish for independence are both repressed. Referring to *Broken Blossoms*, Marchetti observes that Lucy (Lillian Gish) was "exposed and humiliated" (38) due to her contact with an Asian man, while Cheng Huan dies because he dared "to presume he could possess her" (38).

## The Villain in the 1920s

During the 1920s, in part due to the political chaos in China, Asians continued to personify the cinematic villain. The Fu Manchu character became once again prominent, with the release of *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929) and several other films depicting the insidious villain throughout the thirties. Jenny Clegg in *Fu Manchu and the "Yellow Peril:" The Making of a Racist Myth* asserts, "Chinese characters are generally used in film to represent the ultimate in evil, the better to highlight the superiority of western civilisation, whose law and order is upheld under the leadership of the white hero" (39).



**Figure 15.** Fu Manchu (Warner Oland) in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929).

Allen Woll and Randall Miller in *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television*, state, "The emphasis on the evil character of the Chinese and Japanese in many of the films brought criticism from the Asian governments which realized the powerful message that these films were carrying throughout the world" (191). Their protest resulted in occasional positive images. For instance, the character Charlie Chan appeared on the big screen as a response to the Chinese government complaints about the Fu Manchu character. Still, Asian-Americans were not pleased with western portrayal of Charlie Chan. In his article "Them and Us: Immigration as Societal Barometer and Social Educator in

American Film” Carlos Cortés remarks, “The Chan movies received justifiable criticism from members of the Asian-American community for their caricatures of Chinese-Americans” (62). The audience is not invited to take Charlie Chan very seriously since the resolution of the mystery is always accompanied by a Confucian saying, which provokes a comic effect.



**Figure 16.** Charlie Chan (Warner Oland) in *Charlie Chan in London* (1934), one of the many adventures of the Chinese detective which were very popular in the thirties.

Although Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan represent extremes at either end of the word spectrum the villain and the hero, it is possible to find common characteristics in both characters. According to Benshoff and Griffin in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, both Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan “embody the stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental – an Asian with superior intellect who is potentially untrustworthy because of his mysterious behaviour” (120). Until 1924 and the definite banning of Asian immigration, Chinese and Japanese peoples were presented in this stereotypical way in Hollywood cinema because they represented two types of threat, “economic competition for jobs and (...) corruption of white women and miscegenation” (183), as Richard Oehling argues in “The Yellow Menace: Asian Images in American

Film.” After 1924, the main interest was not the Chinese and the Japanese as immigrants in the United States, but rather the concern was with China and Japan as foreign powers.

It was also in the 1920s that an Asian actress was paired with a white actor for the first time. Anna May Wong, a Chinese-American, was the first woman of Asian descent to be paired with a white male on the big screen in *Toll of the Sea* (1922). Wong was also the first Asian-American actress to become a Hollywood star. However, her career was marked by a lack of diversity in the roles she played. She was either the exotic and docile “Lotus Blossom” as in *Toll of the Sea*, or she was the scheming, villainous character, the “dragon Lady” type, as in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924).

### **The 1930s and the Production Code**

The western image of the coolie evolved into the stereotypical depiction of Asians as domestic servants in the 1910s, when they were portrayed doing several domestic tasks. This portrayal changed again during the following decades into a manservant, the personal assistant of the white protagonist. Stephanie Larson in *Media and Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* remarks that “These houseboys, butlers, and valets are underdeveloped and asexual characters who seem to exist only to serve whites” (71). Indeed, these “loyal servants” reinforce the white protagonists’ social status. This type of character can be seen in films such as *The Son of Kong* (1933), *The Painted Veil* (1934) and *San Francisco* (1936), where apart from serving the white protagonists, they were also used as exotic elements.

During the 1930s, Hollywood began to depict Asians in a contradictory way. While the image of the Asian detective represented the Chinese and the Japanese in a more favourable way, the Asian villain was still a recurrent figure in adventure films, just as Asia remained associated with a certain laid of obscurity. For instance, during the second half of this decade, Hollywood released several films depicting the stereotypical image of the Asian detective. Peter Lorre played the Japanese Mr. Moto and Boris Karloff the Chinese Mr. Wong. Benshoff and Griffin remark that the fact that these two actors, known for their roles as mad scientists and monsters, were cast as Asians “suggests a cultural

connection between mystery, terror, and the Orient” (121). Boris Karloff, for example, was playing the role of Fu Manchu in this same period.



**Figure 17.** Boris Karloff during the yellowface process for his role as Fu Manchu.



**Figure 18.** Fu Manchu (Boris Karloff) in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932).

Clint Wilson II and Félix Gutiérrez have suggested that due to the anti-Japanese Immigration Act of 1924, the Japanese were no longer seen as a threat to American society during the 1930s. However, since it was perceived as a threat in East Asia, the Pacific and to China in particular due to its military expansionist policy, it was also negatively portrayed. China not only had to deal with Japan’s attacks, it was also facing chronic national problems and an incipient civil war, which commanded the attention of western news media and Hollywood accordingly depicted conflicts in China as harmful to its own people. The film *The Good Earth* (1937) illustrates the desperate suffering of the Chinese peasants.

A cinema landmark in this decade was the establishment of the Production Code in 1934. In relation to other cultures, the Production Code determined that they should be treated fairly. However, it also ascertained that scenes of miscegenation were prohibited.

Ruth Vasey in *The World According to Hollywood* points out the consequences of the Production Code's "rules," remarking that foreign cultures became as it were detached from specific national groups; instead they were to belong to a wider category, the alien. Countries became "mythical kingdoms" (101), as Vasey asserts, "so that film commerce abroad would not be affected by the casual insult of national stereotyping" (101).

As mentioned above, the two most prominent figures in this decade are Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Marchetti claims that Yen in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) is the conflation of these two stereotypes prevalent in Hollywood films. According to this author, Yen is both "polished but diabolical Fu Manchu and the cultivated and benevolent Charlie Chan" (52-53). In *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, the American audience, which had to deal with the Depression in their own country, could transpose its anxieties to a distant country, which was in effect in an even more desperate situation. The film also depicts miscegenation scenes, which passed Production Code censorship only one imagines because underneath all the make-up, it was possible to discern two clearly Caucasian actors pretending to be in love.



**Figure 19. General Yen (Nils Asther) and Megan (Barbara Stanwyck) in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933): the opulent scenarios contrasted with the Depression era.**

## The 1940s and the Legacy of War

Thomas Doherty in *Projections of War, Hollywood, American Culture and World War II*, points out that before World War II the distinction between Asian peoples was not very significant, claiming that, “in the American imagination, Asian peoples were an indistinguishable swarm of almondeyed, tallow-skinned multitudes” (134). However, as a result of the World War II, it became extremely important to differentiate the Chinese (American allies in the Pacific) from the Japanese. Consequently, in December 1941, *Time* magazine published an article entitled “How to tell your friends from the Japs,” to help readers discriminate their temporary enemies from their temporary friends.

The portrayal of the Japanese created ambiguous feelings in the audience, as Doherty argues, “Hollywood’s Japanese monsters from the id are at once perversely fascinating and cringingly unwatchable” (137). According to this author, cinema, though dependent on stereotyping, can also lend humanity to characters. Even a villain, when given a point of view, can generate empathy with the audience. Doherty remarks that consequently, almost never “was the Japanese enemy given an identifiable face, proper name, or prolonged reaction shot” (137).

Most American images of the Japanese during this period were extremely negative. Doherty remarks that these “projections provoked an impulse toward utter extermination” (134). The Japanese were portrayed in such a pejorative way that annihilation seemed desirable and reasonable. Frequent comparisons between Japanese soldiers and animals, and the dissemination of images displaying Japanese atrocities towards westerners were later intended to justify the use of the atomic bomb. In *Objective, Burma!* (1945) after seeing soldiers’ mutilated bodies, an American soldier exclaims, “Stinking little savages. Wipe them out, I say. Wipe them off the face of the Earth!” Littlewood suggests that all western images of the Japanese during the forties promoted the idea of the Japanese as subhuman, and John Dower in his book *Japan in War and Peace: Essays on History, Culture, and Race*, seems to share a similar opinion, commenting that Hollywood films portrayed the Japanese “as a peculiarly despicable and atrocious enemy. The caricature rarely varied, but rather became part of a ferocious crusade for vengeance” (39). According to Oehling these films highlighted “the barbarism of the enemy and the Americans’ basic decency” (199).

One remarkable aspect of the image of the Japanese at war is that it was the most negative depiction made of all American enemies. Indeed, Eugene Wong states that during the war period the Japanese were the main target of Hollywood's most derogatory portrayals, adding, "The Japanese were shown to be capable of any human atrocity, especially if the victims were unarmed, sickly, female, or generally defenceless" (156). From all the war films which in any way depict Japanese soldiers, Wong categorises *The Purple Heart* (1944) as "the most terrifying and incendiary product Hollywood ever would produce dealing with the Japanese" (157). Another interesting aspect is that Hollywood made a clear distinction between Germans and Nazis. Dower also points out that despite introducing "good" Germans in war films, Hollywood almost never depicted a "good" Japanese.



**Figure 20.** *The Purple Heart* (1944): the Japanese portrayed as heartless and inhuman.

These negative images created an anti-Japanese sentiment within American society that extended to Japanese-Americans. The Chinese community in the United States was portrayed in Hollywood films as fighting for their adoptive nation. For instance, in *Charlie Chan in the Secret Service* (1944), the Chinese detective is an agent of the American government, who has to investigate the death of an inventor. While the Chinese were seen

in a favourable light, the Japanese were perceived as traitors and sent to internment camps. According to Cortés, “Hollywood justified this treatment in *Little Tokyo, U.S.A.* (1942), which portrayed L.A. as a hotbed of disloyal Japanese immigrants” (63). However, as Cortés also points out, many Japanese-Americans fought for the United States in segregated military units, but it was only in 1951, with the film *Go for Broke!*, that their military efforts were at all recognised.

The harmful consequences of judging other cultural groups based on stereotypes and pre-conceptions can be observed in the events of World War II. Several analysts argue that the United States were unprepared for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour because they underestimated Japanese capabilities. Anglo-American observers based their judgements on pre-conceptions, believing that the Japanese were mere imitators and that could not think imaginatively. As Dower points out, “Prior to Pearl Harbor, it was common wisdom among Westerners that the Japanese could not shoot, sail, or fly very well” (266). Westerners did not think that the Japanese were able to plan and execute an attack as bold and as effective as the one on Pearl Harbour.

Even after the war, with a defeated, demoralised and non-threatening Japan, the portrayal of the Japanese did not improve much. Indeed, their portrayals continued to be unfavourable. For example, *Tokyo Joe* (1949) continues the practice of centring the movie in scenes of torture and brutality. However, this tendency began to change in the following decade, starting with *Go for Broke!*, which Wilson II and Gutiérrez suggest it was result of American guilt over Japanese relocation camps; also it was the product of the period of intense US reconstruction of Japanese domestic institutions.

### **Glamour and the 1950s**

Hollywood images of the Japanese became more sympathetic throughout the 1950s. After World War II, American fear was clearly focussed on the threat of the spread of international communism. While China was now depicted in a negative way, Japan was benefiting from a newly favourable relationship with the United States, being positively portrayed in mainstream cinema. Referring to *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Battle of the Coral Sea* (1959) and *Hell to Eternity* (1960), Oehling states that the Japanese were

depicted as “real human beings” (202), adding that “even in the portrayal of different values, those differences were handled sympathetically” (202). While Japan was represented in a more sensitive way in these films, China was portrayed as repressive and deceitful. Eugene Wong asserts that in a similar way to the Japanese, who were formerly depicted in a much more unfavourable fashion than the Nazis, during the Cold War, the Chinese were portrayed much more negatively than the Soviets. In this decade, the roles of victims and villains reversed, as Woll and Miller seem to suggest, “The heroic Chinese lost their beatific glow of the war years and became the enemy agents (...). The Japanese evil streak swiftly faded” (192).

This decade is also characterised by attraction to two main themes: the recurrent narrative of interracial romance and marriage, and the geisha world. In films depicting interracial relationships, the plot line generally revolved around an American military figure in Japan and his love interest, a Japanese woman. According to Benschhoff and Griffin, these relationships became more common since laws banning interracial marriage between whites and Asians were removed by American courts in 1954. Referring to films portraying the geisha, Gina Marchetti avers, “Throughout its history, Hollywood has had a romantic fascination with the geisha” (176). This deep interest reached its peak in the 1950s and early 1960s with films such as *Sayonara* (1957), and *My Geisha* (1962). This period coincides with the end of American Occupation in 1952, and “it appeared as if the geisha was Hollywood’s chief emblem of post war reconciliation” (178), as Marchetti claims.

Indeed, in these films the geisha personifies Japan itself. This feminine figure incarnates post war Japan: mysterious but dependent on the West. Marchetti argues that the character Hana-ogi (Miiko Taka) in *Sayonara* is a metaphor for defeated Japan. Japan was now perceived as a submissive country, needing western guidance. To reinforce this idea, the films which depicted interracial romance paired white almost always American men with Japanese women. White women were rarely paired with Japanese men, since that would challenge white male authority and identity.



**Figure 21. Hana-ogi (Miiko Taka) and Major Gruver (Marlon Brando) in *Sayonara* (1957): the “defeated Japan” embraced by the “West.”**

Hollywood transmitted the idea that Japanese women fell in love with white men because they were more appealing than Asian men. Their romanticised and idealised qualities reinforced white male dominance and superiority. Johnson presents a slightly different perspective on these same events, clarifying why images of white men paired with Japanese women disseminated so easily. She suggests that American occupation brought more western men than women to Japan; many Japanese women had become widows during the war; and the Japanese were extremely poor immediately after the war, and American soldiers were associated with food and other items that were in short supply for the Japanese. Johnson also argues that good-looking young Japanese men were “highly attractive to foreign homosexuals” (89) and that certain arts such as flower-arranging and the tea ceremony, often practiced by men, “has caused some American men to believe that all Japanese males are somehow unmasculine” (89). These assumptions may have contributed to the American soldiers’ confidence in themselves as suitable partners for Japanese women, and then not considering Japanese males as sexual rivals. In the case of white women, Johnson claims that they perceived the Japanese in two distinct ways: as sexually aggressive or as effeminate, but not as appealing male partners. Nevertheless, Johnson states that there are fewer portrayals of Japanese men paired with white women because “it is not likely that a man from a defeated country would have dared to make advances to a woman so clearly above him in status” (83). The reverse of this is found in the 1970s / 90s, as I will show in the third chapter with the film *Rising Sun* (1993).

On the other hand, these films might also be considered early attempts to portray the prejudice and difficulties faced by interracial couples in the post-war era. Marchetti points out how *Sayonara* (1957) contributed to audiences' awareness of these issues, stating, "*Sayonara* ostensibly makes a statement against racial intolerance" (126), adding that the film "argues that both sides suffered during the war" (130). Referring to *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), Marchetti argues that the film "uses romance as a metaphor for racial harmony and intercultural understanding" (111). Other authors have also commented on the key role played by these films in terms of social consciousness. For instance, Benshoff and Griffin suggest that *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955) might even be considered a social realist film with a strong political agenda in the sense that it deals with small-town prejudice against Japanese-Americans.

Esther Ghymn also considers *Sayonara* an innovative film in the sense that it reverses the public's expectations in relation to the love story ending. Different to the paradigm of *Madame Butterfly*, the Asian woman is not left behind. Ghymn suggests that the film's popularity "confirmed that the audience had become more accepting of interracial relationships" (140). However, despite these innovative aspects, these films still did not defy certain Hollywood's conventions. In her article "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck," Jessica Hagedorn claims that *Sayonara*'s tragic ending was the only way to pass the censors and their limitations on the representations of interracial romance, adding, "With one or two exceptions, somebody in these movies always had to die to pay for breaking racial and sexual taboos" (33).

During this decade, images of post-war Japan were glamorised. As Marchetti affirms, "Japan provided the perfect location for the new wide-screen Technicolor spectacles that appeared in the 1950s in response to inroads made by television" (179). This glamorised version of Japan was associated to a renewed country. The West created a "new" Japan reminiscent of "old" Japan, according to Littlewood. The same author states that this "new" Japan is perceived as "a place of tradition and spirituality whose concerns, above all, are aesthetic" (72). The 1952 film, *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, for example, illustrates this point. Referring to the American Reconstruction of Japan Patrick Smith in *Japan: A Reinterpretation* notes, "we not only fixed Japan and the Japanese in our minds as a certain kind of country populated by a certain kind of people; we went on to create the country and the people we imagined" (6). Aestheticisation of Japan was

therefore a strategy for covering over some of the unresolved and bitter legacies of the war (the internment camps as much as the prisoner of war camps and the dropping of the atomic bomb), which even liberal films like *The Bridge on the River Kwai* could not altogether conceal.

### **Social Changes in the 1960s**

During this decade, Hollywood gave form to western fears about “Communist China” by depicting the Chinese regime as a threat to Americans in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and as repressive towards its own people in *Satan Never Sleeps* (1962). The James Bond film, *Dr. No* (1962), for example might be taken to represent the refashioned Chinese as the post-war villain (played still by Caucasian Joseph Wiseman). Other films, such as *The Sand Pebbles* (1966) and *55 Days at Peking* (1963), although set back in early twentieth century, are intended to reinforce the pejorative image of the Chinese as drug addicts, untrustworthy and inhumane.

These negative portrayals of the Chinese tended to get softer throughout this decade. Benshoff and Griffin claim that America’s concerns about the spread of Communism in Asia changed from China and Korea to Vietnam. However, Hollywood avoided the Vietnam War as a theme for its films throughout the sixties. Due to the chronic political instability within the United States and the related political assassinations of President J. F. Kennedy and Martin L. King, as well as the Civil Rights movement, Hollywood focused its attention on the relations between whites and blacks and paid Asia very little attention.

In relation to Japan, Marchetti seems to suggest that post-Occupation Japan was still perceived as a subservient country, adding that the geisha character in films such as *My Geisha* (1962), “helps to cast Japan as the conquered enemy, the submissive servant to the conqueror America” (186). Similar to films in the previous decade, Marchetti claims that *My Geisha* uses the geisha as “a symbol for a desired female servility and passivity threatened by the women’s movement” (187). Indeed, within a cultural context marked by deep social changes, such as the rising divorce rate, and women’s emancipation, female images became even more ideologically determined. For instance, Marchetti claims that

films depicting the western ideal of Japanese women serve as role models to western women if they wanted to seduce a man. On the other hand, films which depict western women masquerading as Japanese females promotes white male fantasies in which the desire for the exoticism of a foreign woman can be rationalised since beneath the characterisation, the female character, is in fact white. The representation of the Japanese woman as submissive and eager to please contrasted with the rising independent spirit prominent first in American and the European women.

Esther Ghymn claims that Lucy Dell (Shirley MacLaine), pretending to be a geisha in *My Geisha*, “with her feigned gentleness, small steps, and soft voice, incorporated all the stereotypical mannerisms of a Japanese woman” (142). In a similar way, Mr. Yunioshi (Mickey Rooney) in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, became the archetype of stereotypical Japanese men. Reminiscent of propagandistic images of Japanese soldiers, Mickey Rooney is depicted with all the elements commonly associated with yellowfacing, but in an exaggerated way, in order to obtain a comic effect: enormous and clearly artificial buckteeth, slant eyes and round glasses. He also typically mispronounces the ‘L’ for the ‘R’, and shows an excessive (and presumably unhealthy) interest in his white female neighbour, Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn).



**Figure 22.** Lucy Dell (Shirley MacLaine) in *My Geisha* (1962): the archetype of the stereotypical geisha.



**Figure 23.** Mr. Yunioshi (Mickey Rooney) in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961): the archetype of the stereotypical Japanese men.

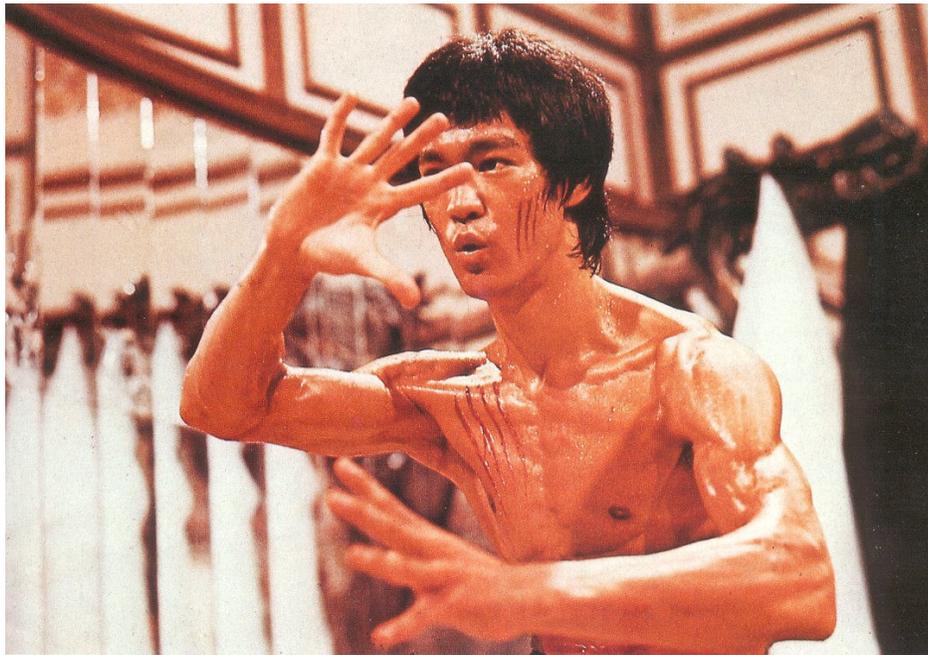
During this decade, the Asian male was portrayed as asexual even when he had a wife, family life or when paired with a white female. In *Bridge to the Sun* (1961) a Japanese diplomat, Terry Terasaki (James Shigeta), marries a white woman, Gwen Harold (Carroll Baker). What could be an innovative and unconventional portrayal of the Japanese male is however yet another representation of emasculated Japanese men. Marchetti seems to support this idea, stating, “Terry does not emerge as a triumphant hero of a new, nonhierarchical family but rather fades from view and eventually disappears as an ineffectual invalid doomed to extinction” (164). The sixties perpetuated old western images of the Japanese male. In a period when western women were assuming new social roles, films still persisted in representing Japanese men as unsuitable partners for white women.

### **The 1970s and Revisionism**

With the end of the Production Code in 1967, many aspects started to change in Hollywood cinema. As far as Asian depictions on the big screen are concerned, in the 1970s there occurred an outburst of kung fu actions films as part of the process of independent films breaking into the mainstream. Referring to these films, Benschoff and Griffin affirm, “Most kung fu movies were exploitation films – sensationalistic, violent, sexy and often cheaply made abroad in Hong Kong or other parts of Asia” (126). These films became extremely popular in the United States.

With martial arts films, the image of the Asian male began to change. The Asian male was now perceived as “a new type of hero: the martial arts expert” (142), according to Esther Ghymn. For instance, the original idea for the *Kung Fu* television series came from Bruce Lee. He wanted to be the protagonist, but the producers refused to give him the part. According to Ghymn, “it has been said that the part was given to David Carradine as the producers thought that Lee looked too Asian” (142). Bruce Lee returned to Asia and made *Fists of Fury* (1972) in Hong Kong, which then became very successful throughout Asia. Lee thereafter returned to the United States where he made *Enter the Dragon* (1973).

His intention was to create a new type of Asian hero, active and manly. Indeed, Bruce Lee embodies the sexual Asian male, different from previous depictions of asexual Asian heroes. Martial arts film success in the United States relied on Lee's charisma; his innovative fighting techniques and irreverent wildcat calls captivated audiences. Referring to Bruce Lee, Ghynn remarks that he "did pour fresh water into the stale images of Asian men, creating a strong Asian male image" (143).



**Figure 24. Lee (Bruce Lee) in *Enter the Dragon* (1973): the new type of Asian hero.**

Lee's characters on the big screen were a step forward in the representation of Asian males. Finally audiences were cheering for an energetic Asian male. His films became popular within a political context favourable to China, when President Nixon renewed American-Chinese relations in 1972. Wilson II and Gutiérrez assert, "From the mid-1970s, following the reopening of diplomatic and trade ties with China, the pendulum swung again in China's favour and Hollywood curtailed its negative portrayals" (94).

Lee's career was short and his contribution to progressive Asian images was curtailed because he died at the age of thirty-five, leaving behind only a few films.

Another significant aspect of the seventies is that the war image of the Japanese was revised. Several critics and scholars consider the blockbuster *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) an innovative film in the sense that it offers a more neutral portrait of the Japanese, representing them as human beings and worthy adversaries. For instance, this film tries to explain why Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, suggesting that the Japanese were forced to attack the United States in order to secure metal, rubber and oil resources to support their invasion of China. Another innovative aspect in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* is that it suggested that there were internal divisions among the Japanese, showing the conflict between the Army and the Navy. The older officers believed naval power was the key to victory, whereas the younger military strategists claimed that air power would enable them to win the war. Differently from war films from the 1940s, where the Japanese were portrayed as flawless and planning their actions cautiously, this film gives a more balanced vision of the events. Another groundbreaking feature in this film is that the Japanese are allowed to speak in their own language (with subtitles) and are not limited to the use of broken English commonly associated with Asians in mainstream cinema. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* purports to present a more impartial vision of the events, depicting both versions of the battle in the Pacific, the American and the Japanese perspectives on what happened. Referring to this film, Oehling comments, "For perhaps the first time in decades, the Japanese were played entirely by Japanese" (203).



**Figure 25.** A Japanese pilot in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970): the Japanese portrayed as worthy opponents.

## **The 1980s and Economic Threat**

The expression “samurai in suits” evokes in western minds the stereotypical image of a male class totally devoted to work. Japanese employees have been portrayed by westerners as willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their companies. According to David Matsumoto, “This concept became extremely popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s, partially as a way to explain Japan’s economic recovery and boom” (68). The Japanese work ethic and the Japanese workers’ spirit of dedication to the company intrigued the West, becoming a recurrent theme in Hollywood films. Nevertheless, John Dower argues that depicting Japan as an economic superpower implies the decline of America’s hegemony in the capitalist world, adding, “For the first time in modern history, a nonwhite nation has challenged the West by the very standards of wealth and power which for over four centuries have been associated with Western – and white – supremacy” (262).

According to Benshoff and Griffin, the economic recessions of the 1980s had as a consequence a revival of anti-Asian and particularly of anti-Japanese sentiment, since American workers in general felt that Japanese companies were overrunning western markets. This antagonism towards the Japanese was so strong within American society that these authors point out that even in a period of increasing cultural awareness and tolerance, stereotypical images of the Japanese persisted or returned in even more virulent forms in Hollywood films.

Johnson remarks, “During the late 1970s and early 1980s, newspapers and magazines were full of stories about the Japanese-U.S. trade imbalance” (134). Apart from the Japanese “flooding” the markets with their products, by the mid-1980s, the US dollar was relatively stronger than most other foreign currencies, which led to American goods being more expensive and Japanese exports being cheaper for American consumers. Consequently, the United States pressured Japan into revaluing the yen (as Asia is constantly trying to get China to revalue its currency today). Shortly afterwards, Japan was economically strong enough to buy real-estate and business companies in the United States and in other western countries, notably in Australia. Johnson comments that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sony Corporation acquired Columbia/ TriStar Pictures, Matsushita bought MCA/ Universal Studios, the Mitsubishi Real Estate Company acquired the

Rockefeller Centre and Minoru Isutani bought Pebble Beach Golf Course in California. What started as pique curiosity and a little admiration soon changed into suspicion and resentment. The rising Japanese economy was perceived in western minds as a threat to American prosperity. David Desser points out that although other countries, namely Great Britain, possess much more real-estate in the United States than the Japanese, it was the Japanese acquisition of American companies in particular that generated anti-Japanese feelings in the wider community.

Due to this unstable economic context, the image of the strong Asian men which appeared in the seventies, was weakened by images of ageing, frequently sexless Asians who helped to defeat other Asians. For example, in *The Karate Kid, Part II* (1986) Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita) helps the white protagonist to defeat the Japanese opponents. *The Karate Kid* series were released during a transitional period. In the early 1980s, the Japanese were not yet considered a serious threat to the West, but its extraordinary economic recovery aroused curiosity in westerners, who tried to understand the secret of Japanese efficiency. Moreover, these films obey a simple formula that became unexpectedly popular during the 1980s: a wise Asian mentor and a young white hero who learns martial arts. Apart from the return to the sexless Asian male stereotype, Mr. Miyagi is depicted as the eternal foreigner. He is portrayed as not speaking very good English, although his character is a *nisei* (second generation). In fact, several conventional visual signs, such as his house decor for example, serve to reinforce his ethnicity, and also to keep him apart from American society.

In the article “The Martial Arts Film in the 1990s,” David Desser argues that the Asian master is portrayed as an old man and as passing on his legacy to a white hero, because his character represents symbolically the West’s better ability to use Asian skills and knowledge. In other words, the white hero uses Asian methods against Asians. This same idea was transposed to the business context. Westerners were more than willing during the competitive Reagan years to learn Japanese strategies and apply them in their own corporations in order to defeat their economic competitors.

Therefore, after a period of more sympathetic portrayals, the representation of the Japanese became negative again. Since the Japanese had come to be perceived as serious economic competitors to the United States, they became associated once again with violence, crime and corruption. Consequently, the business image of Japan revives many

of those negative aspects of the war image and transposes them to an up-dated context clearly associated with illegal activities.

After this brief historical presentation of Hollywood images of Asian peoples, with particular emphasis on the portrayal of the Japanese, one might conclude that these images are deeply ambivalent, highly contingent and directly influenced by historical events. Richard Oehling argues this with this statement, “The image of both the Chinese and the Japanese in the media depended more on political factors among the dominant Caucasian population of the United States than upon the characteristic behaviour or attitudes of either immigrant group” (185). According to Pickering, the extent to which stereotypes of any cultural group have proved open to or unreceptive to change depends on the historical and social conditions in which they function. Events such as World War II or commercial tensions caused a tremendous shift in western perceptions of Japan, creating new stereotypes or reanimating old ones. Indeed, over the past century, certain stereotypes are recurrent and adapted to new circumstances. Again, Pickering suggests that “Stereotypes remain fairly stable for quite considerable periods of time, and tend to become more pronounced and hostile when social tensions between different ethnic or other groupings arise” (12). Indeed, World War II was responsible for disseminating the most pejorative images of the Japanese, confirming Pickering’s statement. However, John Dower draws our attention to the fact that both countries had preconceptions of each other which predate their encounter in war. According to him,

It required Pearl Harbour and Singapore to destroy the myth cherished by Caucasians that the Japanese were poor navigators and inept pilots and unimaginative strategists, for example, and it required a long, murderous struggle to rid the Japanese of their conceit that the Anglo-Americans were too degenerate and individualistic to gird for extended battle against a faraway foe (260).

In this chapter, it is possible to observe a contrasting range of American attitudes towards the Japanese. Sheila Johnson summarises them, thus “rage and fear during World

War II, pity and compassion during the occupation, admiration and curiosity during the late 1950s and 1960s, followed by a return to fear (this time of Japan's impact on American industries) mixed with appreciation for her products during the 1970s and 1980s" (3). In their work mentioned in the first chapter, Patricia Brown and John Turner point out that stereotype content indicates the way we explain the world. There is generally more than one way to explain the different situations that may be presented to us. Therefore, there is generally more than one collection of depictions to characterise and represent a group. According to these authors, "The content produced on any given occasion will be the content that best allows us to explain and make sense of the differences we perceive between groups in the light of relevant theories and knowledge" (88).

This chapter also allows us to reach another conclusion, that the Chinese and the Japanese exist in an oppositional relationship in respect the United States. According to Johnson, "when one nation is being viewed in the light of the favourable stereotype, the other will be saddled with the unfavourable epithets" (10). The easiness with which these contradictory images were inverted between the Japanese and the Chinese suggests how vulnerable and malleable public opinion is and how easily victims are turned into villains and vice-versa. What seems to be a paradox is the remarkable rapidity with which Japan changes from ally to rival in the eyes of the West. Richard Oehling suggest that Hollywood images of the Japanese are equally volatile because, "As a profit-center industry, Hollywood has been particularly responsive to what it thought was public opinion at any given moment" (183).

Japan started as being seen as an exotic place, submissive to western will. This early image changed during the decades, alternating with positive and negative images, until Japan was depicted as an economic threat to the West. However, Japan is still the focus of a changing process. Once portrayed as a powerful nation and as economically strong (in terms of trade, it practically had no rival), Japan's economy is now perceived as weaker and the country is considered stagnant, in economic recession. Negative images of Japan related to their business practices continued throughout the 1990s. However, as the effects of the Japanese economic recession became more apparent, Hollywood's representations of the Japanese changed again. More neutral images and positive portrayals were disseminated at the turn of the Millennium. The reasons that underlie these depictions

will be analysed in the Final Considerations of this dissertation, while the third chapter contains a more detailed analysis of certain films which are illustrative of Hollywood's treatment of the Japanese in the last twenty years.

## **Chapter III**

# **The Japanese in Recent Hollywood Cinema**

## 1. *Black Rain* (1989)

Recent images of Japanese business started to be shaped by Ron Howard's *Gung Ho* (1986). This film explores the difference in business techniques used by Americans and Japanese. It seems to support the idea that for the Japanese their work and their company is a priority in their lives, above that of their families. The film transmits the notion that Japanese companies are successful because their employees work as a cohesive whole, evoking a collective spirit commonly associated with old Japan. On the other hand, westerners try to show the Japanese that family and individuality are also important. The film's main goal is to indicate that both nations can learn from each other.

This film explores the difference in business techniques used by Americans and Japanese, depicting both the Japanese and the Americans in stereotypical ways in order to obtain a comic effect. Ian Littlewood suggests, "the apparent even-handedness is a fraud. The faults on the American side are superficial (...) whereas those of the Japanese are central to the values of their culture" (54). Consequently, the Japanese are portrayed one-dimensionally, as work-obsessed, sacrificing their family lives for the sake of the company. For instance, one of the characters prefers to be at work rather than with his wife who is giving birth. The western heroes of the film teach the Japanese to value their families, proving the "superiority" of western life style, as Littlewood remarks, "The Japanese have learned humanity. By comparison, the American lessons are trivial. What presents itself as a humorous conflict of cultures is, in fact, a celebration of American culture" (54). One might conclude that the film's main goal is to reassure American values and reinforce the belief in the American system.

*Gung Ho* also started to shape the western notion of "working together" in order to face economic competitors. For instance, Sheila Johnson notes that "*Gung Ho* reflected the thinking of many Americans in the mid-1980s, who concluded that facing up to the challenge of Japanese business might be the best thing that had ever happened to the American economy" (142). That is, having to face Japanese competition united American people in an effort to "defeat" the Japanese, thus reviving their own economy. Nevertheless, the lack of an American effective response to the Japanese economic advances contributed to a darker and more negative portrait of the Japanese. In Ridley

Scott's *Black Rain*, the Japanese are associated with crime, as a reflection of American growing anxiety towards the Japanese economic threat.

In this film, the city is depicted as overwhelming, disproportionate, sinister and chaotic. Osaka is a highly industrialised city, filled with factories, chimneys, and pollution. It is portrayed as having a degraded environment, which contrasts with bright lights and neon signs; the combination makes a surreal setting. The city suffocates the foreigners, who feel lost and confused. *Black Rain*'s Osaka (often compared to Los Angeles in *Blade Runner*, 1982) is a perfect symbol for the modern way of life and its negative consequences.

It is worth remembering that Ridley Scott had already imagined a "Japanese" future in the above-mentioned dystopian *Blade Runner*. When Scott imagined the future, when he designed futuristic Los Angeles, he had already projected Japanese elements into the city. For example, Japanese high-technology, massive neon advertisements and bright lights (now familiar in western representations of Japanese metropolises) were part of Ridley Scott's predictions. He also portrayed Los Angeles as a place of extremes, showing a world of contrasts, the high and low of society.

*Black Rain* constructs its main characters based on opposites. The Japanese are associated with collectiveness and westerners with individualism. The Japanese policeman, Masahiro (Ken Takakura), remarks, "Perhaps you should think less of yourself and more of your group, try to work like in Japanese." These words seem to imply that the Japanese favour team work, while the American officer, Conklin (Michael Douglas), replies, "If there was one of you guys who had an original idea, you'd be so tight you couldn't even pull it out of your ass!" This sarcastic comment points out the importance of individuality and of having self-identity. Conklin points out the relevance of having "original ideas." His statement also alludes to another prejudice commonly applied to Japan, that is, the Japanese as imitators. Conklin perceives the Japanese as commercial reproducers, who can copy and improve western innovations, but cannot create nor have original ideas.



**Figure 26. Conklin (Michael Douglas) and Masahiro (Ken Takakura) in *Black Rain* (1989): the confrontation between American and Japanese values.**

This film revives the negative image from the war period and transposes it to a business context. Therefore, its portrayal of the Japanese villain does not challenge Hollywood's previous depictions of the stereotypical Asian villain. In this film, the villain is the adaptation of the traditional Japanese warrior to modern settings. Faithful to the samurai spirit, the genuine Japanese warrior refuses to use fire arms and prefers the sword. The death scene in *Black Rain*, where the villain kills the American police officer by cutting his head off, is reminiscent of former samurai images. Ridley Scott adds a few new elements to this traditional Japanese use of the sword. The scene is set in an empty car park and the villain is on a motorbike. It is a mixture of "modern" and "old," metropolitan setting and traditional decapitation. Referring to this particular scene, Ian Littelwood remarks, "The use of the sword reveals both a primitive satisfaction in the act of killing and an inhuman detachment from the emotions that would normally accompany it" (186). The villain performs the death scene speechless and emotionless, characteristics usually associated with the samurai figure. This intense scene becomes even more dramatic in the sense that Conklin witnesses his friend's death, not being able to save him, suggesting that America is also in a hopeless situation before cold Japanese efficiency.

The film deals with other complex issues, such as American guilt over the dropping of the atomic bombs, indicating that they were accountable for the radioactive black rain that fell subsequently. This can be perceived in Sugai's (Tomisaburo Wakayama) words,

I was ten when the B-29 came. My family lived underground for three days.  
When we came up the city was gone. Then the heat brought rain. Black rain.  
You made the rain black, and shoved your values down our throats. We forgot  
who we were. You created Sato and thousands like him.

This comment refers to the corrosive effect Americans had in Japan. It seems to suggest that the American Reconstruction of Japan was not entirely positive, but it brought materialism, corruption and other social effects that have negatively influenced Japan. *Black Rain* also seems to imply that industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation are all unhealthy by-products of westernisation. Consequently, Conklin is portrayed as an atypical hero. He is not a very likeable character, and he is associated with corruption, since he himself is being investigated by the Internal Affairs. The attitudes of his character seem to reinforce the idea that the Americans are not entirely blameless for America's situation nor without responsibility for some of the ways that Japan has developed.

One film whose characterisation of the Japanese differs from the generalised negative images from the late 1980s is Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* (1987). Not following the general trend might explain the film's relatively disappointing results at the box office for one so normally fail-safe as Steven Spielberg, as Anthony Barker in the article "*Blood Oath/ Prisoners of the Sun* (1990) and the Return of the Japanese Prisoner of War Camp Movie" seems to suggest, commenting, "*Empire of the Sun* was poorly received because its frank admiration for Japanese sacrifice and endeavour was out of step with the need to decry the very qualities that made Japan once again influential" (31). Jim's (Christian Bale) passion for flying and airplanes is associated with kamikaze pilots and Zeros. There is even an iconic scene where Jim magically touches one of these planes and salutes Japanese pilots. According to Andrew Gordon in "*Steven Spielberg's Empire of the Sun: A Boy's Dream of War*," this particular scene symbolises Jim's identification with Japanese leadership. Gordon states, "The Japanese are stern, angry fathers whom Jim admires. He identifies with the aggressor, learns their language, and even earns the grudging respect of Sgt. Nagata" (123). Since one of the main themes of this film is precisely the child's search for the parents, Jim is attracted to Japanese control. His interest in Japanese ritual and martial discipline is in sharp contrast to pervasive American anxieties about Japanese buy-outs of American cinema studios and take-overs of American business companies.



**Figure 27. Jim (Christian Bale) in *Empire of the Sun* (1987): saluting Japanese pilots, who he perceives as brave soldiers.**

## **2. *Rising Sun* (1993)**

The film *Rising Sun* recurs to an old stereotype to portray the Japanese, the Asians as hordes, the Japanese image as invaders, evoking the notion of “Yellow Peril.” This recalls the audiences of the fear and anxiety felt in the late nineteenth century, when Asian immigrants “invaded” American territory. In this film, the Japanese are not only intruders, but also predators. They are portrayed as willing to conquer American companies, resources, market and women. In a similar way to *Black Rain*, which transposed warrior characteristics to the modern Japanese villain, *Rising Sun* transposed the western stereotypical image of the samurai to the image of businessmen. The film represents therefore, the Japanese as business warriors, who are literally at war, according to Eddie Sakamura (Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa), when he states, “Business is war.” David Matsumoto points out this comparison, stating, “Although the cultural attributes are translated to the contemporary corporate world, the underlying image of the Japanese is the same that of the bushido warrior” (17). Instead of challenging old stereotypes, Hollywood films tend to adapt former stereotypes to the modern world and to new cultural circumstances.

In *Rising Sun* the portrayal of the Japanese remains extremely negative, since they are perceived as a threat to western society. For instance, the possible Japanese dominance over white women is still seen as a menace by the white males, as Lt. Tom Graham (Harvey Keitel) exclaims, “They are plundering our natural resources,” referring to Eddie,

surrounded by two white females. Nonetheless, the film also seems to criticise American attitudes towards this Japanese “invasion.” According to Graham, they are the ones who are “giving the country away.” The film draws the audience’s attention to what is happening to American society, as Ian Buruma in *The Missionary and the Libertine, Love and War in East and West* remarks, “the story has two leitmotifs that are bound to appeal: the decline of America, our way of life, etc., and a clearly identifiable enemy” (263). The film tries therefore, to motivate Americans to react against Japanese dominance.

The film also tries to demonstrate that Japanese culture has positive and negative aspects. For instance, Capt. John Connor (Sean Connery) explains to Lt. Webster Smith (Wesley Snipes) that the Japanese “fix the problem, not the blame.” That is, they find out what is wrong and repair it, and no-one is blamed, while the Americans concentrate in finding the guilty ones and do not solve the problem. Therefore, Connor concludes, saying, “Their way is better.” The film also indicates less favourable aspects, such as, how the Japanese treat mixed-blood descendants and disabled people. Jingo Asakuma (Tia Carrere), the computer expert, refers to this when she states, “To the Japanese being deformed is shameful.” Buruma considers Jingo as “a useful character, because she represents the perfect target for Japanese bigotry. (...) Her story offers an opportunity to expound a little on Japanese racism” (265). Jingo’s characterisation was conceived to emphasise western “superior” moral values and suggest Japanese intolerance. That is precisely why Connor, the white protagonist is paired with Smith, a black police officer, that is, to emphasise American society’s relaxed pluralism.

Western and Japanese societies are depicted in another contrasting way. While the Japanese are portrayed as giving less importance to individuality, American characters highlight the importance of human rights. For instance, the film insinuates that the Japanese find the girl’s death insignificant. She was not an important or known entity, thus her death was irrelevant. This image clearly contrasts with American ideology, where every individual is important, regardless of his/ her social status.

Although Japanese businessmen are depicted as being respectful, formal and polite, their hidden side indicates that they recur to less dignified techniques in order to succeed. Americans feel humiliated because they have been beaten at their own game. They taught Capitalism to the Japanese, now the pupils have surpassed the master. Americans envy their business tactics, and are resentful for Japanese successful economy. This

dissatisfaction is manifested through Graham, who openly shows his antipathy for the Japanese and expresses his disdain for their business success. He also seems to be resentful towards his own country for allowing this “plunder.” When he utters the words “we are giving this country away,” he is referring to American passivity in not fighting back. He dislikes the American attitude of inertly observing the Japanese overrunning the country, and not taking measures against it. In his opinion, the notion of crime and corruption connected with the Japanese should stimulate the American government against Japanese economic competition.

When John Connor asks Graham his theory about the crime, he answers bitterly, “My theory is that these guys are known world-class perversion freaks.” Ian Littlewood, clarifies that “The Japanese male is not much associated with sex, since that would trespass on the westerner’s fantasised rights over the Japanese woman, but when he does show any sexual inclinations they are usually perverse” (180). Therefore, Littlewood concludes that the film evokes the “old stereotype of the lascivious oriental” (181). This stereotype related to Japanese male sexuality seems to evoke old images of the Asian as sexually aggressive. It also seems to reject the idea of Japanese men being successfully paired with white females. Since white males’ dominance is threatened, negative stereotypical representations emerge as a way of re-establishing western conventional social roles. On the other hand, the depiction of the white protagonist is clearly positive. Richard Dyer, in his book *White*, states that *Rising Sun* stresses the dominance of the white man. In a scene where Connor and Smith, interrogate a security guard, Dyer remarks about Connor, “The light catches Connery’s temples, while Snipes and the guard are in darkness. Connery is literally but also figuratively enlightened, the light emphasises his forehead, or, in effect, his brain” (101). In this case, Dyer points out the fact that studio lights are used to indicate white superiority. He knows the Japanese habits, he understands their customs and uses this knowledge to benefit western society.

Despite the distrust and aggressiveness felt towards the Japanese during this period, the film introduces many unfamiliar elements of Japanese culture and language. Japanese words are commonly used, and their meaning explained throughout the film. There are also references to typical aspects of Japanese culture, such as *taiko* drums, samurai swords, women in kimono and *origami*. Another example is Agent Smith’s interest in Japanese culture; he is intrigued by Connor’s house and its Japanese decoration motifs, and he is

learning Japanese. One might conclude that the film uses these elements to emphasise Japan as exotic, portraying it as the “Other.”

The novel presents a darker vision of the Japanese. Michael Crichton’s *Rising Sun* (1992) is a wake-up call for American society. Ian Buruma clarifies that the book was published earlier than first announced because the social context could not be more appropriate, “at the height of the Japan-is-buying-up-the-US hysteria in spring 1992” (262). Detective Graham’s antagonism towards the Japanese is never clearly explained in the film, while the novel reveals details of Japanese cruelty inflicted on prisoners of war, suggesting that Graham’s uncle died in Japanese medical experiments. Michael Crichton’s wit can be seen in Graham’s contempt for Japanese products and sarcastic commentaries, such as when asked by another police officer “you want some sushi?” he responds, “No thanks. If I get a craving for mercury, I’ll eat a thermometer.”



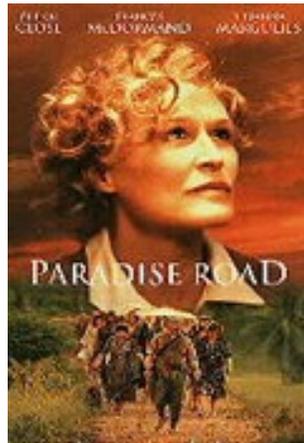
**Figure 28. Smith (Wesley Snipes), Graham (Harvey Keitel) and Connor (Sean Connery) in *Rising Sun* (1993) in the Nakamoto Tower: Graham complaining that the elevator should speak in English.**

This negative portrayal of Japanese men persisted throughout the nineties. In 1997 *Paradise Road* was released, continuing to depict the Japanese in a pejorative way. In this film, the Japanese soldiers, especially the camp commanders, are represented as being fanatics, sadists and extremists. *Paradise Road* leaves a cruel and intense impression of the Japanese. Their negative characteristics are even more emphasised since their target is women. The punishments inflicted are brutal, including burning a woman alive or being made to kneel for hours surrounded by pointy sticks. There is also the constant threat of

rape by the Japanese soldiers. These images of torture, violence, the possibility of rape, starvation and executions depicted in this film are reminiscent of the war image prevalent in Hollywood propaganda films during World War II.

The women held prisoner in Japanese war camps have to endure unbearable suffering that is not portrayed so intensely in other films depicting the Japanese and male prisoners in imprisonment camps. In fact, these women are beaten, humiliated, neglected, left to die, they have to bury their own friends, and live in filthy conditions. The film also deals with a theme that western films have tended to avoid, that is, “comfort women.” *Paradise Road* seems to suggest that all those terrible conditions could disappear, if they became mistresses of Japanese officers. In this film, there is the constant menace of sexual aggression towards the female prisoners, and being a “comfort woman” is the only alternative given to a life of harsh imprisonment and abuse.

Although the central theme of the film is survival in a scenario of extreme circumstances, the final message is forgiveness. One of the prisoners, Daisy Drummond (Pauline Collins), comments, “I just can’t bring myself to hate people. The worse they behave, the sorrier I am for them.” These words reveal a maternal perspective, since she mentions “behaviour”, suggesting a mother that forgives a child that has misbehaved. On the one hand, she represents Christian forgiveness, on the other hand, her reaction seems to indicate a patronising attitude, in the sense that forgiveness is a “superior” act, that is, the person who forgives is morally superior. This film appeals to the basic human instinct of group acceptance and feeling good about oneself. The female captives define themselves as opposed to their captors and are able to increase their self-esteem in the sense that they are able to forgive, reinforcing their moral values. *Paradise Road* evokes old stereotypes related with the extremely negative war image the West promoted in the forties. However, James Berardinelli points out the attempt made to avoid portraying Japanese soldiers as incarnations of evil, when he remarks, “While one of *Paradise Road*’s themes is the barbarity of war, it manages to present its case without demonising the Japanese (indeed, it goes to great pains to paint a few of them as sympathetic).” The film tries to give a human dimension to these Japanese soldiers by allowing them to sing along with the choir the female prisoners have organised without their consent. A response to music, in contrast to the brutality of war, is the film’s symbolic device to suggest a shared humanity between captors and captives.



**Figure 29. *Paradise Road* (1997): the story of western women as prisoners of war in Japanese camps.**

### **3. *Pearl Harbor* (2001)**

The film *Pearl Harbor* is the American version of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. What the audience sees is the American perspective of what happened, and consequently, the main focus is on the white protagonists and the triangle love story. For that reason, the representation of the Japanese is very limited. The film includes a few generic scenes focusing on the Japanese. For example, there are scenes of planning the attack, where we see the Japanese officers defining their strategy, and scenes of pilots and mechanics preparing the planes for the raid.

There are only a few specific scenes, which reveal how Hollywood perceives the Japanese in a World War II film directed in the turn of the millennium. For example, an interesting, though very brief, scene is a phone call between a local dentist and Tokyo. The Military Intelligence Service intercepts the call and the interpreter is a Japanese-American. The interpreter says the dentist did not know who he was talking to. After that, we see an officer talking to the Admiral about this call, remarking, “It sounds like someone in Japan is sneaking around, asking a local citizen the location of our carriers.” Both these comments emphasise the idea that the Japanese-Americans living in Hawaii were not traitors, or somehow collaborating with Japan. The officer even calls the dentist “a local

citizen,” reinforcing the idea that Japanese-Americans were loyal to their country. With this particular scene, the film is trying to suggest that the generalised panic installed in the United States and which led to the internment of Japanese-Americans in camps, was unjustified. Although *Come See the Paradise* shows the difficulties caused by this policy, very few attempts were made in Hollywood cinema to deal with this historical event.

In the scene after the attack, where one of the nurses, Evelyn, is outside the clinic marking the wounded with lipstick, there is a Japanese doctor who tries to help a soldier. However, the soldier reacts negatively, pushing him away, screaming, “Don’t touch me, you Jap. Get your hands off me.” This indicates that for some, everyone who looked Japanese were the enemy, even Japanese-Americans, American citizens, who were also fighting for their country and who wanted to help. This brief scene symbolises the strong antagonism that emerged after the attack to Pearl Harbour. Again, it was this sentiment of suspicion and anger felt by the Americans in relation to the Japanese that led to the decision to transfer Japanese-Americans to internment camps.

Several critics believe that the film reflects an excessive or deadening political correctness due to its over simplified characterisation of the Japanese. Michael Bay, the director of this film, and the producer, Jerry Bruckheimer, are known for their commercially successful blockbusters. Having in mind profitable Asian markets, the filmmakers involved in this production depicted the Japanese in an anodyne way. For instance, there are no sadistic characters, which would correspond to the old stereotype from World War II, nor is there a real villain. The Japanese soldiers are portrayed as brave, resolute but also several times as mere robots executing orders. One might conclude that a big budget production like this avoided a negative portrayal of the Japanese in order to be profitable in worldwide box-offices. The importance of succeeding in Asian markets can be seen in the absence of references to the Japanese as “Japs,” “suckers,” and “sons of bitches” from the Japanese version, but which are included in the western version.



**Figure 30. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in the blockbuster *Pearl Harbor* (2001).**

Roger Ebert, referring to this plain representation of the Japanese, comments, “As for the movie’s portrait of the Japanese themselves, it is so oblique that Japanese audiences will find little to complain about apart from the fact that they play such a small role in their own raid.” Concerning the dialogue between the Japanese characters Ebert remarks, “They state facts but do not emerge with personalities or passions.” The Japanese are not shown rejoicing about the successful raid and even Admiral Yamamoto (Mako) would have preferred to “find a way not to fight a war.” Robert Brent Toplin suggests a similar idea, stating in *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, “*Pearl Harbor* provides no well-characterized cinematic villains. (...) *Pearl Harbor* portrays them critically but not unsympathetically. The Japanese strategists appear thoughtful and, at times, almost regretful about launching the attack” (112). One might conclude that this film has no innovative Japanese characters and that the characterisation of the Japanese is reminiscent of previous Hollywood depictions of one-dimensional Japanese soldiers. The audience does not have access to their human side, nor to their feelings or motivations. The reasons that led the Japanese to attack the United States are not completely perceptible in the film, that is to say, there is no sense of geopolitics at all. *Pearl Harbor* illustrates therefore the recurrent practice of using Asians as background figures, mentioned in the first chapter. In a film depicting the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, where the Japanese would seem to

have a more prominent role, they are once again pushed into the background, not playing a particularly significant role.

Apart from the dentist, the interpreter and the doctor, there are no Japanese characters, nor are other Asian nationalities depicted in the film, which according to Ebert is incomprehensible, as he suggests, “The almost total absence of Asians in 1941 Hawaii is inexplicable.” After the attack, the Japanese soldiers become even more dehumanised. At the end of the film, when they are searching for the American pilots that came down on Chinese territory, the audience sees their faces only vaguely and what they say has no subtitles, which contributes to their characterization as a group and not as individuals. One might conclude that in a film where the depiction of the Japanese is conditioned by politically correct considerations, stereotypical views of the Japanese prevail, since there is fear of risking a more innovative and unconventional portrayal.

A film that contrasts greatly with *Pearl Harbor* is *The Great Raid* (2005), which is a revival of the 1940s war film. In fact, aesthetic techniques such as fade of colour, are used to give the film a forties look. It is also redolent of propaganda film’s ideology, where the Japanese were depicted as the incarnation of evil and the American heroes were the personification of goodness. The film presents a very negative vision of the Japanese, clearly suggesting that they preferred to kill the prisoners instead of allowing them to be rescued, the initial scenes of the film depicting American prisoners being burnt alive by the Japanese.

In order to indicate contrast between Japanese and American value systems, the Japanese soldiers are portrayed as committing *hara-kiri*, meaning that they would rather die than surrender. This is the reason given for Japanese mistreatment of their prisoners of war in this film; that is, they brutalise American prisoners because they do not respect soldiers that prefer to surrender rather than die.

Clearly contrasting with *Pearl Harbor*’s attitude towards the Japanese, in this film the portrayal of the Japanese is highly pejorative. Nonetheless, some commentators believe that this is only a realistic view of the historical facts. There are numerous publications and evidence documenting Japanese war crimes and atrocities committed during World War II. Perhaps not concerned about the return from mainstream politically correct positioning, they opted for a more visceral and graphically violent niche audience. In order to portray

the Japanese soldiers as capable of perpetrating such actions, *The Great Raid* evokes the old stereotypical war image of the 1940s, that is, the Japanese as sadistic and inhuman.



**Figure 31. Lieutenant Colvin (Logan Marshall Green), Major Gibson (Joseph Fiennes) and Major Nagai (Motoki Kobayashi) in *The Great Raid* (2005): the brutal camp commander.**

#### **4. *The Last Samurai* (2003)**

Captivity narratives have been extremely popular in Hollywood film throughout the decades as they had been in early American literature. These stories usually involved settlers being held captives of Native Americans. Fanny Wiggins Kelly's *Narrative of my Captivity Among the Sioux Indians* (1874) and Minnie Buce Carrigan's *Captured by the Indians: Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in Minnesota* (1903) are cited on the internet among the most popular texts of this kind. In the early stages of motion pictures history, these stories usually portrayed a white female being captive of an Asian culture, as it can be seen in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* and *Shanghai Express*. The idea of abandoning one's culture to adopt the captor's culture was dangerously unattractive from an ethnographic perspective. *The Last Samurai* is therefore an innovative film, in the sense that in previous depictions of captivity narratives, it was not probable or desirable that the

captive was a man, since he was the one who would rescue the white female from the Asian menace. The film also challenges former views of western cinema, since during his imprisonment the white male decides to adapt to and adopt this new culture.



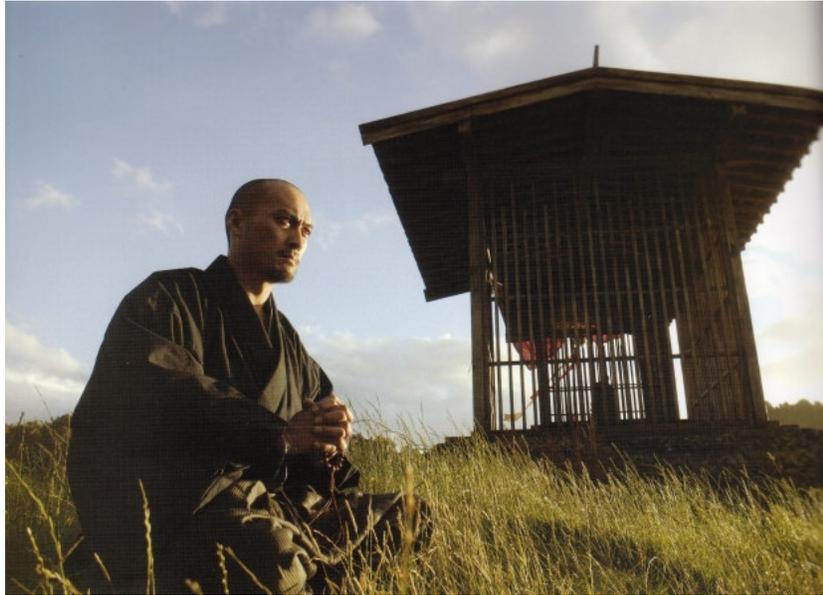
**Figure 32. Algren (Tom Cruise) in *The Last Samurai* (2003): the “western samurai” receives a sword with the inscription – “I belong to the warrior in whom the old ways have joined the new.”**

The film starts by showing how western society perceived the Japanese in the late nineteenth century. Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) is told that the samurai are “savages with bows and arrows.” The word “savages” implied that they were not organised, that they had no fighting tactics or strategies, and so on. Consequently, in Algren’s mind a comparison with the Native Americans was made. Associating the Japanese warriors with the Native Americans he had been fighting against, Algren writes in his diary, “I am hired to once again stop the rebellion of another tribal leader - apparently the only job for which I’m qualified.” He calls the samurai a tribe, setting them apart from the Japanese in general. Another connection is made; the samurai, just like Native Americans, had to be exterminated, because they seemed to oppose progress and were an impediment to technological advances (the railroad, for example). Their unsophisticated weapons were

ineffective and helpless against modern ballistic weapons. For all these reasons, Algren perceived the samurai to be an inferior people that would easily be subdued. Algren's perception of the samurai is a reflection of the western mentality in relation to the Japanese so soon after the opening up of Japan. Japan was considered "inferior" in the eyes of the West, in terms of technological progress. This notion implied that Japan needed western guidance, and so existed in support of the dominant imperialistic discourse.

As a prisoner, Algren uses his time to learn more about his captors. He soon realises that they are not "savages." Nevertheless, Algren is not the only one interested in knowing more about different cultures. Katsumoto (Ken Watanaba) is also interested in learning more about his captive. He explains to his enemy why he decided to keep him alive, "Many of our customs seem strange to you, and the same is true of yours." These words indicate that Algren was not the only one surprised by all the differences he found in Japanese culture. The Japanese also found the West a peculiar and intriguing place. Therefore, this feeling of strangeness and suspicion was reciprocal.

*The Last Samurai* seems to break previous Hollywood codes. For instance, the film has innovative Japanese characterisations, not depicting the male characters in a traditional one-dimensional way. They are complex and portrayed with inner depth. Even the secondary characters are enriched with humane characteristics. Katsumoto, for example, is a multifaceted character, even paradoxical and contradictory in certain scenes. At first, he is depicted as a stereotypical warrior, extremely serious, rigid, rational, cold and distant, not sensitive to other people's feelings. On the other hand, he is portrayed as having a spiritual, insightful side. The audience sees him meditating, praying, observing cherry blossoms, searching for the perfect flower, and writing poetry. This might seem an innovative feature, when in fact it is based on an old stereotype promoted by Inazo Nitobe, as Ian Littlewood points out, stating, "The conviction that the true Japanese warrior was as much concerned with poetry as with battle is again derived mainly from Nitobe, whose *Bushido* deliberately grafted the ethic of the warrior onto the contemporary image of aesthetic Japan" (191). Therefore, one might conclude that although Katsumoto's depiction is innovative in some aspects, it still corresponds to the western ideal of a Japanese warrior. He embodies the perfect leader, personifying dignity and honour; characteristics that Hollywood has long associated with Japanese warriors.



**Figure 33. Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe) in *The Last Samurai* (2003): the warrior’s spiritual side.**

Nevertheless, *The Last Samurai* is a step forward as far as the portrayal of the Japanese is concerned. The warriors have a human dimension, and the audience has access to their feelings and motivations. Even Algren’s most inflexible adversary, Ujio (Hiroyuki Sanada), who is not talkative and has a grim facial expression, is given a human side when he embraces the task of teaching Algren the samurai fighting skills. We see him proudly looking at his apprentice when he achieves the high standard a samurai should have. Katsumoto’s son, Nobutada (Shin Koyamada), is another secondary character who has vivid features. The audience sees him rejoicing when Algren speaks his first Japanese words.

The film recurs to another Hollywood strategy when portraying foreign cultures, that is, the film depicts the male warrior body as spectacle. The samurai are portrayed as larger-than-life warriors. The audience has access to their training, where their physical agility is emphasised. Their stoicism, their determination and integrity contributes to their portrayal as “higher” beings, depicting the samurai as idealised warriors.

Product of an era of the readier acceptance of difference, the film portrays the Japanese as a tolerant people. They are the ones who accept difference, allowing a stranger to integrate in their close community. Algren even introduces western elements into the community, teaching the young children how to play baseball. This might be seen as a metonym of the post second world war reconstruction, where during the Occupation, Americans introduced western leisure activities into Japanese society.



**Figure 34. Algren (Tom Cruise) in *The Last Samurai* (2003): teaching the children how to play baseball, a metonym for the American Reconstruction of Japan after World War II.**

The film also seems to challenge the emotionless stereotype, commonly associated with the Japanese, as discussed by Matsumoto in the first chapter. What Algren says about the village inhabitants is quite relevant. He describes them as being layered individuals, remarking, “Everyone is polite, everyone smiles and bows, but beneath their courtesy I detect a deep reservoir of feeling.” These words suggest that they do not show their inner thoughts, they repress their real feelings. Although they apparently seem serene and untroubled, this does not mean that they are emotionless, or mechanical. They just do not demonstrate openly their anxieties. For instance, Taka’s (Koyuki) suffering facial expression reveals that there is a lot more going on in her mind and heart than what she articulates.

Although this film has managed to move on from previous presentations, certain stereotypes still prevail. For example, the villain Omura (Masato Harada) is a very stereotypical characterization. He only thinks about profit and how he can personally benefit from new circumstances. He is also disloyal, treacherous, scheming behind the Emperor's back, manipulating him and taking advantage of his inexperience. His characterisation is very similar to previous Asian villains, in terms of being associated with corruption and illegal activities.

Taka, Algren's love interest, is also depicted in a stereotypical way. She is depicted as being polite, submissive, elegant and delicate. Only once do we see her telling Katsumoto that having her husband's killer in her house is unbearable. However, she obediently accepts her brother's decision. She plays the passive role frequently given to Asian females, which became known as the "Lotus Blossom" stereotype. Although she feels humiliated by Algren's presence in her home, she is kind and polite to him, even smiling at him. She is "playing" the traditional Japanese female role, which was stereotypically perceived as subservient and respectful towards men. Moreover, although she tries to resist at first, she succumbs to the white male's enchantment (the fact that he is her husband's executioner seems not to be significant). She is attracted to his romanticised western nature: loving, caring man; family protector, transmitting the notion of safety and security (he defends her family during a ninja attack); publicly showing affection. In fact, Algren openly shows interest in her children, spends time and plays with them, which was not common among Japanese men. This is another stereotypical idea associated with Japanese males, which is prevalent in Hollywood cinema. In *The Last Samurai*, Japanese warriors are not associated with family life, nor seen as paternal (at least not in a heavily idealised western way). For instance, Nobutada lives in his aunt's house and not with his father. When he is dying, Katsumoto does not express his love in words or gestures, only with his facial expression. On the contrary, we see Algren hugging and caressing Taka's oldest son when he is crying. Another contrast between western and Japanese males is demonstrated when Algren helps Taka with domestic tasks even after she clarified that Japanese men do not participate in those activities, to which he simply replies, "I am not Japanese." One might conclude that this film is not far from previous depictions of Asian males as cold and oppressive. In this particular case, the samurai are deprived of romantic

interests. Contrasting with this depiction, the western male emerges as the ideal partner. Taka falls in love with Algren, asserting the appeal therefore, of white masculinity.

*The Last Samurai* also portrays the Japanese in other stereotypical ways. First, it represents the Japanese as hard-working, a western idea that has been prevalent throughout the decades. This stereotypical view can be illustrated with Algren's words, "They are an intriguing people. From the moment they wake up, they devote themselves to the perfection of whatever they pursue. I have never seen such discipline." This image of the Japanese people as extremely organised, trying to achieve perfection was especially prevalent during the eighties. Secondly, the film contributes to the recurring idea of Japanese culture as inscrutable. Algren supports this notion when he states, "There is so much here that I will never understand." He points out that some aspects of the Japanese culture are "forever obscure" to western society, reinforcing the idea of "the mysterious East." These statements imply that Japanese culture is so different that it is not reachable, suggesting that Japanese society is beyond western understanding.

Algren, as opposed to Japanese warriors, is characterised as a soldier who has lost his soul. He was a man with neither scruples, nor integrity, mentioning, "For \$500 a month, I'd kill whoever you want." Even though Algren is haunted by agonizing memories of slaughter, he will repeat the experience again for the right price. As a symbol of America and its values, Algren suggests that the West is a materialist place. Therefore, one might conclude that the film tries to illustrate the dangers of modern society, that is, technology, trade, sophisticated weaponry, globalisation, capitalism, and so on. All these aspects are responsible for the annihilation of traditional way of life. Accordingly, Philip French in his critical review categorises *The Last Samurai* as the type of film "where the hero turns against what he comes to see as the shallow, materialistic civilisation in which he was reared, and embraces a supposedly more primitive but in fact far richer culture." In other words, Algren rejects a greedy and self-centred society and integrates in a community that encourages the values his former culture is lacking in or has turned away from. Therefore, a comparison can be made between *The Last Samurai* and *Dances with Wolves* (1990) since both films narrate the story of a westerner who learns to respect a different culture. Similar to Kevin Costner's character, Algren realizes that his society does not represent his aspirations, and starts to identify himself with the values of this new culture. Certainly, the film deals with complex themes, such as western anxieties, the

danger of American hegemony, western responsibility towards subjugated nations, and America's fear of losing its power, influence and dominant role in the world scenario.

Related to this topic Roger Ebert states in his review that *The Last Samurai* "breaks with the convention that the western hero is always superior to the local culture he immerses in." At first, Algren feels superior because he believed white culture is implicitly superior. White supremacy was not much questioned at this time, when western powers had colonies and imposed their rule upon such territories in the late nineteenth century. As a captive, his attitude and mentality changed, since he had time to observe this culture and recognise its worth. However, at the end of the film, he once again plays the "superior" role, lecturing the Japanese on what it means to be Japanese. It is hard to escape the feeling that, although this film is innovative in certain aspects, such as Japanese character development, it still portrays Japanese culture in a submissive position in relation to the West. The West reveals therefore, its moral "superiority" by teaching the Japanese to honour their past and value their traditions.

The film's title, *The Last Samurai* anticipates the tragic ending, suggesting that the samurai are doomed to extinction. In a film where traditional values and old customs collide with an emerging westernisation, the modern is clearly going to prevail. The last samurai, Katsumoto, is killed on the battlefield, because he does not accept the modern way of life and obviously prefers the old habits, remaining therefore loyal to his principles. The representation of Tokyo in the film also reinforces the prevalence of westernisation. Being a mixture of old and new, the portrayal of the city recalls the western guide, Simon Graham's (Timothy Spall) words, when he asserts "The ancient and the modern are at war for the soul of Japan." Rapid modernisation was in direct confrontation with tradition. Westernisation was sweeping away ancient conventions, such as the samurai top knots. Nobuta is forced to cut his hair in public as a symbol of the imposition of western ways in the East. The film clearly suggests that progress and westernisation, though beneficial in some ways, is bound to have negative consequences, which might be seen as a reflection on the present American position in international affairs. For instance, the Bush Administration and its aggressive pre-emptive foreign policy has upset other countries, which have therefore become more sceptical in relation to the ideals that America seems to stand for.

I will be looking at films which represent a more independent spirit and possibly newer ways of looking at the Japanese in the next chapter. However, since the particular features of Hollywood cinema stand out more when analysed and interpreted in comparison with other national cinemas, it might be useful here to compare Hollywood's depiction of Japan with another film released in the same year as *The Last Samurai*, that is, the Australian film *Japanese Story* (2003).

The main innovative aspect of *Japanese Story* is that it portrays a relationship between an Asian man and a white woman, which is quite unusual in mainstream cinema. At the beginning of the film, the protagonists are depicted in oppositional ways. However, this strategy is not used primarily to emphasise cultural differences, but to accentuate the characters' conflicting personalities. Sandy (Toni Collette) is loud and graceless, while Hiromitsu (Gotaro Tsunashima) is quiet and reserved. Their clashing personality, different educational profiles and cultural backgrounds influence their relationship. Different patterns of education and discipline condition individuals differently. For that reason, Sandy and Hiromitsu have different values, different visions of the world and different attitudes towards their personal difficulties.

To illustrate this statement, when Sandy and Hiromitsu are lost in the desert, Sandy desperately wants to call for help, whereas Hiromitsu refuses to admit that they need to be rescued. After solving the crisis on his own, he explains to Sandy that if one causes problems, one is responsible for resolving them. That is one aspect of Japanese culture which Sandy cannot understand at first. However, the film does not emphasise the protagonists' differences as the result of a cultural clash, it offers them as highly individualised examples of their respective backgrounds.



**Figure 35. Hiromitsu (Gotaro Tsunashima) in *Japanese Story* (2003): lost in the desert, he feels responsible for solving the problem he caused.**

Furthermore, the Japanese male body is here presented as spectacle, but in a different way than it is depicted in *The Last Samurai*. In *Japanese Story*, the male body is the object of awakened desire and eventually veneration of the white female character. After his death, this veneration becomes even more significant, as images of bathing and dressing up are depicted in prolonged scenes. Hiromitsu's portrayal is very different from Katsumoto's characterisation in *The Last Samurai*. While Katsumoto is depicted as a rigid and strong figure, Hiromitsu is portrayed as fragile and vulnerable. In *Japanese Story* the male body is depicted from a female perspective, since the writer, the producer and the director are all women. This generates a contrast with most Hollywood films, which depict the Asian male as aggressive. Hiromitsu's boyish look, reinforced by his hairless body, contributes to his vulnerability. He is also depicted as facing inner conflicts. He reluctantly and hesitantly shares his concerns with Sandy, who starts to perceive him differently from how she did at the beginning of the film. From a female perspective, the film seems to suggest that males in touch with their feelings are more attractive regardless their national or ethnic identity. This aspect becomes even more meaningful when compared to Hollywood's depiction of Asian males. Whereas in mainstream cinema Asian men are rarely portrayed as suitable sexual partners to white female characters, *Japanese Story*

challenges this stereotypical image and presents Hiromitsu as sexually appealing, his body being frequently displayed from an eroticised and aestheticised perspective.

Despite its innovative representation of the Japanese male character, *Japanese Story* includes stereotypical views of Japanese people. Similar to *The Last Samurai*, this film refers to Japanese culture as being largely inscrutable. Sandy's reaction to her associate's order to meet Hiromitsu at the airport reveals how she feels about the Japanese. When she first reads his name, she exclaims, "God, how do you say that?" Also referring to his name, she asks, "Which one is the surname?" This scene seems to indicate that the Japanese language is so different and alien that it is impenetrable to westerners. Sandy reveals her concerns about dealing with the Japanese culture when she asks a friend, "Do you know anything about the Japanese?" This question has many strategic implications for her, such as, what kind of behaviour is considered appropriate? What do Japanese people like or dislike? How am I to present myself to win his approval? Her anxiety seems to promote the idea of incomprehension between the two cultures.

*Japanese Story* also contains similar fears to those portrayed in *Rising Sun* for example, although not in such crude ways as represented in Hollywood films. *Japanese Story* addresses Australian hostility towards Japan that have persisted after the war. Australian characters' attitudes towards Hiromitsu vary according to the commercial relation they hope to establish with him. For instance, his business partners try to please him and make him feel welcomed, while Australians in general feel uncomfortable in his presence. There is even a specific scene where he is verbally abused. Comments such as the old joke, "Don't mention the war!" or the classic Chinese/ Japanese conflation "Did you bring the chopsticks?" attempt to stigmatise Australia as a country of entrenched prejudice, suggesting that the Japanese purchase of Australian real estate was not an entirely pacific process. Australian antagonism against Japan can also be seen in a scene where Sandy and Hiromitsu are on a boat and its owner remarks: "In the war, we thought you blokes were coming after us. Now you blokes own the place." The old man admits to having hard feelings about the Japanese. He is now referring to a different kind of threat. Formerly, during the war, Australians were afraid of a military invasion. Nowadays, they consider themselves "victims" of an economic invasion. Not only are the Japanese buying Australian property, they are also flooding the Australian market with their products. The boat owner refers to this as well, saying, "There was a time when no-one bought anything

made in Japan.” These words indicate an ironic reverse in history. From this old man’s point of view, the Japanese are still the enemy, only at present they represent a different kind of menace. Although Americans and Australians had different war experiences with the Japanese, this film seems to suggest that both countries have similar fears and concerns related to Japan’s economic growth.

The film focuses on the tension felt by the two leading roles. In order to intensify the anxieties they experience, the film is crowded with scenes showing lack of communication, language barriers and misunderstandings. For example, in the first meeting with Hiromitsu, Sandy is mistaken for a tour guide and has to carry his bag. Hiromitsu is not very talkative at first and is reluctant to use the English he possesses. When he answers the phone he speaks in Japanese, leaving Sandy alienated, excluding her from communication. On the other hand, the film indicates that there is not only tension between different cultures, there are also common elements. For instance, after Hiromitsu’s death, Sandy’s mother shows her concern for the widow. She even suggests sending her a card. Sandy, however, is totally against this idea, telling her mother in an angry tone, “You don’t know her! You don’t know her culture!” At this, Sandy’s mother calmly replies, “I know she is probably sad. I don’t have to be Japanese to know that. Some things are the same the world over.” This dialogue apparently indicates that certain concepts are common to every culture, that is, feelings such as sadness, happiness and grief are common to any nationality. Through its narrative, the film tries to reinforce the need for understanding between cultures, and seems to suggest that beneath cultural differences, as human beings, we are all very similar.

Nonetheless, the film seems to point out that those feelings are exteriorised in different ways, in accordance with one’s culture. As already mentioned, Lafcadio Hearn portrayed the Japanese as able to smile in the face of grief. *Japanese Story* seems to base the representation of Hiromitsu’s wife on this old stereotype. Hiromitsu’s wife is usually portrayed as under control, quiet, and solemn. There is a contrasting depiction between western and Japanese ways of dealing with sorrow. While the widow deals with this tragic situation with dignity and restraint, Sandy acts in a totally hysterical manner.

Another recurrent western image depicted in the film is Japanese formality. In a similar way to *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), where the formality of the transformation process of the geisha is emphasised, in *Japanese Story* formality is highlighted by

Hikomitsu's clothes. First, he is usually dressed in a black suit. This outfit is inappropriate for the desert and contributes to his image as an outsider. Secondly, this notion can also be detected in other details, such as how carefully Hiromitsu folds his clothes, how everything around him is always tidy and how his white shirt is constantly immaculate.

Nonetheless, *Japanese Story* is a step forward in relation to previous superficially characterised Japanese roles. Hiromitsu is a complex character, he is multifaceted and reveals his worries, fears and how divided he feels. Hiromitsu seems to be trapped in his marriage and in his work. He seems to be suffocating in his present condition as a family man and employee. He is in a claustrophobic situation, literally as well as symbolically. He feels overwhelmed in Japan, mentioning more than once that there is not enough space in his country. This clearly contrasts with the feeling of freedom he experiences in the vast empty spaces of the Australian outback. He mentions at least twice in the film the quantity of available space they have there. He remarks how amazed he is by the contrast with Japan, stating, "In Australia you have a lot of space, no people; in Japan we have many people, no space. (...) There is nothing. It scares me." Although Japan is commonly associated with urban life, this film seems to suggest that what Japanese people really wish for is what many western nations have in relative abundance, that is, space.

As already mentioned, several authors have argued that it is possible to change stereotypical images of other groups through direct interaction. *Japanese Story* seems to support this idea, indicating that understanding is possible when one interacts with members of the outgroup. In this particular case, western assumptions of the Japanese are questioned when Sandy has to deal over a prolonged period with a member of that group. There is a scene where Sandy asks Hiromitsu what *hai* means. She seems truly interested in learning more about Japanese culture. Through direct contact with a member of the Japanese community, Sandy was able to change her view on the Japanese people, suggesting that through interaction it is possible to reach balance and improve understanding.



**Figure 36. Sandy (Tony Collette) and Hiromitsu (Gotaro Tsunashima) in *Japanese Story* (2003): tension and anxiety give place to connection and romance.**

One might note in passing that the film's title seems vague and inappropriate. Although the film has a Japanese man as one of the main characters, the story focuses mainly on the white female protagonist. The story is not set in Japan, rather in Australia. The *Sight and Sound* reviewer, Leslie Felperin, was the first to note the discrepancy between the film and its title, "What makes this story 'Japanese' as opposed to 'Northwestern' or just 'Australian'? Why not just call it *Desert Story*, one wonders" (62). These questions are quite pertinent, since marketing issues are involved. One possible explanation is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Japan was fashionable and was been used in Hollywood as a tag in order to attract audiences. Thus, the Australian filmmakers might have used the suggestive title "Japanese Story" in order to cash in on this obsession with Japan, making their film appealing to audiences outside Australia as well as within it. It might also be an allusion to the famous and much admired Japanese film of urban life and generational post-war culture shock, Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953).

## 5. *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005)

Arthur Golden, the author of the novel which is the basis for the *Memoirs of a Geisha* script, as well as the filmmakers involved in the project, are westerners, meaning that the film's portrayal of the Japanese is from a western perspective. Hollywood's previous notions and idealisations of the geisha world have certainly influenced the depiction of the female characters in this film. In *The Last Samurai* Hollywood explored western perceptions of the Japanese male world. With *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Hollywood tried to repeat the commercially successful formula, exploring a secretive Japanese female world.

As discussed on the first chapter of this study, foreign cultures tend to be portrayed as the "Other." Japanese and western societies are represented in oppositional ways in order to accentuate the differences. In this particular case, the West, commonly associated with a liberal norm of social informality, is fascinated by Japanese formality and restraint. For instance, in *The Last Samurai*, when the foreigners are on their way to meet the Emperor, Graham indicates the right procedures to follow, explaining, "It's all highly ritualised, of course." The formality and the rigid protocol involved in meeting with high personalities from foreigner cultures has been explored in other films, such as *Seven Years in Tibet*, when Heinrich Harrer has the privilege to be in the presence of the Dalai Lama, or in *Anna and the King* when Anna meets King Mongkut of Siam, and is told how to behave in his presence. *Memoirs of a Geisha* presents rigid formality as it relates to the delicacy of the geisha's preparations and to relationships based on Japan's hierarchical society system.

The film also seems to exemplify how representing outgroups in stereotypical ways increases ingroup self-esteem. In this film, Hollywood explores difference (the condition of a specific symbolic female group within Japanese society), presents it in a contrasting way, thereby reasserting, the validity of the western system. In other words, western female self-esteem increases when its independence and emancipation contrast with images of Japanese female submissiveness. The portrayal of the Japanese female in this film, which is not very innovative, exemplifies this statement. For example, the protagonists of the film are represented in contrasting ways; Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang) is naïve and romantic, while her rival, Hatsumono (Li Gong), is deceiving and scheming, evoking the "Lotus Blossom" and "Dragon Lady" stereotypes. These conventional portraits

establish the antagonism between the two main characters embodied by the innocent geisha and the distrustful geisha, precluding the exploration of any further character development. Both female characters, even though they have vastly different personality traits, are portrayed as subservient and dependent on men.



**Figure 37. Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang) in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005): the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype – the enduring geisha.**



**Figure 38. Hatsumono (Li Gong) in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005): the “Dragon Lady” stereotype – the deceiving geisha.**

Similar to *The Last Samurai*, where the warriors are depicted as trying to achieve perfection as soldiers, “mastering the way of the sword,” *Memoirs of a Geisha* portrays the geisha as an artist seeking perfection. Consequently, much attention is given to their training, to the make-up process, hairstyle, the richness and value of the kimono, and so on. The film also focuses on the explanation that the geisha is an “artist of the floating world” as Sayuri states, not a mere prostitute. Leslie Felperin points out this excessive preoccupation, remarking, “The script (like the book) spends so much time reminding us that geisha are not prostitutes, even if they do auction off their virginity and look forward longingly to the day they’ll become some rich man’s mistress, that one suspects there’s a bit too much protest afoot” (72). As a result, one might conclude that the emphasis on the “purity” of the geisha is part of the western fantasy of the Japanese female as an ideal of

femininity. In order to attain this goal, the film represents the female character in a stereotypical way, similar to the glamorous portrait of the geisha in the 1950s. Although they were associated with the notion of perfect beauty and femininity, they were also perceived as sexually available and as sexual objects. Despite the attempts to depict geisha as living art, the film transmits the idea that for the right price, they were available. This can be observed in the attitude of the American soldiers towards the geisha in the last part of the film.

Viewed in this manner, one might conclude that *Memoirs of a Geisha* demonstrates familiar depictions of Asians in Hollywood and does not challenge previous notions of female roles. For instance, geisha had a different social role from Japanese women in general, and this could be seen as a means of escaping the rigidity of class. Certainly, they had access to the male's social life, being part of their entertainment. Therefore, they could influence them, exercise power over them. Nevertheless, the film portrays the geisha as servile and as being several times manipulated by men, not the other way around. The main emphasis of the film is on spectacle, consequently it diminishes the scope of the human drama that might be presented.

American cinema however is not coterminous with Hollywood cinema. American national cinema is more diverse and includes the visions and practices of less conventional and established filmmakers. In the following chapter I would like to analyse the representation of Japanese people in the independent film *Lost in Translation* (2003) as well as other more recent films, and discuss in which ways they diverge from the Hollywood films discussed in this chapter.

## **Chapter IV**

# **Japan in Independent Cinema: New Directions?**

### 1. *Lost in Translation* (2003)

Nobuyuki Matsuhisa's creative dishes led *Food and Wine Magazine* to name Matsuhisa one of America's "Ten Best New Chefs" in 1989. Born and raised in Japan, Matsuhisa had a classical training in sushi bars in Tokyo. He left Japan and lived abroad, namely in South American countries. Lacking authentic Japanese ingredients, he decided to experiment and mix Japanese traditional dishes with local flavours. He moved to Los Angeles, where he opened his first restaurant in 1987. His inventive style was soon recognised and "Matsuhisa" became popular among Hollywood stars. Matsuhisa himself became Robert DeNiro's friend and opened a restaurant, "Nobu," in partnership with him in New York in 1994. In return, Matsuhisa made his film debut in *Casino* (1995). He also had parts in *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002) and in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. This partnership revealed itself to be successful and Matsuhisa has now opened seventeen restaurants around the world.

With a business partner such as Robert DeNiro, one of the world's best sushi chefs is himself considered a celebrity. His book *Nobu: The Cookbook* (2001), was supported by friends and famous people, having a preface by DeNiro, a foreword by Martha Stewart and an afterword by Ken Takakura, a well-known Japanese actor. Although Matsuhisa was an internationally acclaimed chef, when he decided to open a restaurant in Japan, he found some resistance. Since Japanese sushi restaurants are typically very conservative, Matsuhisa's mixture of classical sushi cuisine with western savours was not entirely embraced. DeNiro's presence in Tokyo for the opening of the restaurant was essential, so that it was well received by Japanese food critics. DeNiro was the star attraction for Japanese glitterati in this glitzy opening. This event illustrates the dominance of image and recognition over substance which constitutes modern celebrity culture; old traditional values have been eroded, all that seems to matter is to be famous and have famous friends. Matsuhisa's experience also seems to suggest that if one succeeds in the United States, one will succeed in Japan. Matsuhisa's story is a good example of fusion, like his food, and of how distinct identities are dissolving in an increasingly globalising world.

According to Paul Julian Smith in his *Sight and Sound* article "Tokyo Drifters," Sofia Coppola satirises this celebrity culture in her film *Lost in Translation*. Kelly (Anna Faris) plays a shallow starlet promoting her latest film in Japan. Her comments on

Japanese culture, anorexia, and her silly press conference might be regarded as Coppola's sly commentary on this kind of emergent, young Hollywood star and consequently on our present celebrity-obsessed society. Robert DeNiro's presence in Tokyo to promote Matsuhisa's restaurant is reminiscent to Bob's (Bill Murray) arrival into Japan in *Lost in Translation*, that is, he is there to publicise a whiskey brand, while Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), a Yale philosophy graduate, contrasts with Kelly.



**Figure 39. Kelly (Anna Faris) in *Lost in Translation* (2003): the shallow starlet.**

One of the innovative aspects in *Lost in Translation* is its loose plotting, that is, the film seems not to have a linear narrative, but just follows the protagonists as they hang out in Japan, depicting their sense of disorientation. The experience of finding oneself lost and alienated in a foreign country has been portrayed several times before on the big screen. For instance, Roman Polanski's *Frantic* (1988) illustrates the frustration felt by an American when language barriers prevent him from recovering his lost wife. This film

deals with a standard crime plot (somewhat Hitchcockian), while *Lost in Translation* deals with language difficulties but has no urgent mystery to resolve. Moreover, it could have been set in any other foreign country. The characters loneliness and isolation could be explored in any number of different countries. Nevertheless, Asian countries are perfect settings to depict a foreigner's isolation in a distant nation due to their apparently "strange" customs. Asian orthography and pronunciation are deeply challenging for westerners. Unfamiliarity engenders feelings of loneliness and helplessness in foreigners. Being cast-drift and jet-lagged, as they are in Bob's and Charlotte's case, contributes to this notion of confusion and disorientation.

Sofia Coppola's choice of using two protagonists seems to be an interesting one, since the sense of uncertainty is shared by the two characters and therefore seems generalised. All the stylistic elements displayed in the film have the aim of inducing the public to share the protagonists' alienation. The two protagonists lead us through the ways of the Japanese with subtly different points of view. Bob seems to be arrogant and sarcastic. He is also portrayed as being too tall, and clumsy, not able to fit in. He is experiencing a life crisis, marriage difficulties and that is reflected in his apathy and indifference to the world. These characteristics, such as not being easily impressed, are part of Bill Murray's screen persona, which he has developed throughout his career as a comedian. For instance, Paul Julian Smith claims that there is a close parallel between Bob and Murray's Phil in *Groundhog Day* (1993), since both characters "are impotent and bewildered outsiders in a strange world" (16). Audiences are familiar with these character traits, which help to make sense of Bob's disconnection and lack of interest in his surroundings, and which enable us to perceive Japan through his perspective.

Charlotte has a different perspective from Bob. In the film, she is more related with aesthetics and spirituality. For instance, throughout the narrative she seems to be looking for a spiritual experience, a way to connect to the world. She seems to be searching for something that is missing in her life. She observes the agitated urban life from her high hotel room window but is then depicted as observing from a closer point of view traditional aspects of Japanese culture, such as women in kimonos, flower arrangements, a typical wedding ceremony, shrines and monks chanting, suggesting that spirituality is associated with "old" Japan, not with "modern" Japan. The fact that initially Charlotte is observing people and traffic at a distance might also symbolise her detachment and lack of

understanding. Later Charlotte tries to connect with Japanese culture, however, the film shows her as not really making a serious effort, but as simply curious. Consequently, she is not able to reach the enlightenment she is searching for. She still feels empty, commenting to a friend after visiting a temple, “I didn’t feel anything.” Not being able to satisfy her wish, Charlotte seems to be even more confused and lost.

Nevertheless, Charlotte is portrayed as more open to Japanese difference, beauty and variety, while Bob is portrayed as being jaded. She has a less self-assured attitude to being “abroad,” while Bob has a more rational and intellectual approach to his surroundings. Another distinction between the two leading characters is that Bob is an American celebrity with a specific purpose in Japan, being the centre of attention, while Charlotte is depicted as a sort of groupie or a hanger-on; she simply has nothing to do. Both Charlotte and Bob are products of American commodity commercialism. Bob is selling his image for money and Charlotte seems to be a trophy girlfriend with a social purpose of her own.

Apart from the two main white characters, there are a few secondary Japanese characters. However, the way they are represented in the film led several critics and audiences to interpret the film as mocking the Japanese. Many Japanese-Americans consider that the portrayal of the Japanese in this film is offensive and views the Japanese in a reductive way, since the Japanese characters are glanced at, are out of focus and deprived of depth. Kiku Day in the review “Totally *Lost in Translation*” considers the film anti-Japanese, stating, “There is no scene where the Japanese are afforded a shred of dignity. (...) The Japanese are one-dimensional and dehumanised in the movie, serving as an exotic background for Bob and Charlotte’s story.” There is indeed an absence of complexity or dimensionality in the characterisation of the Japanese, and there is arguably not a single significant Japanese character in the film. Kiku Day goes on, “The good Japanese, according to this director, are Buddhist monks chanting, ancient temples, flower arrangement; meanwhile she portrays the contemporary Japanese as ridiculous people who have lost contact with their own culture.”

The Japanese are also portrayed as a mass, a group, not as individuals. All the Japanese people who walk in the street are dressed in dark colours, and all look alike. There is a scene where Charlotte is walking in the street and she is the only blond haired head among a mass of black haired people. The images of crowded streets, commonly

associated with Tokyo, present the Japanese as homogeneous. Although it is a sophisticated city, which receives many western tourists, we do not see other ethnicities among the crowd. As a cosmopolitan capital, we perhaps should see younger generations with dyed hair, diverse haircuts and different fashion styles. However, this misrepresentation of modern diversity is probably an aesthetic strategy, that is, the director emphasises Japanese homogeneity in order to accentuate Charlotte's and Bob's individuated personal crises.



**Figure 40. Bob (Bill Murray) in *Lost in Translation* (2003): an example of physical comedy – the elevator scene, where Bob towers over the Japanese businessmen.**

There are a few examples of old stereotypical images related to the Japanese in this film. For example, there is the old joke of the Japanese director giving a long explanation in Japanese of what he wants Bob to do and then the translator only uses two words. Bob finds this intriguing and Bob's perplexity is well explored on screen. That is, after a long speech in Japanese that Ms. Kawasaki translated as, "He want you to turn and look in camera," a sceptic Bob asks, "Is that all he said?" This situation repeats itself and again Bob asks, "Is that everything? It seemed like he said quite a bit more than that." There are also other scenes involving language barriers and misunderstandings, such as the prostitute episode. The woman insists with Bob, "*Lip* my stockings," when she really means "Rip my stockings." Bob seems lost, repeatedly asking, "Lip them? What?" Both scenes suggest

that comically misunderstandings, often deliberate, are Bob's character note. Bob's remark that the Japanese switch the 'R' and the 'L' to amuse themselves and his comments "brack toe" and "good fright," are a good example of his patronising American wit.

There is a specific scene where the audience has access to Bob's humane side. When he takes Charlotte to the hospital, he gets involved in a "conversation" with an aged Japanese woman in the waiting room. Their onomatopoeic sounds and unclear gestures make two other Japanese women start to giggle. In this particular scene, Bob is no longer a bemused foreigner, but becomes part of the joke. Bob laughs at the situation, but the two Japanese women are laughing at him. Bob seems to abandon his ironic protective covering and share a moment with that elderly woman. They are both "lost in translation," but since both agree to misunderstand, they are finally able to connect with each other.

Bob's attitude cannot be considered as being disrespectful towards Japanese culture in the sense that this is not his intension. Bob is not sarcastic or ironical about Japanese culture; that is his attitude towards life in general. His posture is that of an individual in a collectivised world. He uses certain Japanese aspects to relieve tension or simply to be humorous. For example, after spending the night with another woman, Bob has lunch with a disappointed Charlotte, who later remarks, "That was the worst lunch." Bob ironically comments, "The worst. What kind of restaurant makes you cook your own food?" This comment (deliberately out of context because Bob knows Charlotte is not speaking about the food) is used to break the tension between them. Sometimes his objective is to make Charlotte laugh, as can be seen in the following comment, "I was feeling tight in the shoulders and neck, so I called down and had a Shiatsu massage in my room. (...) And the tightness has completely disappeared and been replaced by unbelievable pain." Charlotte's response is laughter, as Bob intended.

Sofia Coppola's representation of Japan is not intended to be accurate or realistic. The film shows us Japan as impressionistically seen through western eyes, as foreigners see it. In "Tokyo Drifters," Paul Julian Smith remarks, "If the Americans are lost in a foreign culture, then that culture itself is dislocated, made up of fragments (ancient and modern, eastern and western) that cannot be joined" (14). Indeed, if the Japan we see in this film is the product of the writer/ director's imagination and personal experiences, it nevertheless does not follow from this that Americans escape wholly uncriticised themselves.

*Lost in Translation* seems to offer a different position from other Hollywood films in relation to the image of the Japanese culture as inscrutable. Its peculiar title might be an illusion to certain aspects of Japanese culture which are “lost in translation,” meaning that certain Japanese customs and habits are simply not intelligible to westerners. Nevertheless, this phrase cannot conceal the fact that all foreign cultures have cultural aspects which are inaccessible to others. Accordingly, Paul Julian Smith comments, a “photographer asks the bemused Bob for a ‘mysterious face’ in a telling reminder that westerners can be mysterious too, that the Japanese are no more inscrutable than ourselves” (15).

Since it is a multi-layered title, it may also refer to the words Bob whispers in Charlotte’s ear, which are “lost” to the audience. This also suggests that Charlotte and Bob’s relationship is more ambiguous than it might seem at first sight and that their feelings are not entirely explained. The film is not about two lost westerners in Japan; it is about two lost souls in the world. Japan is not only a place of exclusion; it is also a location that promotes integration and bonding for the two protagonists. In other words, the loneliness they feel is not due to the fact that they are in Japan, but to the fact that they feel disoriented in their own lives. Consequently, by finding each other in Japan, out of their usual cultural context, and through their conversations, they try to make sense of their lives.

Although *Lost in Translation* presents certain conventional views on Japan, it does not pretend to understand Japan and it honestly admits its confusion. The film does not insinuate that westerners understand the Japanese or that understanding comes overnight. On the contrary, it is aware that many preconceptions are invalid. The film is true to this process of disorientation, which might be seen as an early phase in the recognition (and perhaps reappraisal) of difference. Therefore, it might be seen as a step forward in relation to Hollywood depictions of the Japanese. With *Lost in Translation*, Sofia Coppola presents an original perspective and an innovative approach in western representations of Japanese culture. It might therefore be considered a new direction in western portrayals of foreign cultures. One might argue that *Lost in Translation* prepared the ground for more challenging approaches, such as the one depicted in *Babel* (2006).

## ***2. Babel (2006) and Letters from Iwo Jima (2006)***

*Babel* approaches Japan and Japanese culture from a different perspective. The film is a multicultural project, involving different settings, languages and nationalities. *Babel* is clearly a step forward in terms of authenticity. The film portrays an overcrowded urban Japan avoiding looking at Japan from a western point of view. *Babel* seems to reject the Anglo-centricity, which is commonly associated with western cinema, and uses native actors and authentic settings. This can be seen in the use of Japanese with subtitles throughout the film instead of the use of English as in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. The film uses language diversity, giving the different nationalities portrayed the opportunity to express their cultural identity and specific concerns in their own language.

*Babel's* interconnected narratives seem to focus on the geopolitical and interpersonal consequences of lack of communication and misunderstandings in a world that gets smaller everyday. Instead of bringing people together, *Babel* seems to suggest that the ultra-modern way of life is isolating individuals. The uses and abuses of technology, society's increasing dependence on it and the use of technology as an intermediary in human relations have as a consequence a dehumanised society, where individuals lack human contact and physical touch. Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) embodies the need for connection and human bonding. She is deprived of sound through her deafness, and of communication (she is not able to communicate with those who do not know sign language and that frustrates her). She releases her dissatisfaction by acting out sexually. She displays her sexuality in order to attract other people's attention. Despite all the technological tools that have been developed to improve communication between individuals, the film transmits the idea that people are not really listening to each other.



**Figure 41. Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) in *Babel* (2006): personifying human isolation and lack of communication in the crowded streets of Tokyo.**

The film depicts certain events that are common to all cultures, such as the loss of a child and consequent marital difficulties, the rivalry of brothers, teenagers and their relation to the opposite sex and so on. The film emphasises therefore what joins human beings together, not what separates them. However, lack of communication and understanding seem to keep people apart. Even when the characters speak the same language, they might not be able to connect, as seems to be the case of the North American couple, Richard and Susan (Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett). *Babel* seems to indicate that our inability to communicate is not only because of language, but also due to emotional, political and physical barriers.

The film deals with complex issues such as the instable socio-political climate inherent to a post-9/11 world. Generalised panic makes people believe that an American woman being shot in Morocco is an act of terrorism; an isolated incident becomes an international event. In a disconnected world, the film transmits the impression that everything now is related, as suggested by the Butterfly Effect theory. The international instability generalised after the attack to the World Trade Centre is reflected in the conflict between the American and Moroccan government. Not willing to be associated with terrorist organisations, the Moroccan government focuses its attention on finding the guilty

ones for this incident, instead of helping to solve the problem, that is, instead of getting medical attention to the injured woman.

In *Babel* institutions are cold, heartless and indifferent to people's suffering, while individuals are portrayed for the most part as well-intentioned and helpful. For example, when Amelia (Adriana Barraza) and her nephew Santiago (Gael García Bernal) try to cross the Mexican border to the United States, the patrol officer undertakes an exaggerated search, which makes Santiago uncomfortable. Both sides provoke each other, both men judge each other based on assumptions and this leads to a tragic situation. After being lost in the desert, Amelia relies on the authorities to rescue her and the children. However, the police officers perceive her as a criminal first, arresting her, and only then do they pay attention to her call for help. The indifference of institutions is revealed particularly in this story, in the sense that apart from ignoring her despair, Amelia is sent back to Mexico without the opportunity to clarify her situation properly. On the other hand, individuals play a humanising role in the film. For instance, the Japanese police officer could take advantage of Chieko, since she was offering herself to him. Nevertheless, he does not exploit the situation, rather he tries to understand and help the teenage girl.

Chieko feels herself an emotional and social outsider, personifying lack of communication. To reinforce this idea, the director, Iñárritu, deprives the audience of sound, juxtaposing those instants with energetic dance music. This sequence underlines Chieko's need for acceptance and human connection. The sense of isolation becomes even more powerful when Chieko is on the crowded streets of Tokyo; she is lonely and alienated, even when people surround her. Japanese metropolises have therefore become a universal symbol for human detachment and disorientation, emblematic of the deracinated modern way of life.

In *The Last Samurai*, the city, which had already been touched by progress, is portrayed as less traditional. Nobutada's village contrasts with the characterisation of Tokyo. Whereas the village is the symbol of tradition and pleasantness, the city is grey and crowded, a mixture of western suits and kimonos. While the village is calm and peaceful, the city is noisy and agitated, with horses on the streets and people constantly arriving. The spiritual side of Japan is therefore connected with pleasing landscapes, ideal settings and tradition, while the city is depicted as corrupted by the West.



**Figure 42. Nobutada’s remote and isolated village in *The Last Samurai* (2003): idyllic landscapes are associated with the spiritual side of Japan.**

Ten years ago, Littlewood noted

Today, for those who look to the tea-house and the Zen garden, the image offers a dream of spiritual peace in the midst of modern urban pressures. Again, it speaks to them of what their society lacks – of restraint in a world of indulgence, tranquillity in a world of turbulence, spirit in a world preoccupied with the material (...) meditation in a world of barbecues (87).

The West then was perceived as modernised, urban and associated with stress and constant transformation. Westerners could regard Japan as the opposite of their experience and way of life. Nowadays, this image of Japan seems not to apply. For example, *Lost in Translation* suggests that Japan is no longer associated with spirituality and tranquillity, at least not urban Japan. As has already been mentioned, Charlotte is not able to feel this spiritual side of the country, not even after visiting a temple.

In *Lost in Translation* the sense of disorientation is reinforced by the representation of Tokyo. The panoramic shots of the city depict it as simultaneously recognisable and strange. The neon signs, the bright lights, advertisements, skyscrapers, and traffic remind

us of Time Square. However, the indecipherable Japanese characters, high technology, the apparent chaos and disorganisation make it look atypical to foreign eyes. The city is represented as a vertiginous experience, which contrasts with the quiet and peaceful gardens and temples Charlotte visits, in the same way the shrines contrast with the video arcades and the strip clubs. Paul J. Smith compares Tokyo to Rome in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), describing the city as "a place of pure pleasure" (15). This might be seen as a reference given by the director since the film is seen on the hotel television. In *Babel*, Tokyo is presented as a giant nightclub, or as a visual playground, not dissimilar to the electronic and virtual environments of video games. Recent representations of Japan's metropolises can be compared to a patchwork of previous familiar images. Present images of Tokyo in Hollywood films seem to have joined those former depictions of this city, having formed a post-modern representation which is already part of popular iconography.



**Figure 43. Japan's megalopolis: vibrant Tokyo portrayed as a giant playground in *Lost is Translation* (2003).**

Although the East, especially Tokyo, Hong Kong and the great cities of China have been associated with the emergence of disorientation and human detachment as a thematic

explored on film, it is not confined to the East. The film *Crash* (2004) also deals with complex issues such as the dehumanisation of society, detachment and isolationism. The film seems to suggest that the lack of human connection and individuals' self-centredness must lead to negative consequences. The opening lines of the film illustrate this point, "It's the sense of touch. In LA, nobody touches you. We are always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much we crash into each other just so we can feel something."



**Figure 44. Christine Thayer (Thandie Newton) and Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon) in one of *Crash*'s (2004) intensely dramatic scenes.**

This film is reminiscent of a popular formula used by Hollywood cinema, which became prominent during the 1990s, that is, to present urban life from several different characters' perspectives, whose stories are linked together and whose narratives criss-cross throughout the film. *City of Hope* and *Grand Canyon* both released in 1991, *Short Cuts* (1993), *2 Days in the Valley* (1996) and *Magnolia* (1999) are all examples of this phenomenon. *Crash* seems to indicate that people of all nationalities, social classes and ages have preconceived ideas about others and judge others based on those pre-conceived assumptions. *Crash* also reflects on people's mistrust of strangers and generalised suspicion of members from other groups felt by post- 9/ 11 society. For example, a Middle

Eastern immigrant is insulted and called “Osama.” Similar to the situation during World War II, where the distinction between the Chinese and the Japanese became significant, nowadays to distinguish the several different Arabic peoples seems more critical than ever. To illustrate this, when the shop is vandalised, the wife is cleaning the walls and exclaims, “They think we’re Arab. When did Persian become Arab?” People’s suppositions prevent them from perceiving the actual individual they are dealing with. Films that offer models of atomised society desperately trying to hang together have mutated into a post 9/ 11 crisis in which social cohesion has totally fragmented along ethnic, racial, national and religious lines. Independent cinema shows its liberalism by protesting this turn of events.

Another film that presents a new direction as far as western representations of the Japanese are concerned is *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Indeed, this film might be considered a breakthrough in multiethnic cinema. With the release of *Flags of our Fathers* (2006) the audience is made to realise that part of the story is missing. The Battle of Iwo Jima is told from the western point of view and it only presents its version of events. Instead of joining both the opponents perspectives in one single film, like previous films such as *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and *The Longest Day* (1962), Clint Eastwood decided to present two separate films. Each film is part of a dialectical approach, the American and the Japanese visions of what happened on that island during the war.

The title of the film is quite meaningful. While in most films the audience perceives Japan from a western point of view, the word “letters” suggests that the narrative is told by the Japanese themselves, they are describing their feelings and experiences to their families. They are not only telling their side of the story, they are also expressing themselves in their own language. Similar to *Babel*, *Letters from Iwo Jima* reveals a new openness to language. The audience listens to their native language, and their discourse is not limited to the usual flat and restricted use of English. The use of Japanese with subtitles seems to suggest that the narrative cannot be authentic if the audience is not allowed to listen to authentic language. It has even been suggested that this film is a Japanese film which happened to come out of Hollywood. The fact that the film won a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film reinforces this idea.

It is also innovative in other aspects. For instance, the film does not portray every officer and soldier as blindly believing in fanatical militarism, as previous western war films have done. The Japanese soldiers are aware that they will die on their mission. The

island has no support from the Army or from the Navy and the soldiers' morale is low. The film indicates that the officers in command have different opinions on fighting and committing hara-kiri, suggesting that they are divided among themselves. While other officers order the soldiers to commit suicide, General Kuribayashi (Ken Watanaba) motivates the soldiers to kill at least ten enemies before being killed, suggesting that the best way to serve their country and their Emperor is fighting, not dying unnecessarily. Another significant aspect is the representation of the Japanese in both films. While in *Flags of our Fathers* the Japanese are shown as severe, well prepared and highly organised, in *Letters from Iwo Jima* they are seen as badly equipped, lacking supplies, and being decimated by dysentery. Nevertheless, both films seem to share a few features. For example, both films reflect upon propaganda and its impact on the population, national symbols and the common soldier as mere dispensable pawn in the war.

The innovations of *Letters from Iwo Jima* also include the portrayal of Japanese soldiers as humane. Far from the images of sadist soldiers disseminated during World War II, Eastwood's film shows the vulnerability of the common Japanese soldier and how they too longed for home, just like American soldiers. Nevertheless, their stoic leader, General Kuribayashi, similar to Katsumoto in *The Last Samurai*, seems to embody the qualities an idealised commander should have. He is strong, and rigorous, but also polite and helpful. Saigo (Kazunari Ninomiya) is also different from previous demonised versions of the Japanese soldier. He is represented as an ordinary person, with a regular job as a baker, and a family back home. Different from friends and neighbours, who repeatedly try to convince him that it is an honour to die for one's country, Saigo just wants to go home and stay with his family.

*Letters from Iwo Jima* portrays the Americans as the enemy, and the audience forges a certain empathy with the Japanese, who have lost the war. With these very recent films, the Japanese have the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. Although they are still western representations of the Japanese, the later are at least being portrayed in more authentic ways, departing from old images and challenging former stereotypes.



**Figure 45. General Kuribayashi (Ken Watanabe) preparing for the American attack on Iwo Jima in *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006).**

As I hope to have demonstrated, in the last twenty years Hollywood has reinforced previous stereotypical images of Japanese characters or has adapted old stereotypes to new cultural contexts. The negative stereotype associated with the Japanese businessman was followed by a greater variety of Japanese representations on the big screen. In the first part of this decade, Hollywood released several films which are set in Japan or that deal with Japanese culture. Brian Ruh in his article “Killing in Translation” (October 2003) for the magazine *Pop Matters*, states “In a single year, the release of three major American films that take place in Japan is an unprecedented cinematic move, attesting to the perceived desire of audiences to see films about Japan.” In the final section of this dissertation I would like to analyse the reasons that underlie the public’s recent attraction to Japanese subjects and argue that Hollywood’s interest in Japanese culture and a new type of urban/social paradigm is the result of western perception of Japan as a new type of menace.

# **Final Considerations**

In the first half of the present decade, we can observe a return to western interest in exotic and traditional Japan. *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* are examples of that particular curiosity about “old” Japan; the war scenario was also revisited with *Pearl Harbor* and the *Great Raid*. Quentin Tarantino also revealed his fascination with Asian culture, paying homage to the martial arts film with *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004). Other films prefer to emphasise Japan as a cultural influence in the world. For instance, *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006) uses Japan as a visual alternative to US settings. It also satisfies western curiosity about what the younger generation does in Japan in order to amuse itself. The Japanese youngsters depicted in the film are highly stylised. Their fashion sense, their careless behaviour, their excessive use of technology, and their connection to the crime world all come together, forming an aesthetic portrait of modern Asian youth culture. This might be seen as an example of using Japan only for superficial reasons, taking advantage of the public’s renewed interest in Japanese culture. Absent from this recent fascination with Japan is Hollywood’s depiction of Japanese males as rigid and regimented businessmen. Since the Japanese economy has been stagnant since the 1990s, Japan no longer represents a serious threat to American economic interests. Therefore, Hollywood has focused on historical aspects or on Tokyo as the Asian capital of style, particularly youth styles.



**Figure 46. Sean Boswell (Lucas Black) in *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006): the capital of “coolness” – multicultural Tokyo as symbol of ultra-urban way of life.**

Several commentators have noticed Japan’s influential role in the cultural sphere. Journalist Douglas McGray wrote the article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” for the *Foreign Policy* journal (May/June 2002), where he explored the idea of Japan as a cultural superpower, or as he puts it, “Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower.” McGray suggests that, “Japanese culture has transcended U.S. demand or approval,” meaning that Japanese cultural products are being embraced in many other Asian countries and in Europe. Japanese animation and films, music, magazines and fashion have achieved enormous success without needing the American market. However, according to McGray, Japan has simultaneously made “deep inroads into American culture.” For instance, video-games and Japanese anime-style cartoons overrun external markets, including the United States. Japanese fight

choreographers have been recently influencing Hollywood film aesthetics and a few American filmmakers have turned to Japanese film style, searching for inspiration. *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), are examples of this tendency.

After a decade of recession, Japan's Gross Domestic Product was down, and the country was not as economically competitive as in previous decades. Nevertheless, Japan started to reinvent itself as a cultural superpower, as McGray asserts, "Instead of collapsing beneath its political and economic misfortunes, Japan's global cultural influence has only grown." For McGray there are several reasons which might explain Japan's success as a cultural superpower. First, there is a substantial difference in the exports of American and Japanese cultural products. That is, while American culture tends to transmit certain values and ideals, "Japan has been perfecting the art of transmitting certain kinds of mass culture." Secondly, while most commentators point out that the essence of modern Japan contains very little of traditional Japan, McGray believes that is precisely why Japanese culture is successful abroad. Elaborating upon this idea, the author suggests, "Japan was post-modern before post-modernism was trendy, fusing elements of other national cultures into one almost-coherent whole. It makes sense: Japan's history is filled with examples of foreign inspiration and cultural fusion."

Younger generations around the world are embracing Japanese pop culture and wearing Japanese fashion accessories simply because they are stylish. To reinforce the idea of western obsession with Japanese products, McGray gives the following example, "Teenagers and 20-somethings in the United States and elsewhere buy Hello Kitty purses and cell phone cases as icons of Tokyo pop chic." This interest is also manifested in audiences' desire to consume images of Japan, since Japan is associated with style and "coolness." According to McGray, Japan's increasing international cultural presence has created a sense of "national cool." He clarifies this expression, adding, "National cool is an idea, a reminder that commercial trends and products, and a country's knack for spawning them, can serve political and economic ends." In this case, culture is the new medium used by Japan to impose itself and determine its place in the global sphere.

The *Washington Post* journalist, Anthony Faiola in his article "Japan's Empire of Cool – Country's Culture becomes its Biggest Export" (December 2003) seems to agree with McGray's theory. Faiola suggests that after losing its status as a worldwide economic

superpower, Japan “is reinventing itself – this time as the coolest nation on Earth.” This author draws our attention to analysts’ remarks related to the recent outcrop of Japanese cultural exports, since many of them argue, “the international embrace of Japan’s pop culture, film, food, style and arts is second only to that of the United States. Business leaders and government officials are now referring to Japan’s ‘gross national cool’ as a new engine for economic growth and societal buoyancy.” For instance, Japanese manga and anime are translated into several languages and are available around the globe. Its films are increasingly successful outside its national market. They are critically acclaimed in international film festivals (especially animation films), and are progressively gaining the wider public’s admiration and interest. Hollywood is not indifferent to this fascination with Japanese products, nor to Japan’s progressive challenge in international markets. Therefore, it used the public’s interest in Japanese pop culture to release several films of its own dealing with Japanese themes.

Faiola tries to explain the emergence of Japan as a cultural superpower by suggesting that Japanese anime and manga were extremely popular among a “fertile subculture of technology-minded Americans” during the 70s and 80s. This generation played an important role in the internet expansion, carrying with it the interest in Japanese cultural products. In its turn, this spread of Japan’s pop culture lead to more people being interested in Japan. Another possible explanation is related to anti-American feelings, as Faiola remarks, “outside the United States, Japan is being viewed as a more neutral, alternative source of entertainment at a time when anti-Americanism is running high.” The unpopularity of the Bush Administration contributes to a generalised sentiment of disillusionment with America. President Bush is antagonising people around the world with his aggressive foreign policies, which makes audiences reject American cultural products. Nonetheless, Japan has been accused of not generating an original cultural style, but of adapting western culture and transforming it into their own, that is, Japanese culture and its exports are a Japanised version of western culture. Faiola comments on these statements, suggesting, “Critics say that Japan is merely a cultural prism, absorbing influences from abroad and reflecting them back, albeit altered to Japanese taste. But many say that it is precisely the attraction.” Both authors, McGray and Faiola, claim that the mixture of styles, influences, images of urban life and modernity are synonyms of “coolness” and this is fascinating western societies.

Hollywood took advantage of the appeal of Japanese images for the public and appropriated its “coolness.” Ruh, in his already mentioned article, “Killing in Translation,” states that the films released in early 2000 “tie American cultural products into the rise of Japan as a player on the world cultural market, while simultaneously serving to control the potential threat of Japanese popular entertainment to the American media hegemony.” In this case, Hollywood is not only interested in profit, but also in maintaining its monopoly. By giving the public what it wants, Hollywood controls the growing popularity of Japanese entertainment, ensuring that Japanese exports do not override Hollywood’s dominance. Elaborating upon this idea, Ruh comments, “The American film industry may be trying to subsume the influence of its Japanese counterpart,” and by doing so, Hollywood reveals its anxieties about the growing influence of Japanese popular entertainment in the United States. Ruh asserts that Japanese pop culture is an alternative to American culture that has spread worldwide, therefore, “The Japanese influences, even in an American film, undermine this limiting mindset by promoting an alternate version of what the media may look like.” Ruh in his article “America’s Japanese Cinema: Appropriating Japan’s Cachet of Cultural Cool” (January 2004), reiterated his earlier statements, commenting that, “imports are important (...) they remind those of us in the U.S. that we are not the only cultural producers in the world.” After decades of Hollywood’s dominance, audiences are now familiar with its style and formulas. Globalisation has revolutionised cultural markets; Japanese cultural products are reaching a greater variety of international markets. Audiences have now easier access to different cultural styles, and in a post-modern era, the public is searching for new experiences, alternatives to Hollywood’s conventional feature film fare. For instance, a few Asian films arrive at western markets introduced by well-known American filmmakers, who promote these cultural products as “cult films,” publicising them abroad. Referring to Tarantino, Mark Kermode in the article “Hong Kong in Hollywood” remarks that he acted as godfather to Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002) in the United States, “where it became an unexpected box-office hit” (337).

For decades, Japanese culture has been associated with inscrutability; so the West has been depicting Japanese culture as impenetrable. Language and cultural barriers make understanding of Japanese society difficult for westerners. These complexities are valid arguments used by those who are sceptical about the emergence of the Japanese as cultural leaders. It might be difficult to accept that Japan will be able to challenge Hollywood’s

dominant position due to its long established business and successful industrial history, but at least analysts and commentators are now considering that possibility.

Within this cultural context, it is not hard to see why the remaking of Japanese films has become such a popular trend within Hollywood studios, and why this tendency curiously coincides with the turn of the millennium. If indeed Japan represents a cultural threat to the United States, this strategy might be seen as Hollywood's response to the Japanese cultural "invasion." Hollywood has held a dominant position in film production and distribution since the 1920s. This dominance has never been seriously brought into question, not even by the Indian film industry, which despite its great productivity, cannot successfully establish itself in international markets. In order to regulate Japan's emergence as a cultural icon, Hollywood not only released several films set in Japan or that are related to Japanese culture, but also decided to release its own versions of successful Japanese films. The following list of Japanese films, which were remade by Hollywood, provides a few examples that illustrate this trend,

*Ring*, Hideo Nakata, 1998 => *The Ring*, Gore Verbinski, 2002

*Ju-on -The Grudge*, Takashi Shimizu, 2003 => *The Grudge*, Takashi Shimizu, 2004

*Shall we Dance?*, Masayuki Sudo, 1996 => *Shall we Dance*, Peter Chelsom, 2004

*Dark Water*, Hideo Nakata, 2002 => *Dark Water*, Walter Salles, 2005

Interestingly, this strategy is not entirely new. Hollywood had already made adaptations of Japanese films, namely from director Akira Kurosawa. *Rashomon* (1950) was remade by Hollywood studios as both *The Outrage* (1964) and *Iron Maze* (1991), and *The Seven Samurai* (1954) was released as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). More recently, Alejandro Agresti directed *The Lake House* (2006), the remake of a South Korean film, and Martin Scorsese directed the western version of a highly successful Hong Kong film, *Infernal Affairs* (2002), the critically acclaimed and Oscar-winning, *The Departed* (2006). These examples clearly indicate Hollywood's interest in Asian cinema, which in turn benefits from this interest. Mark Kermode points out, "The Hong Kong film industry has an extraordinary productive heritage, which has long held a complex and symbiotic relationship with Hollywood" (335). Asian filmmakers sell the remaking rights to Hollywood for a value that allows them almost entirely to recuperate what they invested in

their films (although it is a small part of the remaking cost). *Ring*, *Ju-on – The Grudge* and *Infernal Affairs* were very successful at East Asian box offices. Adapting the script to Hollywood production values and casting well-known western actors proved to be the right ingredients to guarantee success in both national and international markets, including Asian one. Remaking foreign films strengthens Hollywood, helping to re-appropriate its markets, making it even more dominant.

Referring to recent Hollywood films depicting Japan, *New York Times* journalist Mokoto Rich in the article “Hollywood’s Land of the Rising Cliché” (January 2004) states, “Compared to much earlier attempts to portray Japanese characters in Hollywood movies, however, the current crop might seem downright enlightened.” After more than a century of western representations of the Japanese people, one can affirm that they are finally being allowed to be multi-dimensional characterisations and to have some human depth. However, as I hope this dissertation has demonstrated, Hollywood’s representations of the Japanese are still dependent on stereotypes. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, seem to agree with this idea, remarking, “even during this period of growing cultural awareness and sensitivity, stereotypes and stereotypical ideas persisted in formulaic Hollywood films” (128). That is, while promoting acceptance and tolerance, Hollywood is simultaneously depicting other cultures in restricted and limited ways.

Although one can not argue that nothing has changed in Hollywood’s portrayal of the Japanese, one can assert that not enough has changed. Arguably, these changes in images of the Japanese have occurred only superficially. Indeed, even nowadays the Japanese play secondary and derivative roles; there are very few innovative or fully fleshed-out Japanese roles in Hollywood films. These film narratives still focus on the white protagonist, on the Asian as spectacle and on the Asian as the “Other.” In the last twenty years, Hollywood has continued to present for the most part the Japanese as cruel, honourable, business-orientated, polite, delicate and untrustworthy. Even innovative representations of the Japanese male, such as the one developed by Bruce Lee in the seventies became a formulaic portrayal of the martial arts hero. For example, the actor Jet Li has a limited variety of roles, since his film career in Hollywood is defined by his skills as a martial arts expert. Despite Bruce Lee having embodied a strong, active Asian hero, Asian actors have still remained effeminate in the eyes of the West. They almost never get

the girl, seldom even a kiss, not even after risking their lives to save the female protagonist.

One purpose of this work is to summarise and analyse some of the main events that have influenced Hollywood's representations of the Japanese. In doing so, one might observe that depictions of the Japanese depend not on what can be defined as a "national character," but on external public opinion. American attitudes toward the Japanese vary according to historical context, as Johnson points out, "We have been hostile toward the Japanese; remorseful over Hiroshima; condescending, admiring, wary, irritated, and baffled in the face of Japanese culture" (163). These divergent attitudes towards Japan are reflected in Hollywood cinema, since as a popular art form, it tends to reproduce the prevailing zeitgeist, instead of creating it.

More recently, Japan has been associated with urban life, modern life style, postmodernism, elements that have broadened its appeal to western audiences, generating multiple western images. Between 2000 and 2006, Hollywood has promoted simultaneously positive and negative images of Japanese culture. This might be a reflection of American anxieties about urban modernity embodied by Japanese crowded city centres. For instance, western concerns relating to urban alienation might be read into Hollywood's appropriation of Japanese "techno horror," where the threat comes from television, videotapes and computers, as it can be seen in *The Ring* and *The Ring Two* (2004). As argued in chapter four, Japan is metonymically associated with post-modern society and its metropolises are symbols of detachment and isolation, the consequences of excessive use of technology.

I have also tried to argue in this study that Hollywood's portrayal of the Japanese is intimately linked to the representation of the Chinese as well. When the Japanese were being depicted as cruel and villainous, the Chinese were seen as friendly and trustworthy. However, when Americans began to perceive the Chinese as treacherous due to international tensions and conflicts, Japan was then associated with positive characteristics, and seen as America's close ally. Referring to this contradictory representation of China and Japan, Sheila Johnson concludes, "Americans have rarely held either simultaneously positive or simultaneously negative views of both countries" (165). This seems to be an endless cycle of positive and negative portrayals, which vary according to American foreign policy objectives. For instance, cycles of good governmental and business relations

have promoted optimistic representations, while disagreements and conflicts contribute to unfavourable depictions.

International events are responsible for reanimating stale images and for evoking previous stereotypes. For instance, conflicts with North Korea and its policy of developing/disseminating nuclear weapons evoked western representations of the Asian as invaders. As evidence of this, one might cite the recent puppet comedy *Team America: World Police* (2004), where the *South Park* team of Trey Parker and Matt Stone are able to run with the fox and hunt with the hounds, while offering an impeccable liberal satire of Bushian foreign policy adventurism. They manage to smuggle in by the back door all the old despicable stereotypes of foreigners and of Asians in particular, all the old jokes, all the old ridiculous confusion with the 'L' and the 'R' in the hate figure of North Korean dictator, Kim Jong Il. His portrayal is similar to the megalomaniac villain of the James Bond adventures, reinforcing the idea that recent filmmakers still recur to previous representations of Asian peoples and adapt them to the new circumstances.



**Figure 47. Kim Jong Il in *Team America: World Police* (2004): the Asian planning world domination.**

It is my intention that this work contribute to improving audiences' understanding of how western representations of the Japanese work. My main point is that audiences should not accept these images as being in any valid sense accurate. As I tried to demonstrate in the first chapter, several authors have questioned the accuracy of

stereotypes. Social background, personal experiences and other factors prevent individuals from developing balanced representations of others. Hollywood, film and culture in general, offer a partial representation of different cultures. Therefore, audiences should always be suspicious of Hollywood's representations of the Japanese and question those portrayals, trying to determine which motives underlie them. It is not a matter of underestimating audiences' ability to question these images. Rather it is the recurrent use of stereotypical representations and the persistent use of those same images associated with the Japanese characters that have become Japan in the western popular imagination. Consequently, a distancing is necessary, as well as challenging those images when they are manifestly crude and ill-informed. Mathew Bernstein in his introduction to the book *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, states "the study of Orientalism and its consequent self-examination can contribute to a multiculturalist pedagogy, by compelling us to recognize how Western filmmaking has seductively and persuasively limited our perceptions and understanding of the many cultures it purports to represent" (14). It is my belief that this dissertation applies this dictum to the case of the portrayal of the Japanese.

Since stereotypical perceptions of the Japanese are very restrictive, several authors suggest that filmmakers should promote a variety of images. Multiple representations allow Japanese characters to break out of formulaic portrayals, as Johnson argues, "A multiplicity of images makes it more difficult for a particular stereotype to dominate one nation's perspective on another nation" (170). Bell Hooks writes in 1996 in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, "As more nonwhite images appear on the screen, they at least promote public debate and discussion about the politics of representation" (75). This has proved to be true, that is, recent films have become objects of heated debate about whether Hollywood's present representations of Japan are well-intentioned, prejudicial, accurate or self-absorbed. The proliferation of Asian images on the big screen has also contributed to the public's awareness of these communities in their own country. For instance, data from the Census Bureau of the United States indicates how significant Asian communities have become in American society. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Asian Americans represented 4,3 percent of the global American population. That means that around twelve million people identify themselves as Asian or partly Asian. The largest Asian subgroup is the Chinese (3,4 Million) and the Japanese occupy the sixth position (1,1 Million). Recent statistics indicate that more than thirteen million people of Asian and

Pacific heritage live in the United States. This means a nine percent increase since the latest census. This rising presence of Asians in American society and this recent increase in the consciousness of multiethnic American society has also contributed to the dissemination of Asian-American characters in television series. For instance, popular series now include Asian-American actors in their cast. *Lost*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* are all examples of worldwide-distributed series that have Asian-Americans in leading roles.

Lucy Liu in *Ally McBeal* and in popular Hollywood films such as *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), and more recently Sandra Oh in *Grey's Anatomy* and *Sideways* (2004), are examples of successful Asian-American female actresses, who are contributing for this dissemination of positive images of Asian peoples. However, their roles have been criticised in the sense that both embody stereotypical images: Lucy Liu's character in *Ally McBeal* might be considered a "Dragon Lady," while Sandra Oh's character in *Grey's Anatomy* has been accused of perpetuating the image of Asians as a model minority. Nevertheless, other television series like *Lost*, which includes in its cast a Korean married couple who speak Korean with subtitles, and films such as *Babel* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, present innovative portrayals of Asian peoples. Efforts to erase demeaning representations have been made and a recent tendency is to increase Asian visibility with more authentic depictions. For instance, Joann Lee in *Asian American Actors: Oral Histories from Stage, Screen and Television* notes that some progress has been made in the sense that Asian-Americans are "gradually emerging from their media invisibility" (5).

Referring to the early decades of motion pictures, Esther Ghymn states "Perhaps it would not be fair to say that only Asians were cast as stereotypes because if we were to view the films made during this period, we would see that many of the characters were typecast" (135). The point is, while white characters had the opportunity to play innovative and challenging roles, Asian characters remained stale and based on old depictions of Asian peoples. Black actors, for example, have also seen their roles improved. Several black actors have been playing leading roles and have played unconventional characters, while in comparison, Asian actors have been confined to playing a very limited variety of characters. To restrict Asian roles to a few stereotypical characters denies their individuality. Esther Ghymn points out the benefits of western audiences' access to actual representations of Asians speaking their own language. According to her, "such exposure

has created more awareness and appreciation of the Asian heritage and culture in America. (...) Asians are now recognized as an important part of our society” (147). Indeed, one stereotypical image that has almost disappeared is the Asian as unqualified labourer, the so-called “coolie.” Asian-Americans are not portrayed as cooks and laundrymen, as Asian immigrants were in films prior to World War II. They are now playing doctors, dentists, newscasters and professors, especially in television series like the ones mentioned above.

Bearing these arguments in mind, Japanese cultural exports have become even more significant, in the sense that they present an alternative and particularly challenging view to that of Hollywood representations. Brian Ruh in the already mentioned article “America’s Japanese Cinema: Appropriating Japan’s Cachet of Cultural Cool,” believes this might be an opportunity to extend our perceptions of Japanese culture. He remarks, “The proliferation of Japanese popular culture in America will prove to be beneficial to us if we can actually pay attention and not blindly prefer our own visions about foreign cultures.” Therefore, the propagation of Japanese images on the big screen motivates debate, challenges stereotypical representations and induces audiences to resist Hollywood’s labelling of other cultures. Nonetheless, despite this multiplicity of images related to Japanese culture, audiences should keep in mind that these images are still product of filmmakers’ creativity and imagination and therefore possess no special or ultimate authority. Since the very beginning of motion pictures history, Hollywood has been imagining the East and I believe for most western citizens Japan still remains an imagined country.

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# **Filmography**

## **Selected Filmography**

### *\* Babel (2006)*

Director: Alejandro González Iñárritu

Screenplay: Guillermo Arriaga

Country: France/ USA/ Mexico

Runtime: 143 min

Production Company: Anonymous Content, Central Films, Dune Films, Zeta Film

Cast: Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchet, Adriana Barraza, Gael García Bernal, Rinko Kikuchi

Budget: \$25,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$34,287,296 (USA) (sub-total)

### *\* Black Rain (1989)*

Director: Ridley Scott

Screenplay: Craig Bolotin, Warren Lewis

Country: USA

Runtime: 125 min

Production Company: Paramount Pictures, Pegasus Film Partners

Cast: Michael Douglas, Andy Garcia, Ken Takakura, Yusaku Matsuda

Budget: \$14,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$45,645,204 (USA) (sub-total)

### *\* Crash (2004)*

Director: Paul Haggis

Screenplay: Paul Haggis

Country: USA/ Germany

Runtime: 113 min

Production Company: Bull's Eye Entertainment, DEJ Productions, ApolloProScreen  
Filmproduktion, Blackfriars Bridge Films, Bob Yari Productions, Harris Company

Cast: Sandra Bullock, Matt Dillon, Don Cheadle, Brendan Fraser, Thandie Newton, Ryan  
Phillippe

Budget: \$6,500,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$54,557,348 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Empire of the Sun* (1987)

Director: Steven Spielberg

Screenplay: J. G. Ballard (novel), Tom Stoppard

Country: USA

Runtime: 154 min

Production Company: Amblin Entertainment, Warner Bros. Pictures

Cast: Christian Bale, John Malkovich, Mirand Richardson, Nigel Havers

Budget: \$38,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$ 22,238,696 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *The Great Raid* (2005)

Director: John Dahl

Screenplay: Carlo Bernard, Doug Miro

Country: USA/ Australia

Runtime: 132 min

Production Company: Miramax Films, Marty Katz Productions, Lawrence Bender Productions, Village Roadshow Pictures

Cast: Benjamin Bratt, James Franco, Joseph Fiennes, Motoki Kobayashi

Budget: \$70,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$10,166,502 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Gung Ho* (1986)

Director: Ron Howard

Screenplay: Edwin Blum, Lowell Ganz, Babaloo Mandel

Country: USA

Runtime: 112 min

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Cast: Michael Keaton, Gedde Watanabe, Mimi Rogers

Box Office (Gross): \$36,611,610 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Japanese Story* (2003)

Director: Sue Brooks

Screenplay: Alison Tilson

Country: Australia

Runtime: 110 min

Production Company: Fortissimo Films, Australian Film Finance Corporation (AFFC), Gecko Films Pty. Ltd., Showtime Australia, ScreenWest, Lotteries Commission of Western Australia, Film Victoria, Footprint Films

Cast: Tony Collette, Gotaro Tsunashima

Budget: \$5,740,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$647,054 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *The Last Samurai* (2003)

Director: Edward Zwick

Screenplay: John Logan, Edward Zwick, Marshall Herskovitz

Country: USA

Runtime: 154 min

Production Company: Warner Bros. Pictures, The Bedford Falls Company, Cruise/Wagner Productions, Radar Pictures

Cast: Tom Cruise, Ken Watanabe, William Atherton, Masato Harada, Koyuki, Shin Koyamada

Budget: \$140,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$111,110,575 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006)

Director: Clint Eastwood

Screenplay: Iris Yamashita

Country: USA

Runtime: 141 min

Production Company: Amblin Entertainment, DreamWorks SKG, Malpaso Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures

Cast: Ken Watanabe, Kazunari Ninomiya, Takumi Bando

Budget: \$15,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$13,660,616 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Lost in Translation* (2003)

Director: Sofia Coppola

Screenplay: Sofia Coppola

Country: USA/ Japan

Runtime: 102 min

Production Company: American Zoetrope, Elemental Films, Tohokashinsha Film Company Ltd.

Cast: Bill Murray, Scarlett Johansson,

Budget: \$4,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$44,566,004 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005)

Director: Rob Marshall

Screenplay: Robin Swicord

Country: USA

Runtime: 145 min

Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation, DreamWorks SKG, Spyglass Entertainment, Amblin Entertainment, Red Wagon Productions

Cast: Ziyi Zhang, Ken Watanabe, Li Gong, Michelle Yeoh

Budget: \$85,000,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$57,010,853 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Paradise Road* (1997)

Director: Bruce Beresford

Screenplay: David Giles, Martin Meader, Bruce Beresford

Country: Australia/ USA

Runtime: 122 min

Production Company:

Cast: Glenn Close, Frances McDormand, Cate Blanchet, Pauline Collins

Box Office (Gross): \$1,921,471 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Pearl Harbor* (2001)

Director: Michael Bay

Screenplay: Randall Wallace

Country: USA

Runtime: 183 min

Production Company: Touchstone Pictures, Jerry Bruckheimer Films

Cast: Ben Affleck, Josh Hartnett, Kate Beckinsale, Cuba Gooding Jr, Jon Voight, Alec Baldwin

Budget: \$135,250,000 (estimated)

Box Office (Gross): \$198,539,855 (USA) (sub-total)

\* *Rising Sun* (1993)

Director: Philip Kaufman

Screenplay: Philip Kaufman

Country: USA

Runtime: 129 min

Production Company: 20th Century Fox

Cast: Sean Connery, Wesley Snipes, Harvey Keitel, Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, Mako

Box Office (Gross): \$63,095,271 (USA) (sub-total)

### **Secondary Filmography**

\* *Alfie* (2004), dir. Charles Shyer, UK/ USA

\* *Anna and the King* (1999), dir. Andy Tennant, USA

\* *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), dir. John Sturges, USA

\* *Battle of the Coral Sea* (1959), dir. Paul Wendkos, USA

\* *Beheading of the Chinese Prisoner* (1900), dir. Sigmund Lubin, USA

\* *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), dir. John Carpenter, USA

\* *Birth of a Nation* (1915), dir. D.W. Griffith, USA

- \* *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), dir. Frank Capra, USA
- \* *Blade Runner* (1982), dir. Ridley Scott, USA
- \* *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), dir. Blake Edwards, USA
- \* *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), dir. David Lean, UK/ USA
- \* *Bridge to the Sun* (1961), dir. Etienne Périer, France/ USA
- \* *Broken Blossoms* (1919), dir. D.W. Griffith, USA
- \* *Bulletproof Monk* (2003), dir. Paul Hunter, USA
- \* *Charlie Chan in London* (1934), dir. Eugene Forde, USA
- \* *Charlie Chan in the Secret Service* (1944), dir. Phil Rosen, USA
- \* *Charlie's Angels* (2000), dir. McG, USA/ Germany
- \* *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), dir. McG, USA
- \* *The Cheat* (1915), dir. Cecil B. DeMille, USA
- \* *China Gate* (1957), dir. Samuel Fuller, USA
- \* *City of Hope* (1991), dir. John Sayles, USA
- \* *Come See the Paradise* (1990), dir. Alan Parker, USA
- \* *The Conqueror* (1956), dir. Dick Powell, USA
- \* *Dances with Wolves* (1990), dir. Kevin Costner, USA
- \* *Dark Water* (2002), dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan
- \* *Dark Water* (2005), dir. Walter Salles, USA
- \* *Daughter of a Dragon* (1931), dir. Lloyd Corrigan, USA
- \* *The Departed* (2006), dir. Martin Scorsese, USA/ Hong Kong
- \* *La Dolce Vita* (1960), dir. Federico Fellini, Italy/ France
- \* *Dr. No* (1962), dir. Terence Young, UK
- \* *Enter the Dragon* (1973), dir. Robert Clouse, Hong Kong/ USA
- \* *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006), dir. Justin Lin, USA
- \* *55 Days at Pecking* (1963), dirs. Nicholas Ray, Guy Green, Andrew Marton, USA
- \* *Fists of Fury* (1971), dirs. Wei Lo, Jiaxiang Wu, Hong Kong
- \* *Flags of our Fathers* (2006), dir. Clint Eastwood, USA
- \* *Frantic* (1988), dir. Roman Polanski, USA/ France
- \* *Go for Broke!* (1951), dir. Robert Pirosh, USA
- \* *The Good Earth* (1937), dirs. Sidney Franklin, Victor Fleming, Gustav Machatý, USA
- \* *Grand Canyon* (1991), dir. Lawrence Kasdan, USA

- \* *Groundhog Day* (1993), dir. Harold Ramis, USA
- \* *The Grudge* (2004), dir. Takashi Shimizu, Japan/ USA/ Germany
- \* *Hero* (2002), dir. Yimou Zhang, Hong Kong/ China
- \* *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), dir. Steven Spielberg, USA
- \* *Infernal Affairs* (2002), dirs. Wai Keung Lau, Siu Fai Mak, Hong Kong
- \* *Iron Horse* (1924), dir. John Ford, USA
- \* *Iron Maze* (1991), dir. Hiroaki Yoshida, Japan/ USA
- \* *Japanese War Bride* (1952), dir. King Vidor, USA
- \* *Ju-on – The Grudge* (2003), dir. Takashi Shimizu, Japan
- \* *The Karate Kid* (1984), dir. John G. Avildsen, USA
- \* *The Karate Kid, Part II* (1986), dir. John G. Avildsen, USA
- \* *The Karate Kid, Part III* (1989), dir. John G. Avildsen, USA
- \* *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003), dir. Quentin Tarantino, USA
- \* *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004), dir. Quentin Tarantino, USA
- \* *The Killing Fields* (1984), dir. Roland Joffé, UK
- \* *Kiss of the Dragon* (2001), dir. Chris Nahon, France/ USA
- \* *The Lake House* (2006), dir. Alejandro Agresti, USA
- \* *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), dir. Richard Donner, USA
- \* *Little Tokyo, USA* (1942), dir. Otto Brower, USA
- \* *The Longest Day* (1962), dirs. Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Bernhard Wicki, Darryl F. Zanuck, USA
- \* *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), dir. Henry King, USA
- \* *Madame Butterfly* (1915), dir. Sidney Olcott, USA
- \* *Madame Butterfly* (1932), dir. Marion Gering, USA
- \* *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), dir. John Sturges, USA
- \* *Magnolia* (1999), dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, USA
- \* *A Majority of One* (1961), dir. Mervyn LeRoy, USA
- \* *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), dir. John Frankenheimer, USA
- \* *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), dirs. Charles Brabin, Charles Vidor, USA
- \* *The Matrix* (1999), dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski, Australia/ USA
- \* *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski, USA
- \* *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski, USA

- \* *My Geisha* (1962), dir. Jack Cardiff, USA
- \* *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), dir. Rowland V. Lee, USA
- \* *Objective, Burma!* (1945), dir. Raoul Walsh, USA
- \* *The Outrage* (1964), dir. Martin Ritt, USA
- \* *The Painted Veil* (1934), dir. Richard Boleslawski, USA
- \* *The Purple Heart* (1944), dir. Lewis Milestone, USA
- \* *Rashomon* (1950), dir. Akira Kurosawa, Japan
- \* *The Replacement Killers* (1998), dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA
- \* *Ring* (1998), dir. Hideo Nakata, Japan
- \* *The Ring* (2002), dir. Gore Verbinski, USA/ Japan
- \* *The Ring Two* (2004), dir. Hideo Nakata, USA
- \* *Romeo Must Die* (2000), dir. Andrzej Bartkowiak, USA
- \* *Rush Hour 2* (2001), dir. Brett Ratner, USA
- \* *San Francisco* (1936), dir. W.S. Van Dyke, USA
- \* *The Sand Pebbles* (1966), dir. Robert Wise, USA
- \* *Sayonara* (1957), dir. Joshua Logan, USA
- \* *The Seven Samurai* (1954), dir. Akira Kurosawa, Japan
- \* *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, USA
- \* *Shall we Dance?* (1996), dir. Masayuki Suo, Japan
- \* *Shall we Dance* (2004), dir. Peter Chelsom, USA
- \* *Shangai Express* (1932), dir. Josef von Sternberg, USA
- \* *Shangai Noon* (2000), dir. Tom Dey, USA
- \* *Short Cuts* (1993), dir. Robert Altman, USA
- \* *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991), dir. Mark L. Lester, USA
- \* *Sideways* (2004), dir. Alexander Payne, USA
- \* *Sixteen Candles* (1984), dir. John Hughes, USA
- \* *The Son of Kong* (1933), dir. Ernest B. Schoedsack, USA
- \* *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), dir. Daniel Mann, USA
- \* *Team America: World Police* (2004), dir. Trey Parker, USA
- \* *The Terrible Kids* (1906), dirs. Wallace McCutcheon, Edwin S. Porter, USA
- \* *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), dir. Raoul Walsh, USA
- \* *Tokyo Joe* (1949), dir. Stuart Heisler, USA

- \* *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Yasujiro Ozu, Japan
- \* *Toll of the Sea* (1922), dir. Chester M. Franklin, USA
- \* *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), dirs. Richard Fleischer, Kinji Fukasaku, Toshio Masuda, USA/ Japan
- \* *2 Days in the Valley* (1996), dir. John Herzfeld, USA
- \* *Year of the Dragon* (1985), dir. Michael Cimino, USA

\* Source: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)