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Bonded by Stereotypes, Clichés, and Tropes: Introduction to Themed Issue "Symbols of Japan"

Christopher P. Hood
(Cardiff University)

Christopher J. Hayes
(Teesside University)

With record numbers of visitors travelling to Japan, never has there been a time when so many are having an opportunity to see and experience the country for themselves. While airfares for those travelling from Europe, in particular, are much higher than in the past, the favourable exchange rate (as of early 2025) has meant that the time in Japan is more affordable than it has been for decades. Together with this explosion in inbound tourism (which also produces further global exposure of Japan through social media posts), there is also greater access to films and programmes set in Japan, including Japanese-made programmes. The combination of these two factors should provide an opportunity for people to become well informed about life in Japan. However, this possibility needs to be treated with caution, as this article, as an introduction to a themed issue on 'symbols' of Japan, sets out.

There is no shortage of literature concerning the development and role of stereotypes, clichés, and tropes. Indeed, from the earliest encounters with the Japanese, 'Westerners' have perceived the Japanese through a reductive lens, often linked to the belief of 'Western' (and, historically, European) superiority. While there may be limitations to these characterizations, and many may be outdated, one cannot also not say that in most, if not all, cases that they cannot be found. As Ian Littlewood notes,

> One by one, the time-honoured images turn out to be true. But in doing so, they obscure all the other things that are true—which is why they are so dangerous. They teach us what to look for, and that is what we find; everything else becomes a background blur. We are left with a reality selected for us by our stereotypes. (Littlewood xiii)

Therefore, it is pertinent to consider where some of these stereotypes may be formed. This article does by looking at two types of media outputs. In the first section, primarily written by Christopher Hood, the article considers some foreign films set in Japan and what stereotypes, clichés, and tropes they contain. The second part of the article, primarily written by Christopher Hayes, turns to more

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factual, documentary media. While it may be that such media would, at least in comparison to films, be considered to be more accurate, they are not without their own editorial pressures and, at times, may even introduce fictional elements in order to make the footage "seem more dramatic" (Hood, "Truth and Limitations" 29). The final part of this article introduces the other articles in this final issue of *New Readings*.

Foreign Films Set in Japan

After the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan fully re-opened its borders after a period of almost complete isolation, which led some to refer to it as Japan's second *sakoku*, akin to the way Japan was closed off for over 200 years during the Tokugawa Period (1603–1868) (Hood, "Japan" 184), tourists once again began flooding into the country. After decades of relatively modest growth of inbound tourism, the 2010s saw a massive increase, and this trend looked to be restarted in 2023 (Hood, "Japan" 173). This growth has come at a time when access to streaming services, such as Netflix, has meant that access to Japanese-made TV shows and films, often available with dubbing and/or subtitles in the viewer's own language, has never been so easy. This compares starkly with the situation through to the 2010s when in the UK, for example, access to Japanese programmes would be limited to an expensive satellite television subscription dedicated to Japanese output (primarily for Japanese people living outside of Japan), a few videos in video-rental or video-selling stores, and the very occasional showing of Japanese-made films on terrestrial or mainstream satellite television (e.g., Sky). Alongside this dearth of Japanese-made media, there were some foreign media set in Japan, among them content produced by British and American companies. For many, outside those with a particular interest in Japan and so prepared to seek out, and potentially pay for, Japanese-made output, it was this foreign media set in Japan that were likely to be their main exposure to some aspect of Japan. It is some of this output—namely, American- or British-made films set, at least in part, in Japan—that this section of the article will focus upon.

This section of the article draws upon two other studies as its inspiration. The first of these relates to *Empire of Signs* by Roland Barthes. As well as studying the contents of the book itself, including the variations between the original French version (*L'empire des signes*), the Japanese version (*Hyōchō no Teikoku*), and the English version (*Empire of Signs*), I (Christopher Hood) went to the National Archives in Paris and, with the help of a Cardiff University internship programme student, examined the notes and diaries written by Barthes during his trips to Japan.[1] One of the findings was that, other than for certain maps, there was very little evidence that Barthes made any notes or observations of Japan while he was there. *Empire of Signs*, it seems, was written from his memory of the trips. If being a bit more

[1] I would like to acknowledge my thanks to Marine Cornut, for helping me with this project. I would also like to thank Thomas Cazentre at the National Library of France, who helped me access the materials discussed in the article.

disingenuous, one may even argue that much of it may have been written before, or in spite of, the trips to Japan. While there are examples of Barthes interpreting things around him correctly—although it is probable that this was largely thanks to those who were aiding him on his trip—there are also cases where he clearly did not have a full understanding of Japan. For example, his comments about the somewhat gentle way Japanese food, presumably like *tempura* or *sushi*, is consumed in comparison to 'Western' food (*Empire of Signs* 15–18; *L'empire des signes* 28–32) is a good indication that he never got to experience food such as *okonomiyaki*.

The second inspiration for this section of the article stems from work that I have been doing since 2007 about the world's largest single deadliest plane crash, the JAL flight 123 plane crash of 12 August 1985.[2] In relation to this research, I have studied not only the various narratives related to the crash itself, but also disaster Japanese narratives more widely, including their differences and similarities to English-language disaster narratives (Hood, "Disaster Narratives"; Hood, "Japanese Disaster Narratives"; Hood, "Truth and Limitations"). It was the approach taken in one of these, "Disaster Narratives by Design: Is Japan Different?", that provided the framework and methodology for this section.

For this study, it was decided to focus upon the films made between 1960 (i.e., the start of the first complete decade after the end of the Occupation of Japan) and the current decade (i.e., the 2020s). Rather than attempt to study every film from that time period in detail, it was decided to take one film from each decade as an example, allowing for much greater depth and checking than would be possible if more films were studied. I was aware from my previous film-related research how time-consuming watching and analysing the films could be: sometimes multiple viewings are needed, even if it is possible to skip to certain parts or watch at a higher speed. However, while this approach to selecting the sample for my analysis may appear logical, it should be noted that it is quite arbitrary at one level, since the gap between some of the films (e.g., *Black Rain* and *Mr. Baseball*) is quite short, while that between others (e.g., *The Yakuza* and *Black Rain*) is longer (see Table 1). We should not necessarily be expecting portrayals (that is the stereotypes, clichés, and tropes that I was looking out for) to change with a change in decade. A second parameter of the study was that the films had to be set in contemporary Japan, thereby meaning that a film such as *The Last Samurai* (directed by Edward Zwick, 2003) could not be included. The reason for this was that it was highly probable that such films would lean particularly on certain stereotypes, clichés, and tropes, since it is more likely that the basis of these were historical. However, even allowing for the non-inclusion of historical films, it must be acknowledged that the storyline and genre would probably influence what stereotypes, clichés, and tropes would be found. It may have been, for example, that a film such as *Gung Ho* (directed by Ron Howard, 1986) would have led to different findings if I used it rather than *Black Rain* for the 1980s, for example. As it is, there are four

[2] Also referred to as the "JL123", "JAL123", "JA8119", or "Osutaka" crash (Hood, "Dealing With Disaster").

films which could be described as action, crime, or thriller, whereas the other three do not correspond to any of these genres (see Table 1). One surprising finding as the initial part of the study was being established was that there were not many British or American films set in Japan made in the 2010s. In the end, I chose one, *The Sea of Trees*, at random, not having seen it before doing this research, and in many respects, it does not work well as it is hardly set in Japan, and the key Japanese character turns out to be either a ghost or a figment of the protagonist's imagination. The complete list of films studied, together with their genre and average ratings according to IMDb, are listed in Table 1.

Having identified the films that would be studied, each was watched in turn by noting down stereotypes, clichés, tropes, and other contents that could come up in more than one film. The initial list was also partly influenced by knowledge of other narratives, such as The Simpsons' "30 Minutes Over Tokyo" episode (Season 10, Episode 23). When a potential new feature was found, previously watched films were checked to see if that feature appeared in those films too. In total, 70 features were found that appear at least once in one of the seven films. A convention related to the use of a small number of Japanese actors, such as Tetsurō Tamba (whose photograph appears in *Empire of Signs*), Ken Takakura, Ken Watanabe, was considered, but ultimately rejected as this aspect of the films was likely related more to the skills of the actor (for example, their ability to speak some English) rather than the portrayal of a particular stereotype, cliché, or trope.

It is important to acknowledge that, unlike the media considered in the next section, none of these films are meant to be documentaries. Their role is primarily to make money for those involved in their making. To find a mass audience, the films need to entertain. Their average ratings on IMDb (see Table 1), however, would suggest that some struggle on the entertainment front and that the poor reviews may have limited how much they were viewed and what the impact of any stereotypes, clichés, and tropes contained in the film would have been. But even if the role of these films is to entertain rather than be accurate representations of Japan, they still need something the audience can latch on to. To some degree, this could be equated to what novelist Hideo Yokoyama calls "pillars of truth"—elements which are either factually correct about the content being covered or things which accurately reflect how people behave (Hood, "Truth and Limitations" 22). Yokoyama suggests that by having these "pillars", readers are more likely to accept the more fictional elements in between.

This section is not concerned with the degree of legitimacy of certain stereotypes or clichés—their existence is likely based on some sort of reality at some point. Whether they are still accurate may be another matter. Nor is it overly interested in tracing the origin of the stereotypes, clichés, or tropes on display. This study is instead aiming to identify which ones appear to be commonly used—although sometimes even those that appear only once may be noteworthy in some way.

As can be seen in Table 1, of the 70 features identified, *The Yakuza* scored the highest with 48, whereas *The Sea of Trees*, due to its narrow storyline in Japan, only

Table 1: Foreign Films Set in Japan Studied

Decade	Title	Director	Year	Genre	Av. Rating	Features
1960s	*You Only Live Twice*	Lewis Gilbert	1967	Action, Adventure, Thriller	6.8	38
1970s	*The Yakuza*	Sydney Pollack	1974	Action, Crime, Drama	7.2	48
1980s	*Black Rain*	Ridley Scott	1989	Action, Crime, Drama	6.6	34
1990s	*Mr. Baseball*	Fred Schepisi	1992	Comedy, Romance, Sport	6.0	32
2000s	*Lost in Translation*	Sofia Coppola	2003	Comedy, Drama	7.7	22
2010s	*The Sea of Trees*	Gus Van Sant	2015	Drama, Fantasy, Mystery	6.1	9
2020s	*Bullet Train*	David Leitch	2022	Action, Comedy, Thriller	7.3	27

Table by Christopher Hood. All information taken from IMDb. Average ratings as of 9 April 2025.

had nine. Sometimes the reason a feature does not appear is due to the situation of the story. For example, *Mr. Baseball* was set in and around Nagoya, and so there was limited opportunity to include Mount Fuji or any of the sites/sights of Tōkyō that feature in many films.

Of the 70 features, there was not a single one that appeared in every one of the seven films, although combining two into one feature, as will be discussed below, would have allowed for this. There were three features that appeared in six of the seven films, and, in all three cases, the film they did not appear in was *The Sea of Trees*. The three most common features were where there was first, some mention or discussion of honour or dishonour, second, that the foreign protagonist bows, although the bows were not necessarily the best, and third, that there was some Japanese food—albeit in the case of *Bullet Train*, this was limited to snack food rather than a proper meal of any sort. In two cases, showing the consumption of Japanese food was also an opportunity to show the protagonist struggling with using chopsticks.

That we would see food being consumed in a film set in Japan should be of no surprise, and the fact that it does not appear in *The Sea of Trees* is an indication of how little of Japanese life we see the protagonist experience, which is perhaps not a surprise, since he had gone to Japan to take his own life in Aokigahara, itself often the focus for foreign media (Hood, "Japan" 104–08, 116), even though it meant taking a plane and going further away than sites such as the Golden Gate bridge or any number of forests in the USA. Suicide was a feature that was checked for, but it only came up in one other film (*The Yakuza*), so perhaps not as much as may be expected from the English language news reporting of Japan (Hood, "Japan" 188).

As well as Japanese food, it should also be noted that *sake* featured in some way in five of the seven films. It is perhaps also not a surprise that we see the protagonist bow, and even Barthes had a section on the practice of bowing in *Empire of Signs*. But what about honour/dishonour? It appeared that the use of this feature was a way to ground a contemporary film and behaviour of Japanese people with something more historical, due to its link to *bushidō* and *samurai*, which many audience members may have knowledge of, even if the film itself did

not explain this, and so add a degree of validity, or a "pillar of truth", to this feature and the film. Honour/dishonour was not the only feature related to behaviour that came up multiple times. Others that appeared at least twice being duty (four times), responsibility (four times), saving or losing face (four times), politeness (three times), respect (three times), humility or being humble (three times), and loyalty (twice).

Five of the films featured bright lots of neon lights on buildings, as per *Blade Runner* (directed by Ridley Scott, 1982). The only two not to do so were *The Sea of Trees*, where the protagonist only sees Tōkyō during the day, and *Mr. Baseball*, which does have some lights on buildings, but not to the degree of the others, and the protagonist even makes a point of the lights, of Nagoya, not being that spectacular.

Neon lights are not the only modern symbol that appears in five of the films, as the *shinkansen*, which I have used as a symbol of modern Japan in another study (Hood, "Shinkansen"), also appears five times. This includes, in *Mr. Baseball*, the *shinkansen* sounding its horn in a place where it would not normally do so, seemingly to help draw the audience's attention to it. Puzzlingly, in *The Sea of Trees*, the protagonist takes the *shinkansen* from Tōkyō to at least as far west at Shizuoka (we do not see where they get off, but it can be inferred from views from and of the train that this is the case), in order to get a taxi to Aokigahara. It would have been quicker and cheaper to have gone a different route, so this routing would appear to ensure that Mount Fuji and the *shinkansen* appear in the film so that the audience is in no doubt that the protagonist is in Japan. *The Sea of Trees* was not the only film containing inaccurate geography or inexplicable trips, as this was also found in four other films, with only *Black Rain* and *Mr. Baseball*, which had a very limited focus on Kansai and Aichi, respectively, remaining accurate and plausible in this respect.

The fact that even the geography of Japan is not a fixed reality points to just how much leeway non-Japanese producers may take with their depictions of Japan. Indeed, in this respect, *Bullet Train* takes its Japan to a whole new Japan. It was as though a brand-new country, full of neon, manga-inspired-cute mascots, and such like were created from someone's imagination, and they just happened to call it Japan. In that respect, there is a direct parallel with *Empire of Signs*, given that Barthes claims that the country of which he writes is "a fictive nation [. . .] so as to compromise no real country" (Barthes, *Empire of Signs* 3).

On a final point related to geography, it should be noted that not all films that are set in Japan are necessarily filmed in Japan. Although not part of this study, this was the case for *The Last Samurai* (directed by Edward Zwick, 2003), for example, which was largely filmed in New Zealand (IMDb, "The Last Samurai"). Of the films included in this study, the one that has a large proportion of the Japan-based scenes filmed elsewhere is *The Sea of Trees*. In an interesting bit of trivia, when Ken Watanabe's character says that the protagonist is "in purgatory", he could not have been more correct, as the filming was done in Purgatory Chasm in Massachusetts (IMDb, "The Sea of Trees").

As well as the desire to show a modern version of Japan with neon signs and such like, many films like to show the traditional. This duality is not unique to films. Japan is often presented

> as a country of contrasts. By an old temple, there may be much more modern buildings [. . .]. But I would suggest that Japan is not unusual in having such contrasts existing side by side. Many of London's newest skyscrapers tower over nearby churches or cathedrals that may be many hundreds of years old, for example. I expect you could find an equivalent in your closest city. (Hood, "Japan" 10)

When it comes to films showing the traditional, it can be done in a number of ways, for example, by having scenes in the (unmodernized) countryside and a village (four films), having a *tatami* room at some point (five films), a man in traditional clothing (five films) or a woman in *kimono* (four films), and the showing of a shrine or temple (five and four, respectively). It should be noted in relation to the last of the features—showing a shrine or showing a temple—that if these were merged into a single feature that includes both shrines and temples, then this combined feature occurred in all seven films, the only feature which would appear in all the films in the study.

In terms of the Japanese language, although most conversations happen in English, the suffix *-san* was used at some point at least once in five of the films. Also, in five of the films, the 'Western' protagonist speaks some Japanese. Often this is only one word or two, though in the case of *The Sea of Trees* it is not clear how the protagonist knew the word *kaidan* ('stairs'), given his only interactions with a Japanese person up to that point appear to be with a ghost or figment of his imagination, who apparently was incapable of teaching him two other words which get explained at the end of the film. In *You Only Live Twice*, James Bond speaks very little Japanese despite claiming he studied "Oriental languages" at university, and so rejects a phrasebook that he is offered by Miss Moneypenny. As well as using little Japanese during the film, it would also seem that his course was not very good as he seemingly had no knowledge of what *ninja* are. Regarding language, there were four films where one of the Japanese characters uses English incorrectly, which was clearly deliberate by the script writers. *Lost in Translation*, particularly, features many such English errors, often with it being the focus of a joke.

"Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?" These words from Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" were not about American and British films set in Japan, but they may as well have been. Over the decades, there have been a number of films set in Japan, and while their storylines, and even what can be achieved in them due to technological changes in film-making, have varied, certain elements seem unchanging. But, at least in the case of *Bullet Train*, one can question whether the film is even set in a 'real' Japan. Given how unrealistic it is, does this afford it greater freedom in how to depict Japan and Japanese people? If it does, can this be extended to the other films' Japans, too? I do not think so. While the

films' primary role is to make money through entertainment, we cannot ignore the fact that most are set in a 'real' Japan and with people who are meant to be representative of 'real' Japanese. In that respect, we cannot escape from the fact that the stereotypes, clichés, and tropes used are likely to influence their viewers in some way, and that this, in turn, may also lead to some of the replication of these features over the decades.

Non-fiction Films about Japan

If cinema does not present to us a 'real' Japan, can we rely on other forms of visual media, specifically non-fiction? While people from the 'West' have travelled to Japan since the 16th century for trade, and individuals have travelled to Japan for leisure since the 19th century, international tourism to Japan did not emerge until the 20th century (and was not comparatively commonplace until the 2000s, especially for Europeans). In this section, I (Christopher Hayes), will continue the discussion of the representation of Japan in films, but will look at Japan in travelogue films.

Originally a literary genre, travelogue films were a predominant genre in early cinema, and were one of the first forms of documentary film-making (Ruoff 1). Travelogue films (or simply *travelogues*) are "nonfiction motion pictures that represent place as their primary target" (Petersen, "Education" 56). These short films were often shown alongside the main feature-length film, included in the ticket price (Benelli, "Hollywood and the Attractions" 177). While today the idea of watching a short film about a foreign country before the latest blockbuster may seem odd, for much of the 20th century, going to the cinema was one of the few ways people could learn about the rest of the world, before television ownership and international travel became affordable to the masses. In an analysis of press writings on early travelogues, Peterson found that these films were "compared with actual journeys, as though the two experiences were somehow equivalent" (Petersen, "Travelogues" 191). Travelogues have also been linked to advances in transportation and have served as a means to celebrate the new forms of transportation and the new destinations and experiences that are made possible (Ruoff 8).

Like Hood's analysis of films featuring Japan above, the selection of the short films was to some extent quite arbitrary but was also driven by the availability of recordings for me (Christopher Hayes) to watch. Unlike major motion pictures intended for cinema release and, since the advent of home video and now streaming/digital ownership, wider distribution long after, the films analysed here are much more ephemeral. Like modern tourism campaigns today, these films were intended to heighten interest in Japan, and if not to directly encourage tourism to at least educate the viewer about the country. Jeffrey Ruoff borrows Richard Altick's term "rational amusement" to describe how such films strike a balance between educating and entertaining audiences (Ruoff 2). The entertainment aspect of the films is evident from their placement in the cinema film programme, where the short film shown alongside the feature film could be a travelogue, a

short comedy, a cartoon, or some other kind of "film about a topical novelty subject matter" (Benelli, "Hollywood and the Attractions" 177). At the same time, as these films were, for the majority of filmgoers, the only opportunity to experience the countries depicted, they were also "exotic fantasies" of foreign lands (Petersen, "Travelogues" 191). As Dana Benelli writes, "these documentaries were an almost exclusive source of moving images of contemporary reality" ("Hollywood and the Travelogue" 5). Even today, images in film and television, and now video on the Internet and social media, provide a window to distant places. Amy Corbin argues that in watching films, the viewer becomes a kind of tourist, locked in a gaze of another place outside their normal everyday reality, drawing on John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze". Corbin suggests that viewing a film is comparable to engaging in tourism because both facilitate exploration and a "search for contained otherness" (327). For Cobin, this applies not only to factual films such as travelogues, but to fiction, too, like the feature films discussed by Hood in the previous section.

While in the previous section, Hood discussed the stereotypes and clichés present in films set in or featuring Japan, here I would like to widen this discussion to consider how such narratives emerge and are reproduced. One of the most important theories to emerge in the 20th century is that of Orientalism, which was foundational to postcolonial studies and has informed subsequent theories and approaches. The theory was advanced by Edward Said in his 1978 book of the same title, *Orientalism*. Said argued that the way in which other countries and cultures are talked about or depicted are a means of exercizing power over and marginalizing the 'Orient'. Shehla Burney ("Orientalism") notes that travel writing was one of the first forms of text to be critiqued but that this critical angle quickly expanded to all forms of representation and discourse about the 'Orient'. Closely linked to Orientalism is Derrida's notion of *différance*, which Burney describes as "making meanings through *difference*, cultural codes and other signs" (Burney, "Conceptual Frameworks" 173).

The sample analysed in this section draws from films released between the 1930s and 1970s, with two films chosen from each decade. The rationale for the sampling period was that sound films took off in the early 1930s and the era of newsreel and similar film reels came to an end in the US in 1967 and lasted until 1979 in the UK (Fielding; Ayala-Isaza). This period also covers the rapid changes in transport technology and the rise of commercial flights, leading to the 'Golden Age' of air travel in the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, no films could be found for the 1940s, almost certainly owing to the Second World War, during which Japan became an enemy, aligned with Germany and the Axis powers. In total, eight films were selected for analysis. As mentioned above, the sampling procedure was arbitrary in that I could only analyse films that I could view. The films were found on the popular online video platform YouTube. In some cases, the films had been uploaded by regular users, with no specific information regarding how they came to have the recording, whilst others were uploaded by specialist film preservation companies like PeriscopeFilm, a specialist in the archival of old film reels and the

licensing of this footage.[3] Other films may well have existed but have not been preserved or do exist but remain in private collections or archives. Therefore, I cannot claim that the sample is representative of travelogue films about Japan produced during this period, but it nevertheless provides an insight into some of the representations of Japan that would have been seen by audiences.

Table 2: Sample of Travelogues about Japan Made between 1930 and 1979

Decade	Title	Made by	Year	Country	Length	YouTube
1930s	*Seeing the World with The Rambling Reporter: Land of Enchantment*	Bray Studios, United World Films, Inc.	1936	UK/USA	11m03s	URL
1930s	*Symphonical Sketch*	The Board of Tourist Industry Japan, Toho Eiga, Co.	1937	Japan	23m29s	URL
1950s	*Highroad to the Orient*	Reid H. Ray Film Industries Inc., Northwest Orient Airlines	1950s[4]	USA	26m00s	URL
1950s	*This World of Ours: Japan*	Dudley Pictures Corporation	1953	USA	07m51s	URL
1960s	*Exotic Nippon*	Castle Films, United World Films, Inc.	1963	USA	08m06s	URL
1960s	*A Day in Tokyo*	Koga Productions, Inc., Japan National Tourism Organization	1968	Japan	22m57s	URL
1970s	*Four Seasons in Japan (Les quatres saison au Japon)*	Dentsu Motion Picture Co., Japan National Tourism Organization	c. 1970	Japan	27m56s	URL
1970s	*Shinkansen Super Express: Tokyo–Hakata*	Iwanami, Productions, Inc., Japan National Tourism Organization	1977	Japan	20m33s	URL

Across the decades of travelogues and travel-related short films considered in this section, how do narratives change? Do symbols of Japan persist? And are these merely stereotypes or are they instances of Orientalism?

The first films in this sample, *Land of Enchantment* (1936) and *Symphonical Sketch* (1937), suggest that their audiences may not know much about Japan at

[3] PeriscopeFilm's main website is https://stock.periscopefilm.com. In addition to the company's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/PeriscopeFilm), PeriscopeFilm also preserves films on the Internet Archive website (https://archive.org/details/PeriscopeFilm).

[4] The film is likely from the early 1950s, c. 1950–52. PeriscopeFilm has several versions of this video on its YouTube channel, each with a different date. The version linked here gives the year 1949, but this is unlikely as the travel route at that time included flying via Shanghai, which is not shown on the map in the film. The Shanghai service was suspended in May 1949 because of civil war in China, which would place the film during the suspension period. The aircraft shown in the film is a Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, which was in use from 1949, but by 1954 the airline began to use Douglas DC-6Bs for the route, placing the film after 1949 but before 1954. See https://www.oldtokyo.com/northwest-orient-airlines-north-pacific-routes-c-1949/.

all. *Land of Enchantment* in particular takes an informative approach, seeking to educate the viewer about contemporary Japan, providing information about the country and society. Elements of Orientalism and 'Western' superiority are present, however, with Japan's modernization presented as surprising, and Japanese practices described as "novel" or "queer". Indeed, the name of the film itself points to the allure of the exotic and the idealization of an untouched Eastern culture. *Symphonical Sketch* meanwhile has no narration, and the video footage is accompanied by classical music, in line with the film's name. While there are some references to traditional Japan, e.g. *ikebana*, art and temples, this film focusses on modern Tōkyō—the highly industrial city, high-rise offices, salarymen, the University of Tōkyō, department stores, and the neon lights of Tōkyō at night. These earlier films also focus on Japan's export products, namely silk, pearls, and crafts. This is possibly a further indication of the audience's lack of familiarity with Japanese culture, but some knowledge of the physical export products, which have been produced for the 'Western' market for hundreds of years, booming in the nineteenth century when *japonisme* was in vogue.

Japan's post-war recovery is mirrored in the films, with successive films showing the growth of Tōkyō, its development as an economic powerhouse, and the advances in technology, particularly where travel is concerned. Both of the 1950s films, *Highroad to the Orient* and *This World of Ours: Japan*, focus on the emergence of Japan as a modern, Western country. *This World of Ours: Japan* opens with a baseball game, intended to confuse the viewer, with the narrator joking, "no, this isn't Ebbets Field or Yankee Stadium. It's baseball in Japan!" However, both films position this modernity as the antithesis to the real Japan. In *Highroad to the Orient*, the narrator points to the side streets for where one can find the 'real Orient', implying that a modern twentieth-century city cannot be Oriental. Similarly, *This World of Ours: Japan*, leans heavily on the dichotomy of traditional Japan and the 'Western' modern city, with the narrator claiming that "Japan is a paradox—a land of modern ways, ancient traditions".

The 1963 film *Exotic Nippon* heavily emphasizes the Oriental 'other' of Japan, not only in its title, but also on the title card, which imitates angular brushstrokes in the writing, while an illustration of the famous Kamakura buddha statue forms the background, accompanied by traditional Japanese-style music. The film focusses heavily on the "paradox" of Japan and how a country "steeped in ancient traditions and beliefs" is also a leading modern nation. By contrast, the Japanese-produced 1968 film *A Day in Tokyo* also presents Japan's modernity and the technological and industrial developments made by the country, but without dwelling on the traditional aspects of the culture. Indeed, the narrator describes the continuation of traditional theatre as a "public service". Nevertheless, even in the Japanese film, Japan is still couched as being a dichotomous country that is steeped in history and tradition.

The final two films, representing the 1970s, both come from Japan. Generally, across the sample, films made in Japan focus on Japan's modernity over tradition. *Four Seasons in Japan* does focus on nature and tradition, but the film omits any

reference to more 'modern' aspects of Japan, thus avoiding this dichotomy. The film *Four Seasons in Japan* was made by the Japan National Tourism Organization and seeks to highlight the appeal of visiting Japan all year round. Although the film is Japanese in origin, it still presents an exoticized view of the country for the potential visitor, highlighting traditional customs and festivals, and emphasizing the harmony between the Japanese people and nature. In contrast, the 1977 *Shinkansen Super Express: Tokyo-Hakata* focusses on Japan's technological advancement in the form of the *shinkansen*, or bullet train. While traditional scenery and destinations for experiencing traditional culture and heritage are referenced, the film seeks to demonstrate the ease with which they can be reached through Japan's advanced rail infrastructure. By the 1970s, the global image of Japan as technologically advanced had emerged. This had started at the 1964 Tōkyō Olympics when the *shinkansen* was launched, ensuring that there was global attention on this new infrastructure (Hood, "Shinkansen" 72). The juxtaposition of the modernity of the *shinkansen* and the tranquil traditional destinations that can be reached by it is very similar to other films presented in this sample, suggesting the persistence of an exotic, unchanging Japan in spite of modernity in its cities and infrastructure.

Evident from these films, from earliest examples to the present is that simplistic, reductive notions of Japan—the stereotypes, clichés, and tropes identified in fiction films—continue to persist and change very little, despite significant social, political, economic, and technological changes in the intervening decades. Across all the decades covered in this brief analysis, five reoccurring symbols or motifs could be observed: Mount Fuji, often in establishing shots as a symbol of Japan as a whole; the Tōkyō cityscape; natural Japan; the paradox of Japan; and Japan as a gateway to the Orient. Is Japan a gateway because while it may be in the Orient, it is sufficiently Western for visitors to feel at ease? Interestingly, the destinations shown change over the decades, although tourism remains a focus. However, earlier films show a more diverse range of destinations, e.g. Nikkō and Kegon Falls, yet by the 1960s and 1970s a more restricted set of destinations is represented.

The common motifs throughout the films—whether the traditional 'Oriental' sounding music or images of traditional Japan or the rapidly advancing technological Japan—appear to have several functions, which parallel similar symbols in the films discussed by Hood. First, they act as a means to firmly establishing the films as being set in Japan. Familiar locations such as Mount Fuji or imagery of temples instantly transport the viewer from the cinema auditorium seats (or in later examples, possibly their aeroplane seats) to Japan. Second, to provide a short introduction to the country. This is particularly prevalent in the earlier films, before international travel was commonplace. Stereotypes are essentially highly generalized representations and are intended to reduce something as complex as a nation or culture to something that can be understood quickly. Third, to engage and excite the viewer. These films are ultimately a form of entertainment and escapism for the viewer. Consequently, much of the focus is inevitably on the different and the exotic, whether it is positioned as strange or impressive. To normalize Japan and otherwise dispel any notions of it being exotic, would only re-

duce the entertainment value. This is equally true for feature films, such as *Bullet Train*, which incorporates numerous stereotypes about Japan into its narrative.

Hood introduced Barthes' *Empire of Signs* as inspiration for his section, and I would like to return to it here. In her critique of the text, Joanne P. Sharp suggests that Barthes is aware of his positionality when writing about Japan and that Orientalist discourses present within the work are a consequence of "interpretative baggage" arising from his Occidental worldview (164). Sharp argues that through reflexivity and engagement with this "baggage", Barthes' writings take on an irony in their representation of Japan, which would be apparent to those with a deep knowledge of the country, though Hood is rightly sceptical of this interpretation. Yet, in these travelogue films, there is no expectation of prior knowledge about Japan, with the films serving as introductions to or windows into the country. In their pursuit of entertainment and the intentional focus on the different, the exotic, and the strange, there is no irony or conscious positionality, but an appeal to stereotype and Orientalist positioning of us versus them. Even where the films are Japanese in origin, I would suggest that the film-makers are engaging in what is known as "self-Orientalism". Self-Orientalism is the intentional construction of a discourse that emphasizes differences from the 'West', which has been embraced within Japan as part of its national identity (Hayes, "Utopia or Uprising?"). The perceived uniqueness of Japan is positioned as a point of national pride, but also in the case of these films, a selling point for tourism marketing. As can be seen in the presented sample, while earlier travelogues were made as films in their own rights, part of a wider travelogue genre enjoyed by early cinemagoers, later films were more explicitly aimed at attracting tourists, commissioned by airlines or Japan's own tourism board.

To bring this section to a close, I would like to draw on a question asked by Bradley W. Gorham regarding the presence of stereotypes in the media: so what? Gorham acknowledges that it is well-known how much stereotypes inform media representation of different groups but argues that these stereotypes will only be perpetuated if they are received passively, and that consumers of media need to be able to engage with them critically if they are to be dispelled. I have argued elsewhere that for many people, representations of Japan *are* Japan, for without visiting the country, or at least studying it, these representations form the only understanding that individuals have (Hayes, "Othered"). As these opening two sections to this special edition of *New Readings* have shown, certain images, motifs, tropes, and stereotypes of Japan have been perpetuated in films (both fact and fiction) across the decades. While the articles that make up this special issue approach symbols from a variety of perspectives quite different to that of the editors, what unifies them is that they demonstrate the power of symbols and symbolism, and the ways in which Japan is understood, both abroad and domestically.

Introduction to the Themed Issue

The proliferation of stereotypes in films described above serves as an illustration of the ways in which there are many symbols of Japan, visual and auditory cues that signal to the viewer that they are seeing Japan. This is just one reading of the word *symbol*, however, and only one perspective. On 13th and 14th July 2023, fifteen scholars gathered at Cardiff University's School of Modern Languages for a two-day workshop to explore Japan's symbols in literature, film, cultural history, and visual culture. The meaning of the term *symbol* was left undefined intentionally so as to encourage free interpretation and capture innovative emerging scholarship that may not fit within rigid boundaries. The resultant workshop was entitled "Symbols of Japan, Japan as Symbols: An Interdisciplinary Workshop", and this themed issue reflects the diversity and interdisciplinarity of the current scholarship in the broad area of Japan Studies. The issue comprises four articles based on papers delivered by four participants at the workshop.

The first two articles invite us to enter the world of Japanese animation, *anime*, one of the country's largest cultural exports, consumed globally, and a symbol of Japan in its own right. Tomoki Sakata's article "Miyazaki's Life Philosophy behind *Spirited Away*: With Respect to Goethe's Bildungsroman and Nietzsche's Nihilism" approaches the idea of symbols through a distinctly philosophical lens. Taking Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki's acclaimed animated film *Spirited Away* as an example, Sakata moves away from typical analyses of the film as a critique of capitalism or revival of animism and instead seeks to explore how the symbolism in the film can be used to understand Miyazaki's philosophy of life. Sakata contrasts Miyazaki's vision with Nietzsche's nihilism, arguing that while Nietzsche advocates a "will to power" as a response to nihilism, Miyazaki proposes a "will to live" based on hard work and human compassion.

In "Forest Mythology: Symbols in Contemporary Japanese Cinema", Jade Gabrielle Cruz Nogueira also addresses the films of Hayao Miyazaki, amongst others, exploring how forests in Japanese cinema serve as more than just a setting, but as symbolic elements, representing spiritual realms, ancestral connections, and the intersection between nature and humanity. Whereas Sakata approached his analysis from a Nietzschean perspective, Cruz Nogueira engages with Japanese Shinto and Buddhist philosophies and traditions, and how these inform understandings of nature and the forest.

Next, we move from the fictive world to ours with "From Rice to Barley: Whisky as an Imagined National Symbol of Contemporary Japan", by Ikuho Amano. Amano's article makes the case for whisky as a quasi-national symbol of Japan, exploring its emergence and how it has supplanted *sake* in the national imagination due to shifting consumer preferences and Japan's global market ambitions. Whisky stands as a symbol of Japan's evolving identity. While *sake* historically represented Japan's agrarian and communal traditions, whisky's rise reflects a modern, globally integrated Japan. The article engages with material culture, acculturation, and globalization, showing how whisky embodies Japan's aspirations for soft power and international influence.

The final article considers one of the most prevalent symbols of modern Japan: the robot. Amanda Brødsgaard's article "Imagining New Futures: National Narratives in the Japanese Science Museum" considers the image and narrative of the robot in Japan as presented in the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation, the Miraikan. Brødsgaard argues that the Miraikan promotes a sociotechnical imaginary, constructing a national narrative in which robots are central to Japan's technological identity and future prosperity. Symbolically, the robots themselves function as boundary objects, facilitating public engagement with this futuristic vision.

The diversity of the articles presented in this issue and the multitude of ways in which the theme of symbols is addressed provides a snapshot of the workshop held in Cardiff. Other interpretations of the theme included papers on karate tourism, Ainu identity, Japanese culture as seen through the lens of the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, jazz café culture, and cosplay practices. That the workshop attracted such a range of different submissions, spanning vastly different topics and disciplines speaks not only to the vitality of Japan-related research, but also to the importance of symbols, symbolism, how Japan is understood, and how Japan understands itself.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks and gratitude to the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation and the Japan Foundation for their financial support of the workshop, for without this funding the workshop would not have been possible, nor would this themed issue. We also thank the editors of *New Readings* for publishing this special issue, as well as their stewardship of the journal more generally. We believe that this collection of articles reflects precisely what has made *New Readings* distinctive: its advocacy for interdisciplinarity, transnationalism, and the pushing of boundaries in the research of culture.

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