

# The illusion of deconstruction: Orientalism and Japanese representation in Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* (2018)

Mentari Putrirahayu Prawira<sup>1\*</sup>,  
Iusvaldio Ramadhan<sup>2</sup>, Moh. Zamil Alivin<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Said stated that Orientalism is the domination of the West over the East. Orientalism emerged after many trips made by European countries, causing the Orient or East to be exploited by the West. One form of exploitation is present in the film industry, as presented by the animation *Isle of Dogs* (2018) by Wes Anderson. This research uses Boggs and Petrie's (2018) cinematography theory to look at the symbols presented through places and characters in the film. Stuart Hall's representation theory (1997) is used to interpret symbols which are representations of Japanese culture. This research shows dichotomies used in the film, such as Japanese and English language, humans, and animals (dogs), modernity and tradition, active American students and passive Japanese students as symbols or representations of the West and the East, which is an element of orientalism. The result of this research shows that this film attempts to destroy the idea of orientalism, but the representation of Japan presented in this film confirms the idea of orientalism itself. Hence, it can be said that this film failed to deconstruct Orientalism.

**Keywords:** *Orientalism, representation, film, dichotomy, Japanese culture*



## AFFILIATION

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

\*Corresponding Author:

✉ [mentariputrirahayu@uny.ac.id](mailto:mentariputrirahayu@uny.ac.id)

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of technology has become a means that facilitates the exchange of information on certain cultural groups of society through virtual cultural sites, or physically through tourist transportation to visit other cultures of society that have different or diverse culture. Other technologies that allow the exchange of information on certain cultural groups are social media and films. The public's knowledge of cultural diversity serves as a reference in providing subjective or objective views, critiques, or assessments. The cultural diversity within society can give rise to a subjective reflection or stereotypical views. The arrogance and fanaticism of society towards its culture can potentially lead to social conflict because awareness of diversity as a cultural richness has not been fully realized by society. On social media, particularly platforms such as TikTok, certain users have mocked or trivialized cultural symbols like the Palestinian keffiyeh, reducing them to aesthetic or humorous content. This kind of ridicule reflects a broader cultural arrogance and superficial understanding of difference, an attitude that recalls the Orientalist gaze that developed in France during the 1930s.

In the theory of Orientalism put forward by Edward Said (2003), Orientalism is a Western view of the East. According to Said (2003), there are four types of power relations in the orientalism discourse, namely political, intellectual, cultural, and moral power. This

relationship operates as hegemony that one idea is more influential than other ideas, so that one culture is more dominant than other cultures. In Orientalist thought, there is a Western construction that gives the West legitimacy to the East. This thinking implicitly assumes that the West is more rational and superior to the East which is more tied to ancient and inferior traditions. According to Said, the idea of orientalism is also related to the West's interest in the East, which he considers "exotic". This results in oriental or Eastern culture and society being exploited by the West. One example of this exploitation is depicted in a film.

Films that have an orientalist cultural element are western films that portray Eastern culture or films that represent Eastern culture. The representation of Eastern culture in a film can be seen in the famous animation such as Kungfu Panda. As discussed by Omar and Ishak (2011), animation has long served as a medium that reflects and transmits the cultural characteristics of its country of origin. It is said that animated films not only entertain but also include national values, social norms, and ideological frameworks, making them an important lens for understanding cross-cultural representation in media. This concept supports the idea that Kungfu Panda represents China using pandas and kungfu, two elements perceived as exotic by the West. Apart from Kungfu Panda, Wes Anderson's stop motion animation entitled *Isle of Dogs* (2018) also depicts a representation of the East, more precisely Japan. *Isle of Dogs* (2018) is Wes Anderson's second stop-motion animation after *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), continuing his distinctive visual style characterized by meticulous symmetry, handcrafted aesthetics, and anthropomorphic animal characters.

*Isle of Dogs* (2018) is set in a futuristic version of Japan, twenty years in the future, where a dog flu outbreak threatens human life and leads to the exile of dogs to a waste island. This film which represents Japan has an attempt to destroy the orientalist idea that the West dominates the East. However, this dynamic of "othering" does not only occur between the West and the East but can also be found within a nation itself. As Jansson (2005) argued, films can construct national identity through what he calls *internal orientalism*, a discourse that defines the "self" by contrasting it with an internal "other." It demonstrates how visual media often rely on spatial and cultural binaries to affirm a dominant identity. Keskes and Martin (2018) also emphasized how Orientalist discourse operates through binary constructions that simplify complex realities into opposing categories, such as democracy versus authoritarianism or modernity versus backwardness.

This framework resonates with the way *Isle of Dogs* constructs Japan as both futuristic and primitive, simultaneously invoking and subverting the binary logics of Orientalism. It is in line with Desmond (1991) statement that cinematic representations of "the Other" often reproduce the silence and spectacle associated with Orientalist discourse. It is also said that visual media, particularly avant-garde film, has potential to resist these tendencies

by exposing the politics of seeing and the structures of desire that sustain Western constructions of the East. This perspective aligns with *Isle of Dogs*' attempt to reframe Japan not as a passive cultural object but as an active visual and narrative space within Anderson's distinctive cinematic style. This idea is connected to Konzett's (2004) research on war and Orientalism in Hollywood movies, where American national identity was formed by showing Asian places as both challenges for morality and areas to expand empire. Konzett argued that such cinematic Orientalism defined Western power through ambivalence, between democracy and domination, admiration and anxiety. This notion illuminates how *Isle of Dogs*, though produced within a postmodern aesthetic context, continues to negotiate the post-war legacy of Western representations of Japan, oscillating between cultural appreciation and Orientalist control.

In the research entitled *Orientalism in American Popular Culture*, Rosenblatt (2009) discussed that orientalism emerged from Europe and became an aesthetic expression in American culture. Using Said's theory of Orientalism, Rosenblatt found that there was a domestication of the Middle East for American consumption. Orient exploitation began to occur as the consumerism of Victorian American society increased. Orientalist aesthetics became an integral part of American culture. Rosenblatt explained that travelogues had an important role in spreading Orientalist aesthetics. Many travelogues describe the East with very romantic illustrations of the beauty and mystery of the land and its people. Orientalist aesthetics emerged and influenced the clothing culture of Victorian society. The loose orientalist clothing provided a break for Victorian women from the stiff and tight clothing of corsets. The Orientalist aesthetic led men and women to explore sensuality through clothing. Rosenblatt said that the final manifestation of Orientalist aesthetics in American consumer culture was in the film industry. The film industry exploited the Orient and turned it into a visual consumption commodity.

In relation to the research object, namely *Isle of Dogs* (2018), three previous studies with the same object were carried out by Friedman (2019), Zimmermann (2019), and Hathaway (2024). Friedman (2019) used queer theory and animal studies to explain the relationship between animals and machines. This research focused more on the stop motion technique used in films to create talking animal characters and looks at how machines are used by humans on animals. Friedman found that there was a reflection on how dogs relate to the construction of identity given to them by humans. Friedman found that the robot dog in the film was a perfect representation of the behavior that humans expect from their pets and that when one category fell short of their pet, such as illness, the pet was no longer considered an animal but an item that could be thrown away and replaced with a new one.

Meanwhile, Zimmermann (2019) examined *Isle of Dogs* through the lens of heroism and cultural translation. Zimmermann said the movie shows

that heroism isn't just for humans. It also shows dogs can do brave things. However, it is also pointed out that the film's representation of Japan is often cliched and decorative, suggesting a tension between its celebration of interspecies solidarity and its reliance on Orientalist imagery. Zimmermann concluded that while the film presents global and interspecies heroism, it fails to overcome cultural appropriation and Western-centered perspectives, especially through characters like Tracy Walker, who reinforces the "white savior" trope. Similarly, Hathaway (2024) approached *Isle of Dogs* from a multispecies perspective, arguing that anthropomorphism enables viewers to empathize with non-human beings. This paper, however, departs from such humanistic readings to examine how the film's cultural setting and characterization reproduce Orientalist assumptions about Japan.

## METHOD

This research is qualitative descriptive research with orientalism approach. The subject of this research is a film titled *Isle of Dogs* directed by Wes Anderson. The data is collected by reading the film as a text thoroughly. The analysis of research data is focused on two parts, namely the analysis of the film's text structure and representation.

Firstly, the analysis of the film's text structure employed the cinematography theory by Boggs and Petrie (2018). The film's structural analysis focused on the dramatic elements within the film, namely symbols. According to Boggs and Petrie (2018), there are two types of symbols in films: universal symbols and constructed symbolic meanings. Universal symbols are those whose meanings are recognized by a majority of societal groups, and people generally understand the meanings associated with these symbols. Constructed symbolic meanings are formed by incorporating concrete objects or images with associations, emotions, and attitudes and then using them to evoke these associations (Boggs & Petrie 2018). It is supported by Barthes' (1977) semiotic approach, which highlights how visual signs operate on both denotative and connotative levels. These theories provide the basis for interpreting *Isle of Dogs* as a place where Western aesthetics, Orientalist discourse, and symbolic imagery intersect.

In creating cinematic elements with symbolic value, such as objects, characters, or visual motifs, storytellers have two main objectives. First, they aim to broaden the meaning of symbolic objects to communicate meanings, feelings, and ideas. Second, they seek to convey that the object is treated symbolically. Therefore, many methods used to imbue an object with symbolic meaning also serve as indicators that the object holds symbolic value.

Secondly, the analysis of symbols in the film employed Hall's representation theory (1997). This analysis was used to interpret symbols in the film that represent a culture. Hall (1997) explains that there are two systems of representation: mental representation and language. Mental representation

is a series of concepts and images formed in our thoughts that represent the world around us, while language serves to construct meaning. Shared understanding needs to be turned into language so that our concepts and ideas can be connected to writing, sound, or images. Representation, as Hall argued, is not a reflection of reality but a process of meaning-making shaped by ideology and power. This view resonates with Shohat and Stam's (2014) critique of Eurocentrism in media, which emphasizes how Western film industries continue to reproduce colonial hierarchies through visual storytelling.

In addition to Hall's representation theory, this research also employs Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* (2003) as a theoretical lens to interpret how the film constructs the relationship between the East and the West. Said's framework is used to uncover power dynamics embedded in the representations of Japanese culture and to analyze how these depictions may reproduce or challenge Western hegemonic views. This discourse, according to Loomba (2002) and Young (2016), remains central to postcolonial power structures that shape global perceptions of non-Western cultures. In line with this, Bhabha (1994) introduces the idea of cultural ambivalence, where colonial power simultaneously produces fascination and fear toward the "Other."

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### *The Text Structure and Narrative Strategies of the film Isle of Dogs*

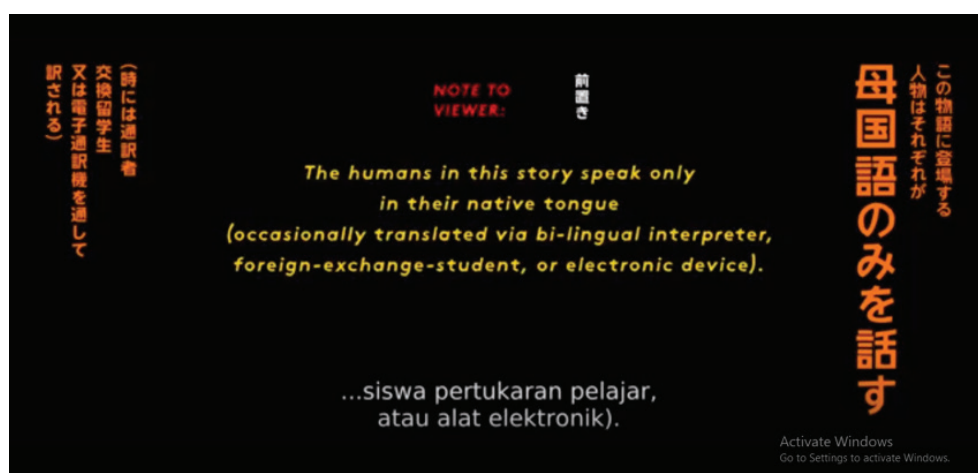
*Isle of Dogs* (2018) tells the story of Megasaki city in Japan, 20 years in the future. Kobayashi, the Mayor of Megasaki, attempts to 'protect' his city from a dog flu outbreak by isolating and quarantining the dogs on 'Trash Island.' Several months after the policy is implemented, Kobayashi's nephew, Atari, who loves dogs, goes to Trash Island to find his guard dog, Spots, who was exiled by his uncle. In his search for Spots, Atari is assisted and accompanied by five dogs, Chief, Rex, King, Boss, and Duke, who are on the island. As the search for Spots on Trash Island unfolds, resistance to the dog isolation policy is led by a pro-dog group led by an American exchange student named Tracy Walker. The film concludes on a happy note, with the pro-dog group winning, and the dogs returning home. From the summary of the story, the film introduces many symbols.

The embodiment of symbols in various forms (objects) that play a role in an animated film is a development of the imaginative elements of a film that shapes a story, making it captivating. As noted by Omar and Ishak (2011), animation often integrates the cultural imagination of its creators, translating national values and everyday practices into visual and narrative forms. This deep connection to culture lets animation serve as both fun entertainment and a way to show cultural values. The design and imaginative storyline in animation enrich the meaning of the symbols presented in the

film. The depiction of symbols becomes increasingly unrealistic but gains more meaning and clarity. According to Boggs and Petrie (2018), symbols can be objects, images, people, sounds, events, or specific places that represent, suggest, or trigger a series of complex ideas, attitudes, or feelings, thus acquiring meaning beyond themselves. Symbols in a film can be universal and natural symbols that have been infused with meaning by a majority of societal groups in a specific cultural context.

Filmmakers cannot solely rely on universal symbols; therefore, symbols must be created with meaning derived from the context of the film itself. In the film *Isle of Dogs*, the meaning of constructed symbolic symbols is quite evident. The constructed symbols present in this film are representations of two different things or can be called binary oppositions. Binary opposition, actually, can be interpreted simply as a system that attempts to divide the world into two structurally related classifications. This term was coined by Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the pioneers of Semiotics in linguistics. The opposing classifications are juxtaposed throughout the story through various elements such as language, characters, and places.

From the data collected, there are five binary opposition found in this film. These five binary oppositions are Japanese - English language; human - dogs; Megasaki city - trash island; modernity - tradition; and active American student - passive Japanese students. The first binary opposition is language. The film, set in Japan or within the cultural context of Japan, uses two languages: English and Japanese. All human characters in the film use Japanese, except for one foreign student. The Japanese language used by humans is sometimes translated in scenes of news broadcasts. English is used by the dog characters and for instructions or when related to machines. Japanese represents a symbol of Eastern culture that is conservative towards its traditions. English serves as a language representing Western culture with hegemony over the domination of other cultures. The film emphasizes the importance of language. This can be observed from the instructions in the film at the beginning, as seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The use of Japanese and English Language in the film

Looking at the language usage in this film, it can be interpreted that the Japanese language holds more power or dominance compared to English, which is the language of animals or dogs. The dominance of the Japanese language can signify the Japanese cultural effort to balance Western culture. Most viewers will likely understand English, spoken by the dog characters, more than Japanese, spoken by human characters. The contrast between the two languages in this animated film serves as a message reflecting the ideology of Japanese culture, which preserves its cultural traditions in the Western mainstream. English, being a universal or dominant language, loses its 'power' because the audience does not understand what the human characters are saying in the film *Isle of Dogs*. Friedman (2019) states that language expresses the oppressive power of humans.

The second aspect is the characters of humans and animals (dogs). The dogs are anthropomorphized, depicted as having the ability to speak and communicate in English. Humans, with their cultural traditions, are portrayed using the Japanese language. The two languages, one being Japanese with the unique symbols of its traditional typography, and English with symbols of universal Roman typography, create a stark contrast as a binary opposition. The two languages used by the roles of Humans and Dogs in this film are highly contrasting. Human characters depict the government and Japanese culture, as well as a society that dislikes dogs. Dogs represent an external element, using Western languages. Humans are portrayed as having immense authority and power, determining the fate of the dogs. This is evident in the policy to exile the dogs to Trash Island due to the contagious dog flu affecting humans. Skabelund (2011) demonstrates that in Japanese history and culture, dogs have long been associated with modernity, westernization, and the regulation of social order. Anderson's depiction of the dogs' exile visually echoes these historical associations: dogs become symbols of contamination and control, mirroring Japan's own negotiation with modernity and external influence. Voiceless, these dogs cannot resist and accept their fate of being expelled from the city and their homes. Dogs can only express themselves through other humans who are fond of or pro-dog. This can be seen in the scene when Spots, the first dog to be sent to Trash Island, is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Spots, the first dog to be sent to Trash Island

Spots, lacking the power or authority to resist, can only gaze at the camera and allow himself to be carried away by the gondola (cable car) in an iron cage. Therefore, it can be said that the relationship between human and dog characters is a power relationship, with one in control and the other being controlled.

The dominant settings in the film, namely the city of Megasaki and Trash Island, are also contrasted. The city appears sterile and overregulated, while the trash island evokes images of abandonment and ruin. This depiction resonates with what Ortiz-Moya and Moreno (2016) described as the cinematic portrayal of Japan's "shrinking cities," where urban decline becomes a metaphor for broader socio-economic and cultural transformations under global capitalism. Through its visual construction of decay and exclusion, *Isle of Dogs* not only imagines a dystopian Japan but also reflects real concerns about urban alienation and demographic crisis. The contrast is evident in the colors used to depict these two locations. The tone used for Megasaki is predominantly red and yellow, which can be interpreted as luxurious colors, giving an impression of grandeur. In contrast, Trash Island is dominated by achromatic colors, namely black, white, and gray. These colors create a somber atmosphere, as shown in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3.** Spots' perspective behind the cage, observing Trash Island

Angle of view in Figure 3 is a subjective point of view. According to Boggs and Petrie (2018), a subjective point of view allows the audience to see and feel the emotions of the character. Figure 3 positions the viewer or audience as Spots, looking at Trash Island and the city of Megasaki across the ocean from behind the cage. This can be interpreted as Spots being in a prison. The magnificent city where humans reside, contrasted with Trash Island where dogs are discarded, further reinforces the position of humans as those in power and dogs as having no significance to humans. In this film, Trash Island serves another function as a prison or quarantine for the

dogs, unlike regular trash islands used only for disposing of unused items.

The binary opposition in the cultural aspects depicted in this film clearly presents two contrasting cultural shades: Modernity and Tradition. Modernity and tradition are represented through spatial elements, linguistic contrasts, and temporal tension between the film's futuristic setting and its persistent use of traditional Japanese imagery. The timeframe in this film is set 20 years in the future. Typically, the future is depicted with advanced and modern technology. The grandeur of Megasaki depicts a modern city with sophisticated technology, even in the creation of a vaccine or medicine to cure dog flu, which can be considered futuristic. This modern city represents two contrasting aspects: Japanese culture with universal and technology-based progress, and strong traditional Japanese culture. Dorman (2016) argued that twenty-first-century Japanese cinema often negotiates between tradition and hybridity, challenging simple East/West binaries. This observation supports the reading of *Isle of Dogs*, where Japanese cultural motifs are both empowered and aestheticized.

The coexistence of futuristic and traditional imagery in Megasaki exemplifies this hybridity, showing how Anderson's depiction of Japan simultaneously celebrates and commodifies its cultural identity. Yet, Arnold (2005) said that technological modernity itself is not ideologically neutral; it has long been intertwined with colonial narratives that equate Western progress with rationality and civilization. Through this lens, the film's portrayal of Megasaki as a hypermodern, mechanized city can be seen as echoing a colonial imagination in which technological control and scientific advancement signify superiority. This hierarchy of progress is visually captured in Figure 4, where Mayor Kobayashi's traditional red house stands against the backdrop of towering gray skyscrapers, a composition that symbolizes the tension between inherited cultural identity and the globalized vision of Western modernity.



**Figure 4.** The dichotomy of modernity and tradition

This can be interpreted as an effort made by the Japanese government or society to preserve a tradition within the mainstream Western culture.

The last binary opposition that is observed involves personal characters in an educational context (school). This can be seen in the active American exchange student and the passive Japanese student. The exchange student named Tracy Walker is portrayed as a curly-haired blonde teenager who advocates for the rights of dogs not to be destroyed and exiled. The Japanese student in this film is depicted as passive and not expressing many opinions. This is very clear in the scene in Figure 5 when Tracy invites her classmates to join a demonstration against the policy of isolating dogs on Trash Island.



**Figure 5.** Tracy Walker expresses her opinion about the Japanese government

Tracy's friends, who are Japanese, only glance at Tracy briefly before returning to their respective activities, appearing indifferent.

It can be said that the above exposition reveals a strong presentation of the East-West dichotomy. This can be interpreted as an element of Orientalism in the film. The East-West dichotomy encompasses orient and occident, superior and inferior, rational, and irrational. It can also be said that this binary opposition represents the East and the West. This narrative strategy indicates that Japanese society and the Japanese language represent the East, while dogs and the English language represent the West. In the concept or theory of Orientalism, there is discourse on how the West perceives the East, discussing the 'self' and the 'other.' There is a power relation between the occident that holds power and the orient whose voice is represented (Said 2003). Foucault states that where there is power, there will also be resistance. Therefore, this film shows an effort to challenge the idea of Orientalism that the West dominates the East. The film constructs an apparent reversal of Orientalist power relations by presenting the East as active

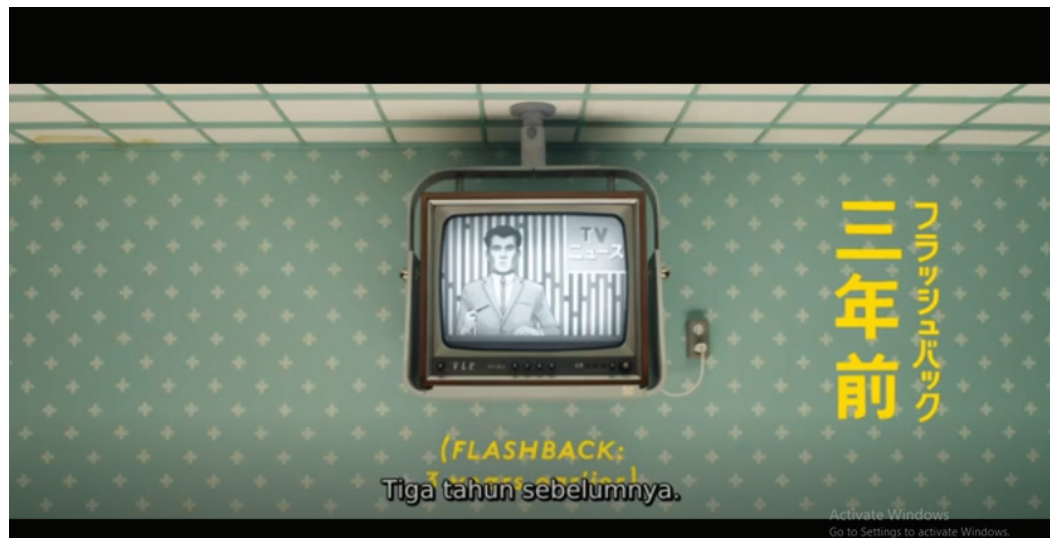
and the West as passive. Yet this inversion does not dismantle Orientalism; instead, it reaffirms it by maintaining Western narrative control over how the East is represented. Japanese society and the Japanese language, representing the East, hold power and become the occident. In the film, dogs and the English language, representing the West, are portrayed as voiceless and marginalized, occupying the position typically assigned to the Orient in Orientalist discourse. This reversal suggests an attempt to critique Western dominance by placing Western-coded characters in a position of subordination. However, this portrayal remains symbolic rather than transformative, as the narrative still relies on Western perspectives and voices to define the meaning of this reversal. This also suggests that Japan is the 'self,' and dogs are 'the other' as they are exiled to an island.

## Discussion

### *Japanese Representation as the Affirmation of Orientalism*

At the outset, it was argued that the interpretation of the meaning of this film is an attempt to dismantle or deconstruct the idea of Orientalism by positioning Eastern culture as if it dominates the West. However, this resistance effort solidifies the Western Orientalist perspective on the East. This is demonstrated by the way the film represents Japan. Hall (1997) stated that representation is 'using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.' The presence of symbols representing Japanese culture in this film reflects Western thoughts or views on the East, namely Japan. The representation of Japan can be seen in the cultural, political, and stereotypical elements of Japanese characters in this film.

Japanese culture is depicted very clearly from the beginning of this film, starting with a human in a temple commonly seen in Japan. It can be said that the film showcases elements highly typical of Japanese culture, such as kimonos, the mayor's building with traditional architecture, and Sumo sports broadcasts. As Hong (2018) argued, *Isle of Dogs* transforms the practice of "othering" into a politicized version of Orientalism, situating Japan as an exotic backdrop through which Western anxieties about power and morality are projected. The traditional clothing worn, the preserved traditional buildings, and the temple shown at the beginning of the film, when contrasted with the futuristic setting 20 years in the future, indicate that the West views in the East as a group inseparable from traditional and spiritual aspects, despite the world's advancement. This is also evident in electronics such as TVs and phones in the film, which can be considered outdated, as seen in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Analog TV in the 17 years later

The image above shows that despite being set in the future, the film still uses a black-and-white TV that resembles the 1951 black-and-white Murphy TV model 405. However, the film was created in 2018, when color LCD TVs were already in existence, especially considering the film is set 20 years into the future. If calculated from the film's release year in 2038.

The contrast between technology and the futuristic setting reinforces Western notions of looking down on the East or assessing its backwardness. The portrayal of well-known aspects of Japanese culture in the West also indicates that Japanese culture in this film is merely used as decoration and accommodation to attract viewers. As stated by Rosenblatt (2009) in his research, orientalist aesthetics are used for the visual consumption accommodation of Western society. This can be observed in the *Sumo* performance shown in Figure 7, suggesting that Japanese culture is merely a spectacle.



**Figure 7.** Sumo competition

The portrayal of Japanese culture in this film can be seen as something exotic in the eyes of the West. This is equivalent to what Said (2003) stated, that ‘the orient was almost a European Invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.’ Similar to Pixar’s *Turning Red* (Huda, Yustisia, & Winarsih 2025), which presents both symbolic affirmations and stereotypes of Asian identity, *Isle of Dogs* also reflects how Western filmmakers often negotiate between cultural appreciation and stereotype reproduction in depicting Asian culture. This tendency aligns with findings by Nagaraj and Wen (2020), who note that Hollywood films have long perpetuated Asian stereotypes and Orientalist portrayals, framing Asian characters as exotic, submissive, or villainous figures shaped for Western audiences.

The Japanese government in this film is portrayed as a dictator and totalitarian government through Mayor Kobayashi of Megasaki. This can be seen in the low angle shot in Figure 8, which shows Mayor Kobayashi with hands on his hips, delivering a speech that they must protect the city from dog flu.



**Figure 8.** Mayor Kobayashi when deciding on the policy

The upwardly taken shot emphasizes Kobayashi as a leader of very high status. Boggs and Petrie (2018) state that the camera position placed below eye level adds significance to the highlighted subject. Kobayashi’s dictatorial and totalitarian nature is revealed when his dislike for dogs leads him to exile them to Trash Island. His policy, considered irrational, can be interpreted as the West viewing the East as a group with barbaric tendencies, a thought often perpetuated by Orientalists (Said 2003).

This portrayal of Mayor Kobayashi as a manipulative and authoritarian figure reflects how power operates through control and propaganda. It is in line with Veva (2019) who identified the film’s depiction of the government’s strategies, manipulating public opinion, enforcing obedience, and instilling

fear, as Foucauldian exercises of power. Such characterization reinforces Western stereotypes of the East as irrationally authoritarian, thus sustaining Orientalist representations under the guise of social critique. In addition to being depicted as a dictator, the Japanese government, represented by Mayor Kobayashi, is portrayed as willing to do anything to achieve its goals, including killing someone. This is shown when the mayor's assistant kills the scientist who created the dog flu vaccine by giving him Sushi laced with 'wasabi poison'.

The depicted evil and seemingly totalitarian Japanese politics is contrasted with the actions of the 5 dogs helping Atari in decision-making. As seen in Figure 9, each time a decision needs to be made, they deliberate collectively, and when differences of opinion arise, Duke suggests to 'take a vote.'



**Figure 9.** The dogs are making decision by take a vote

This can be interpreted as the West not being a group that imposes decisions on its people, unlike the East. The West engages in democracy in decision-making, as depicted by the 5 dogs.

In the portrayal of Japanese characters in this film, they are depicted as a passive society that is indifferent to their surroundings. This is particularly evident in the dichotomy between American and Japanese students. The American student, Tracy Walker, is shown as a leader in opposing Kobayashi's policy, while the Japanese students simply follow the directions of the American student, as seen in Figure 9.



**Figure 10.** American student led the demonstration

The image shows the American student holding a megaphone and being the only one speaking in that scene, while the Japanese students are only holding posters behind her. This positions Japan as a party that does not have a voice. This passive society can also be observed in people who only watch the news and do not provide any comments when the mayor announces a policy. This gives the impression that Eastern society will simply follow government instructions and does not have the power to engage in debates.

In the structural analysis, Japanese language appears to be more dominant than English because the Japanese language has the power to determine the fate of the dogs. However, this is only an illusion as the Japanese language still needs to be translated. As seen in several scenes when there is news from the government and the statements or news are translated by an interpreter. However, the news is originally broadcasted in the Japanese city news. In the end, this portrays English as more dominant. Looking at the dog characters who speak English and represent the West, it reinforces the Western view of the East represented by the dogs and the Japanese society. This can be observed in the scene in Figure 10 when Duke meets Atari and does not understand what Atari is saying.

The dog not understanding Atari's words can be interpreted as the West not understanding the East and reinforcing that the East is 'the other,' something foreign.

Beyond the representation of Japan, the end of this film further solidifies the idea of Orientalism. The dogs and Tracy Walker ultimately succeed in defeating the totalitarian and dictatorial Japanese government. This can be interpreted as the ultimate superiority of the West over the East's inferiority. This aligns with Said's assertion that Orientalists tend to demean Eastern ways of thinking, considering them incompatible and unequal to their own. Tracy Walker, a white American, ultimately becomes Atari's

partner. Tracy, leading the pro-dog group, triumphs in the demonstration against the portrayed evil Japanese government. This ultimately forms a white savior narrative in the film and further emphasizes the concept of Orientalism. The white savior narrative is also evident when Rex, a white-furred dog, leads other dogs; Boss, Chief, King, and Duke, to rescue Atari, captured by the forces sent by his uncle, thinking it's 'child abuse' (Isle of Dogs 2018). Rex's words further solidify the Western view of the East as 'barbaric' which is a stereotype that frames the East as irrational and morally inferior.



**Figure 11.** Duke didn't understand Atari

Similar tendencies are discussed by Fauziyah and Tjahjani (2019), who find that Hollywood films such as *The Great Wall* and *Doctor Strange* perpetuate white supremacy and the *white savior complex* through both narrative structure and visual semiotics. Their analysis revealed that Western characters are consistently positioned as bearers of reason, knowledge, and morality, while Eastern characters and spaces function as ideological backdrops that validate Western dominance. Yet, while the film clearly emerges from a Western perspective, its visual and narrative homage to Japanese cinema complicates a purely Orientalist reading. As Rosenbaum (2017) explained in his study of Steven Okazaki's "hyphenated films," transnational representations of Japan often produce hybrid identities that blur the boundaries between cultural authenticity and mediated performance.

In this sense, *Isle of Dogs* can be viewed as a transnational text that both reproduces and reimagines Japan through the lens of global cinematic exchange, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between cultural admiration, aesthetic appropriation, and hybrid belonging. The portrayal of Japanese culture in *Isle of Dogs* can be seen as an example of Western reinterpretation of Asian identity through a stylized and exotic lens. Figueiredo (2025) said that Western productions tend to emphasize individualism and exoticized

visual tropes, while Eastern adaptations prioritize collectivism and cultural specificity. This contrast reinforces how Orientalist tendencies persist in Western cinema's representation of Asian cultures, including the stylized portrayal of Japan in *Isle of Dogs*. This phenomenon reflects a broader pattern in Western cinema where Asian characters and cultures are often depicted through simplified or stereotypical traits. As Dong, Sun, and Zhang (2022) argued, American films have historically developed fixed stereotypes of Asian identities, portraying them through limited attributes such as submissiveness, academic excellence, or mystical abilities, thus reinforcing a monolithic image of "the Asian" shaped by Western perspectives.

## CONCLUSION

While Hathaway (2024) viewed *Isle of Dogs* as a narrative of interspecies empathy, the present analysis concludes that such empathy remains framed within Orientalist visual codes that exoticize Japan. Based on the analysis and discussion above, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the narrative structure and strategy of the film *Isle of Dogs* (2018) reveal a dichotomy between the West and the East, serving as symbols of resistance and the Orientalist concept. The film positions Japanese culture, representing the East, in a powerful role while rendering the English-speaking dogs voiceless, suggesting an apparent reversal of the Orientalist notion that the West dominates the East. However, this reversal does not transcend the East-West dichotomy; instead, it reconfigures it. Japanese culture is aestheticized as a decorative backdrop to a Western narrative framework, while Japanese politics are portrayed through familiar Western stereotypes: authoritarian, irrational, and exotic. Thus, rather than dismantling Orientalism, the film reproduces it through stylistic admiration and narrative control. The conclusion of the story further asserts the Western superiority over the East due to more rational policies. To conclude, orientalism is still relatable till this day with the richness of technology as it can be seen on the film industry such as *Isle of Dogs*. This research is expected to contribute to the understanding of Orientalism in film. Additionally, it can serve as a reference for further analyses of the animated film *Isle of Dogs* (2018).

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