

## The Quality of Culture-Specific Items' Translation in Rob Marshall's Film *Memoirs of a Geisha*

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This study analyzes cases of culture-specific items, which are often challenging to translate. Lithuanian voice-over version of Rob Marshall's film *Memoirs of a Geisha* is being examined, taking a deeper look into translation of culture-specific items in terms of quality. Quality assessment is one of the most important aspects when evaluating translations. However, audiovisual translation differs greatly from traditional translation, and it can pose difficulties not only translating, but also evaluating translation quality or trying to justify certain choices made by the translator. Hence, the paper seeks to define quality of translation having voice-over and its constraints in mind, and to discuss translation strategies of culture-specific items in the film. To this end, the study relies on definitions of quality provided by Juliane House (2013), categorization of culture-specific items by Willy Vandeweghe (2005), and their translation strategies by Eirlys E. Davies (2003). It is found that the mode of the text in the target language remains the same as the text is always spoken, and it includes narration and dialogues. Mismatches between the source text and the translation mainly appear with culture-specific items that are more difficult to translate (for example, ethnographic references). Overall, the translation quality can be deemed to be good enough, with the translator using translation strategies wisely trying to maintain authenticity where possible.

Keywords: audiovisual translation; voice-over; culture-specific items; translation strategies; quality

### 1. Introduction

While analyzing audiovisual material, be it subtitles, voice-over, or dubbing, one of the most important factors is determining the quality of translation. However, different theories lead to different concepts of quality. It is important not to get lost between them and think about the purpose and the audience of the translation. Furthermore, the specificity of the audiovisual content is that images and sounds can contribute to a better understanding of the content. Information provided through visual channel can compensate for certain lack of precision in the translation of verbal content. At the same time, the presence of visual elements implies a

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(Received 13 June 2022; accepted 7 December 2022)

higher degree of referentiality to the visuals and an obvious need for synchronization between the images and the translation.

Since the theories and understanding of quality in translation are still shifting, it is important, interesting, and relevant to put some of them in action and evaluate translation in regards of them. In order to do that, cases of culture-specific items (hereafter CSIs), which are often challenging to translate, will be used. The translation of CSIs is a reoccurring topic in audiovisual translation; however, less often it appears in analyses of voice-over. While Pilar Orero (2006 quoted in Matamala 2019, 64) terms voice-over as the 'ugly duckling' of audiovisual translation, other authors call it the 'damsel in distress' (Wozniak 2012, 211). It is important to stress that in Lithuania, as in Poland and some other Central and Eastern European countries, voice-over is used not only for documentaries, but also for feature films. However, more research needs to be done regarding established practices and their links to original genre and target audiences.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze cases of CSIs in Rob Marshall's movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) and their translation for Lithuanian voice-over. To achieve this goal, the following objectives have been set out: (i) to introduce theories of quality, (ii) to define CSIs, (iii) to analyze cases of CSIs and their quality for Lithuanian voice-over translation.

This paper is structured in two parts: First, it gives a brief overview of the voice-over as one of the main audiovisual translation modes according to the works by Eliana Franco, Anna Matamala, and Pilar Orero (2013), Jorge Díaz Cintas and Pilar Orero (2006), and Anna Matamala (2019). It will then go on to introduce basic concepts of translation quality and quality assessment as proposed by Juliane House (2013). The following section is concerned with categorization of CSIs by Willy Vandeweghe (2005) and their translation strategies by Eirlys E. Davies (2003). Finally, the analysis of CSIs translation is conducted following a qualitative case study design and employing a comparative method.

## 2. An Overview of Voice-over as a Translation Mode

Voice-over is a term which originated in the area of film studies and is still used by filmmakers (Franco, Matamala, and Orero 2013, 17). The term was then borrowed to become a mode of transfer in audiovisual translation. The existence of voice-over in film studies and in translation studies has caused some terminological confusion among audiovisual translation

scholars. Voice-over has two different concepts in two different fields (19). In film terms, John Harrington defines voice-over as “any spoken language not seeming to come from images on the screen” (1973, 165). In other words, voice-over is defined as “a narrative technique in which the voice of a narrator is heard over different images and this can be done for different purposes” (Franco, Matamala, and Orero 2013, 18). One of the best-known examples of this is documentaries.

In the field of translation studies, scholars Díaz Cintas and Orero define voice-over as an audiovisual translation technique where “a voice translation in a target language is heard simultaneously on top of the source language” (2006, 477). The scholars also indicate that the volume of the original film or program is reduced, but the characters speaking are still heard talking in the background. Voice-over is usually read a few seconds later from when the character starts speaking. This is done in order for the original speech to be still heard for a few seconds. Many viewers like to hear the real voices of the actors, as it adds authenticity. However, when characters are speaking fast, it might not be possible to achieve voice-over isochrony, or in other words, start the voice-over translation a few seconds later than the original. In some cases, it can happen that the translation finishes later than the original and overlaps with other characters speaking. However, this should be avoided, because it can confuse the viewers as to who is speaking at the moment.

Another aspect of voice-over is that lip synchronization is not retained. Dubbing makes it seem that the characters on screen are actually talking in the target language. While in voice-over, “original and translation coexist” (Matamala 2019, 68). In some countries, voice-over is also used widely because it is cheaper and takes less time to produce. Matamala also elaborates further on the process of preparing voice-over translation:

Voice-over generally implies the preparation of a written translation which is delivered orally in a pre-recorded format. Typically, translators are provided with an audiovisual file (with or without a script or transcript) and are required to deliver a written translation, following the formatting requirements of the client. . . . The last steps in the production of voiced-over content are the recording of the translated version by a voice-over narrator or various voice talents, and the final revision of the audiovisual output. (2019, 68)

This existence of the original and the target language has its constraints. The process of translation, various transformations, and even voice actors' talents have a high impact on the quality of the voice-over translation. Original script is often condensed in order to fit within the

time limits, but it is also made more understandable for the audiences. For instance, “when the original version contains spontaneous colloquial speech characterized by hesitations, false starts, repetitions and discourse markers, the original is reformulated and many spontaneous features disappear for the sake of comprehensibility” (Franco, Matamala, and Orero 2013, 18). It is also noted that this audiovisual translation mode “has to be a faithful, literal, authentic, and complete version of the original audio” (26). Then, the viewers will be satisfied with the translation while watching such a program or film.

### **3. Understanding Quality in Translation**

Quality assessment in audiovisual translation is sometimes still insufficient or focuses mainly on possible errors or losses (Pérez-González 2014; Chiaro 2009; Huber and Kairys 2021). However, media translation or audiovisual translation is quite a difficult area to analyze in terms of quality, mainly due to the complexity of several channels functioning all at once. Furthermore, subtitling, dubbing, and voice-over translation have their own constraints that can complicate the translation process. While translating for voice-over, for example, the translator has a limited time frame to express an idea or a phrase.

Translation quality assessment in TS has been considered through many different lenses: with error analysis, in a retrospective (comparing with the ST) or prospective way (measuring the effect), by lateral assessment (comparing with non-translated parallel texts or against expectancy norms), or according to international standards, such as ISO 17100 (2015). (Gambier 2018, 43)

In order to understand quality in translation, it is best to start with the key terms. Firstly, ‘equivalence’ is one of the core concepts in translation theory. It is a response-based approach of quality assessment. Eugene Nida (1964) was one of the first scholars who highlighted the importance of the reader (viewer, listener). In other words, he emphasized the possibility to assess translation by evaluating whether the readers respond to the translation in the same way they respond to the original. Equivalence is rooted in the understanding of translation as something that can be comparable, or as a reproduction of something originally created in another language (House 2013, 534). Furthermore, equivalence entails that translation will have the same value as the original text. It can be on the level of “form,” “reference,” or “function” (Pym 1995, 273). This concept is researched widely, and various authors even propose different paradigms and understandings of equivalence. For instance, Jeremy Munday explains that a full

degree of equivalence (it can be referential or denotative) at the word level would mean that “an original word and a translated word refer to the same (non-linguistic) object in the real world (e.g., English apple – German Apfel)” (2009, 185). Nowadays, the concept of equivalence is one of the most debated issues in translational research, with scholars disagreeing on its validity and utility (ibid.). Nevertheless, it is still a highly relevant topic when discussing translation quality. As for text-based approaches of quality in translation, they view translations as part of the literary and cultural system of the target language (Bogucki 2016, 62).

Next, it is essential to understand the concepts of ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ translation. According to House (2013, 535), in an overt translation, the target text does not pretend to be and is not represented as being an original. It is also not directed at the target text audience. And on the other hand, “a covert translation is a translation that enjoys the status of an original source text in the target culture” (ibid.). Munday explains House’s proposed idea further: “while a covert translation has to be equivalent to the ST at the genre and function level, it does not need to be equivalent at the register and language/text level” (2009, 179). It can be stated that in overt translation, the traces or features of the source text still remain in the translation. An overt translation is a case of “language mention, opposed to language use in the case of covert translation, and it is thus similar to a quotation” (House 2013, 537). The specific purpose of a translation or required quality (for example, depending on the target audience) often determines whether it will be covert or overt.

Furthermore, there are also various concepts and ideas on how to evaluate translations. While analyzing CSIs, the concept of a ‘cultural filter’ by House (1977) is very important. It is part of covert translation, and it is a way of capturing sociocultural differences in expectation norms and stylistic conventions between the source and target linguistic-cultural communities. More research is needed in this field, but when performing comparative analysis of source and target texts and evaluating covert translations, it is essential to take into account whatever knowledge there is about cultural differences between target and source communities. House proposed her own linguistic model of translation criticism:

In this model (House 1977, 1997) translation is defined as the replacement of a text in the source language by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent text in the target language, and an adequate translation is a pragmatically and semantically equivalent one. As a first requirement for this equivalent, it is posited that a translation text has a function equivalent to that of its original. (2013, 542)

House's model for quality assessment of a translation is based on Hallidayan register analysis:

1. Field: what the text is about, what kind of things are in the text.
2. Tenor: a social attitude (formal or informal style) between the author and the audiences.
3. Mode: how the text is communicated, the channel; spoken or written.

As the author states, any mismatch between the source text and the target text is considered an error. Therefore, mismatches are divided into two categories: “covertly erroneous errors” (neglecting the features such as field, mode, and tenor during translating), and “overtly erroneous errors” (the mismatches of denotative meanings between source text and target text) (House 1977, 39).

Other authors, like Delia Chiaro, state what a good quality entails very clearly is “transferring the meaning of highly specific cultural references adequately; finding a solution to retaining the connotations contained in accent and/or linguistic variety; dealing with notoriously thorny problems like songs and jokes” (2008, 251). In the present study, the focus will be on cultural references or CSIs, which will be presented in the next section.

#### **4. Culture-Specific Items and Their Translation**

CSIs are extralinguistic references to items that are tied up with a country's culture, history, or geography, and tend therefore to pose serious translation challenges (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2014, 200). In Lithuania, existing studies focus mostly on CSIs in subtitled and dubbed audiovisual products (Horbačauskienė, Kasperavičienė, and Petronienė 2016; Pagrandytė and Astrauskienė 2021; Huber and Kairys 2021), whereas voice-over translation has been underrepresented. CSIs represent a foreign culture to the target audience. Furthermore, CSIs serve for the purpose of “acculturation, recreation of cultural identities and stereotypes, or humour” (González-Vera 2015, 247). The taxonomy presented by Vandeweghe (2005, 40–41) focuses on three main types of CSIs: (i) geographical references, (ii) ethnographic references, (iii) social-political references. According to the scholar, geographical references include objects from physical geography, geographical objects, endemic animal and plant species. Ethnographic references include objects from daily life, references to work, to art and

culture. Lastly, social-political references include administrative or territorial units, references to institutions and functions and various references to sociocultural life.

The most challenging situation for translators arises when no similar item exists in the target culture and or if it is unknown to the majority of the target audience. For this paper, a classification of translation strategies by Davies (2003) will be used. Davies's classification consists of the following translation strategies: preservation (of form or content), addition, omission, globalization, localization, transformation, and creation.

(i) 'Preservation of form' involves direct transfer from source language to target language with no changes to the word. This strategy is adopted when the translator believes that the best choice for the translation is to maintain authenticity and leave the word unchanged.

(ii) 'Preservation of content' involves direct transfer from source language to target language as well, without any explanation and with slight changes to how the word is written or spoken. This strategy is employed when the translator believes that the best choice is to leave the word partially unchanged, but grammatically adapt to the target language.

(iii) 'Addition' is when more information is added simultaneously with the transfer from source language to target language.

(iv) 'Omission' is a strategy when a word or a phrase is omitted from the target language when no equivalents can be found.

(v) 'Globalization' is a strategy of exchanging cultural elements of the text with more general and neutral words, to match it with the target language culture.

(vi) As a strategy, 'localization' is trying to find an appropriate equivalent of the CSI in the target language.

(vii) 'Transformation' is an alteration of a CSI. It can be changed by another CSI, familiar to the target language audience.

(viii) Finally, 'creation' is a translation strategy that adds a CSI, where it was not present.

Translation strategies can also vary depending on audiovisual translation mode. It would not be possible to use the same strategies for dubbing and voice-over and subtitling because different types of synchronizations are at play.

## 5. Analyzing Cases of Culture-Specific Items

The movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* is directed by Rob Marshall and released in 2005. It is an adaptation of a book by Arthur Golden of the same name. The story in *Memoirs of a Geisha* is set years before World War II. It portrays the life of a Japanese girl Chiyo. The narrative centers around Chiyo's memoirs, especially the injustice she has suffered, her journey to becoming a geisha, and her love for the Chairman. The specificities of Japanese culture are reflected in the movie; hence, it is expected to come across CSIs. It is important to stress that the most appropriate way to analyze a CSI translation would be when the original culture and the original language coincide. This is not the case with *Memoirs of a Geisha*, because Japanese culture is being analyzed and the original film is in English, so CSIs come from a different culture than the original film language. This case is somewhat like relay translation, where the translation is done through an intermediate language, which is quite common.

While analyzing CSIs in the translation of the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*, it is important to keep in mind that voice-over translation is being analyzed. For some time, it was believed that voice-over is easy, and it is “the most faithful of the audiovisual translation modes” (Luyken et al. 1991, 80). However, this opinion has changed over the years with more studies being done and with countries still choosing this method to translate movies. In this case, a professional Lithuanian voice-over version is chosen for the analysis.

It would be hard to evaluate quality based on one word at a time; therefore, CSIs will be analyzed in groups according to Vandeweghe's (2005, 40–41) taxonomy. Firstly, the translation of geographical references in the movie will be reviewed, as seen in table 1.

Table 1. Geographical references in the movie

No.	Source Text	Translation	Strategy
1.	Sagura tree	<i>Sakuros</i>	Localization/Omission
2.	Tanaka	<i>Tanakos</i>	Preservation of content
3.	Yurida	<i>Joroido</i>	Localization
4.	Bamboo stick	<i>Bambukinę lazda</i>	Localization
5.	Hanonoke	-	Omission
6.	Monkey	<i>Beždžionės</i>	Localization
7.	Hanamachi	<i>Bendruomenės namai</i>	Transformation
8.	Tortoise	<i>Vėžlys</i>	Localization
9.	Jasmin	<i>Jazminai</i>	Localization
10.	Blowfish	<i>Žuvis</i>	Globalization



11.	Squid	<i>Kalmaras</i>	Localization
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While analyzing geographical references and their translation, it becomes clear that localization strategy is used the most frequently. Some of the terms, for example ‘monkey’ and ‘squid,’ are well-known to Lithuanian audiences and have equivalents in the target language; hence, the use of this strategy is expected. In other cases, mixed strategies can be seen. For example, *Tanaka* is not adapted to Lithuanian language, and preservation of content is used (Tanaka was a feudal domain in Japan). In many cases, omissions can be employed and they will not affect the quality, because the audience can still rely on what they see and hear to make out a certain meaning. However, the word *Tanaka* is not familiar to Lithuanian audience, and it can leave the viewers wondering what is actually meant. *Hononoke* is simply omitted from the translation. This strategy may have been employed in order to maintain isochrony. The character Pumpkin was speaking quite fast at the given scene, so the word may have been omitted to save time. However, in this case, it is not entirely a loss, as the camera then focuses on a view of the specific city the two characters were talking about. Another interesting case is *Hanamachi* translated as *bendruomenės namai* (community center). It is a case of transformation; however, the translation does not entirely reflect the original word, as a *hanamachi* refers to a ‘district’ where geishas lived and worked in Japan. The translator chose to transform the CSIs in order to maintain authenticity, but this attempt could be improved by preserving the original word or offering another translation that would reflect the meaning of specific ‘district’ that is mentioned. Hence, this is a mismatch in the field of source text and the target text. Lastly, ‘blowfish’ is translated simply as *žuvis* (fish), where the term is globalized. The exact translation in Lithuanian would be *pūsliazuvė*, which is much longer. However, this shows that an exact equivalent is not always needed (especially when talking about voice-over), as the term was not important to the overall plot of the film, but the meaning (of something smelling like a fish) is still conveyed.

The translation of geographical references was adequate, mainly because the cases of CSIs were not too difficult. The strategy of localization was mostly employed because equivalents in the target language could be found. There were a few more difficult cases (like *Hanamachi*) and some omissions (for example, no translation of *Hononoke*). However, sometimes when some information is lost, the audience can still rely on what they see on the screen to make up for that.

Another group of CSIs chosen for analysis is social-political references, as presented in table 2.

Table 2. Social-political references in the movie

No.	Source Text	Translation	Strategy
1.	Mister	<i>Ponas</i>	Localization
2.	Chairman	<i>Pirmininke</i>	Localization
3.	Prime minister	<i>Ministras pirmininkas</i>	Localization
4.	Baron	<i>Baronas</i>	Localization

In all these cases, localization strategy was used. The cases of CSIs in this group are all well-known to Lithuanian audiences, and no challenging cases can be seen. Less-known term is 'baron' (this title is not used in Lithuania), but it did not pose any difficulties; hence, the translation of social-political references is adequate and commendable, with the tenor remaining the same.

The largest and the most challenging group to translate was ethnographic references.

Table 3. Ethnographic references in the movie

No.	Source Text	Translation	Strategy
1.	Mother	<i>Motinėlė</i>	Transformation
2.	Okea	<i>kimono</i>	Transformation
3.	Tea-house	<i>Arbatos namuose</i>	Preservation of content
4.	Bath-house	<i>Pirtyje</i>	Localization
5.	Pleasure district	<i>Pasilinksminimų kvartalas</i>	Preservation of content
6.	Doctor Ohura	<i>Daktaras Morė</i>	Transformation
7.	Miko	<i>Mokinė</i>	Globalization
8.	Misuage	<i>Mizuage</i>	Preservation of content
9.	He is my Danna	<i>Danas, tai yra, mano globėjas</i>	Preservation of content/Addition
10.	Patron	<i>Dana</i>	Creation

A mix of strategies was used in the translation of this group. Some examples are portrayed in table 3. Firstly, the translation of 'mother.' It is a CSI because women who used to run geisha houses were referred to as 'mothers.' The translator wanted to preserve the meaning choosing a different translation, transforming the word. 'Mother' in Lithuanian would mean *mama* or *motina*. However, *motinė* (little mother) was chosen to show a more specific meaning and, once again, to maintain authenticity. This choice can also be explained by using a parallel of 'Mother Superior' (Mother Superior is also a head of her religious house), because

the translation for this term in Lithuanian would also be *motinėlė*. Next, in the third example in table 3, a creation of a CSI appears. The word *okea* is not translated and not even mentioned. Instead, in the same sentence, a word *kimono* appears. It was done by the translator to compensate for the omission. This translation does not seem out of the ordinary, and it is correlated with the images shown on screen at the given moment. It is also an interesting example how two similar concepts are translated using different strategies: 'tea-house' and 'bath-house.' In one case, preservation of content is used, and in the other, localization is employed. Since there are no equivalents in Lithuania for these buildings, preservation of content can be considered as the appropriate translation strategy. However, translating 'bath-house' as *pirtis* (sauna) could make the audience imagine this building differently. Furthermore, there is no direct equivalent for this word in Lithuanian, as 'bath-houses' were more like 'public baths' in Japan (even if they include saunas). It is not always the best strategy to localize words, when there are close equivalents, as sometimes, they are not close enough. Based on House's model for quality assessment of a translation, this would be a field error. In this case, it would be useful to add another word—*viešoji pirtis* (public sauna). That would help understand the term better.

Then, in the fifth example 'pleasure district' is translated as *pasilinksminimų kvartalas* (entertainment district) preserving the idea very well. In the sixth example, a strategy of transformation of the name can be seen, 'doctor Ohura'—*daktaras Morė*. It is not clear why the translator chose such strategy and such a translation, as none of the names is familiar to Lithuanian audiences. It might be that the original surname was too difficult to pronounce, so the translator chose another surname that is not Lithuanian and the pronunciation of it sounds foreign. Then, the seventh example in table 3 shows a specific term in Japanese. A *miko* is a geisha in training. The translator employed globalization strategy and translated it as *mokinė* (female student). However, it is a very broad term. In any other case, this translation would need more context or further explanation. However, since this is an audiovisual material, the audience can see that the main character is training to become a geisha. The visual information compensates for lack of clarity in the translation, thus multimodal cohesion or visual-verbal cohesion is maintained.

Another specific term is *misuage*, which refers to a geisha's virginity. In this case, preservation of content was employed, simply pronouncing the word the same. However, without further explanation, it might be hard for the audience to understand what exactly is

meant. The target audience is not familiar with such concept and such a term, hence why further in the movie, a Lithuanian word for virginity (*nekaltybė*) is used. It is a nice example of how an original word can be used first, introducing the audience to the concept, and then explained further. Authenticity is maintained but the audience's understanding does not suffer. It is important to mention that it might not be possible to employ this strategy in many cases, because it highly depends on what is spoken in the movie next and whether there is a possibility for further explanation. The ninth example in table 3 reflects a strategy of addition, where the foreign word is kept and also explained further. *Danna* is a male patron of a geisha. It is conveyed the same way in Lithuanian version, merely adding a Lithuanian ending to the word. However, the word *danas* in Lithuanian is also a name, which can be confusing. Some inconsistencies and peculiarities in translation can be seen in the tenth example, where 'patron' is translated as *dana*. It is a case of creation, furthermore in the ninth example, the word was translated as *danas* (masc.) and in the tenth it is *dana* (fem.). It is not clear why the translator chose two different translations. It may have been an error, but in any case, it is extremely important and advisable to use uniform terminology.

As mentioned above, the translator is not always consistent with some of the translations. Most field errors can be found in the ethnographic references group. Some tenor errors can also be seen here, as the audience gets the globalized version of words, for example, *Miko*—*mokinė* (female student). Overall, the mode of the text in the target language remains the same—the text is always spoken, it includes narration and dialogues. However, there are some mismatches between the source language and the translation of the denotative meanings (for example, *Hanamachi*—*bendruomenės namai* [community center], 'bath-house'—*pirtis* [sauna]). The tenor remains the same, the translation follows rather a formal style, especially in the narration. Cases can be seen where the tenor in the dialogue translation is more formal (as this is translation for voice-over). The translation for voice-over of *Memoirs of a Geisha* and many cases mentioned above can be considered a mix of both 'overt' and 'covert' translation. In many cases, the target text does not pretend to be and is not represented as being an original (for example, *motinė*). Mainly because the original film is in English, but many Japanese words and cultural references are used. Furthermore, it would not be possible to employ localization too often, because it would clearly contrast with Japanese cultural elements that the audience see on the screen.

## 6. Conclusion

In the film, the most difficult group containing CSIs to translate was ethnographic references. This group included the most cases of CSIs, and many of them contain references that do not have equivalents in Lithuanian language. Hence, the quality of translation in some cases of ethnographic CSIs is not high enough to transfer the original meaning for the audience; it can leave the viewers confused. Nevertheless, the translation strategies employed the most often were localization and preservation of content. Preservation of content (or preservation of form) was used where an adequate transfer of CSIs was not possible. Taken the whole film, the quality of the translation of CSIs in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) is adequate. The translator used localization, when possible, at the same time, trying to maintain authenticity. If there were omissions, translator tried to compensate for them by transforming or creating other CSIs. It is important to note that the work analyzed, although conveying a number of elements of Japanese culture, was not created in Japan or in the Japanese language, so the results should be interpreted with caution. It would be advisable to carry out similar studies in the future, looking specifically at Japanese films.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the insightful comments and feedback provided by professor Dr. Danguolė Satkauskaitė from Kaunas Faculty of Vilnius University.

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## Filmography

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