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# **The composition of still violence in Kitano's Sonatine**

*bakalářská diplomová práce*

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Podpis Havelková

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## Abstrakt

Název práce: Kompozice klidného násilí v Kitanově Sonatine

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Abstrakt (minimálně 900 znaků): Cílem této bakalářské práce je prozkoumat roli binárních opozic v tvorbě významu. Teoretická část práce se zaměřuje na opozice v lingvistických teoriích. Středem zájmu je převážně strukturalistický směr, jak jej můžeme znát z děl Ferdinanda de Saussura nebo Pražského lingvistického kroužku, ale také koncept sémiotického čtverce Algirdase Juliána Greimase. Metodologie práce je dále rozvedena v následujících sekcích, zaměřené na naratologii. Nakonec se probírá sémiotická teorie Juriho Lotmana, se zaměřením na jeho koncept textu a filmový jazyk jako způsob, jak zkoumat vizuální, nelingvistický význam. Analytická část práce poté tyto získané vědomosti aplikuje na *Sonatine*, film z roku 1993 režírován Takeshi Kitanem. Tento film silně využívá protikladné motivy násilí a klidu, což z něj tvoří excelentní ukázkou využívání kontrastních konceptů jakožto způsob vytváření významu. Analýza je proběhla ve dvou částech: první byla popsána narativní struktura, a poté jsme se přesunuli k vizuálnímu použití binárních opozic. Druhá část analýzy pokryla opozice nejen ve vybraných scénách, ale obsahuje i popis vybraných postav. K detailní kategorizaci opozic a vztahů mezi nimi byl využit sémiotický čtverec. Závěr na konci shrnuje výsledky analýzy, případné nedostatky v rámci metodologie a možnosti pro budoucí výzkum.

Klíčová slova: Binární opozice, Sémiotika filmu, Naratologie, Sémiotický čtverec



## Abstract

Title: The composition of still violence in Kitano's *Sonatine*

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Abstract (900 characters): The aim of the thesis is to explore the role of binary oppositions in meaning making. The theoretical section of the work focuses on oppositions in linguistic theories. It is mainly concerned on the structuralist tradition as represented by Ferdinand de Saussure and the Prague Linguistic Circle, as well as Algirdas Julien Greimas' concept of the semiotic square. The methodology is further discussed in the following section, covering structural narratology. Lastly, Juri Lotman's semiotics, focused on the concept of the text and cinematic language, are discussed as a way to work with visual, non-linguistic meaning. The analytical section then applies this knowledge on the 1993 film *Sonatine*, directed by Takeshi Kitano. The film heavily utilizes the opposing motives of violence and stillness, making it an excellent example of the relevance of contrasting imagery as a meaning-making process. The analysis is done on two planes: first the narrative structure is described, before moving on to the visual usage of binary oppositions. The second part of the analysis covers oppositions within a selection of narrative events, as well as a thorough description of select characters. The semiotic square is used to better categorize the motives and the relationships between them. Finally, the conclusions discuss the results of the analysis, as well as any shortcomings of the methodology and possibilities for future research.

Keywords: Binary oppositions, Semiotics of cinema, Narratology, Semiotic square

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## Introduction

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The object of the thesis is to explore the use of binary oppositions in Takeshi Kitano's 1993 film *Sonatine*. Building off of Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of difference in language, we can pose the question of whether the statement applies to non-linguistic systems as well. *Sonatine*'s plentiful, often jarring opposing motives provide a great basis for exploring this possibility. While identifying clear binaries within the film, it is however also important to point out that the reality of things is not as black and white. The main question is then to identify how the oppositions work together, and how they get combined to create entirely new motives, rather than simply negating one another.

A binary opposition can be understood as a pair of objects which are absolute opposites of one another. The notion has long been discussed mainly by members of the structuralist movement. Originating in linguistics, its existence has afterwards been discussed in a vast variety of fields, notably appearing in semiotics and narratology (see Greimas & Courtés, 1982; Greimas, 1983, 1987, Nöth, 1994; Lotman, 1981). The starting point of the discourse around binary opposition can be found in Saussure, particularly the posthumously released *Course in General Linguistics* (1959 [1916]), compiled by Bally and Sechehaye from notes from Saussure's lectures. When describing the study of meaning, Saussure points out the importance of the concept of difference. In order for meaning to arise, signs must be differentiable from one another. The value of a sign is then further determined precisely by its similarity or dissimilarity to other signs. Similar ideas can be found in the study of narrative: it is nearly impossible to imagine a story that could not be summarised as being some kind of battle of good against evil. It is exactly this tension that manifests through the clashing objects that pushes the narrative forward. Our intention is to apply this insight on the selected film, recognising the existence of dichotomies in both the narrative structure as well as in the visual elements, and analysing their relevance and relation to one another.

*Sonatine* serves as an interesting object of study as the concept of binary opposition is very clearly present in every aspect of the film. The focal point of the thesis is understanding how the film works with the binary of violence and stillness. It's not uncommon for the viewer to witness a quiet scenery being interrupted by a sequence of gruesome acts. The constant alternating of opposing scenes only seems to push both the stillness and the violence more to the extreme. The violence comes in unexpectedly,

appearing even more brutal when the viewer gets settled into the previous calmness. On the other side, the silence that follows once the bloodshed is finished feels almost deafening, drawing attention to a certain unsettledness of preceding acts. While opposite, it's clear that the dichotomy also appears to work in a complementary way, both highlighting one another.

A trace of the binary can be found even when going deeper, looking at the individual elements creating each scene. Even when assaulting one another, characters stay eerily emotionless. No matter if they're the ones performing the acts or on the receiving end, there is a jarring lack of reaction. It appears violence is so common in the world of Kitano's film that it becomes easily ignored, perhaps even accepted. *Sonatine* serves as a sort of antithesis to the traditional action movie, constantly presenting the opposite of what the viewer might expect. One can therefore very easily see how the violence/stillness dichotomy essentially constructs the very structure of the movie, being detectable in each part of the narrative, from the subsequent scenes all the way down to individual objects and actants.

In order to analyse the above-described findings, we will borrow models from both narratology and semiotics. First, a general overview of the film's narrative structure will be provided using Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory (1969). This creates a way to find the syntax of the story by summarizing it into a sequence of clauses. Next, we shall analyse the syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements present, while using the previously acquired scheme as a basis for the syntagmatic axis. The discovered paradigms will be further used for our next step, where the main point of interest will be discussed: binary oppositions. The main method for this will be the semiotic square (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). The semiotic square allows us to map out oppositional relations in the form of four terms, including the initial binary and each of the concept's negation. The terms can be further developed into up to six metaterms, which are made up by creating complementary, contrary, and contradictory relations of the individual terms. Finally, after exploring the general structure of the film and identifying the codes within it, we can take a closer look at a selection of crucial scenes. This will provide a more detailed analysis of the visual content. The whole analysis should result in a syntactical and semantic description of the general narrative as well as a more detailed understanding of individual components and visual elements of the film.

In the following chapter we will begin with a closer look at the theoretical framework. The first part will cover a general overview of the notion of binary oppositions and the theories surrounding it. Focusing mainly on the structuralist tradition, we will discuss the contributions on the topic as provided by Saussure as well as the theory of markedness and distinctive oppositions in the works of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Drawing on this basis, we will also further discuss Greimas's semiotic square. Afterwards, the methodology will be presented in more detail, showcasing the narratological and semiotic models we will be using to perform the analysis. The third chapter covers general definitions of narratology, focusing more on Todorov's equilibrium theory (Todorov, 1969). The final chapter of the theoretical part will cover semiotics as a method to study non-linguistic or visual meanings. Afterwards, we will apply the discussed theories on our object of study.

## Theoretical framework

### 1. Binary oppositions in meaning making

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Binary opposition refers to a pair of terms which are mutually exclusive. The oppositional pair is formed by two extremes, with no middle ground or a spectrum bridging the two. While the two contradict each other, they are simultaneously also mutually dependent on one another. The concept of good inherently needs the concept of bad to exist. Without it, it would become an empty object, with nothing to contrast or compare it to. In reality, the connection between opposing terms can however be much more nuanced than a simple either/or relationship. Pure binarism very easily gives way to rigid structures, which don't necessarily reflect the true nature of things.

Another type of a binary relationship can be found in the presence/absence relation. Rather than choosing between two contradictory terms, there is only one term here, which is either present or not. Both types of oppositions are also seemingly related to one another. In an *A* or *B* opposition, if *A* is true, it also logically implies the reality of *not B* being true (Utaker, 1974).

### 1.1. Value and difference in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*

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While Saussure does not explicitly mention binary oppositions, his concept of the sign and value can be seen as extremely influential on much of the later theories concerning binarism. In the *Course in General Linguistics* (1959 [1916]), language is defined as a system of signs. A linguistic sign, such as a word for example, is made up by a signifier and a signified. The relationship between the two is purely arbitrary: the whole language system is based on man-made rules, and there is no natural law which orders a certain sign to be referential to a certain object. At the same time, the signifier and the signified are still dependent on one another and a sign must always include both:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractedly, and the result would be either pure psychology or pure phonology. (Saussure, 1959, p. 113)

The value of a sign can be easily misinterpreted as corresponding to the object the sign represents. Saussure, however, stresses that one cannot simply assign one term to an object, it is also important to pay attention to the sign in relation to other signs. He differentiates relations based on dissimilarity and similarity. Dissimilar things are those which can be exchanged for one another, while similar things are those that can be compared to one another:

In the same way a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value is therefore not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be "exchanged" for a given concept, i.e. that it has this or that signification: one must also compare it with similar values, with other words that stand in opposition to it. Its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it. Being part of a system, it is endowed not only with a signification but also and especially with a value, and this is something quite different. (p. 115)

Saussure's theory essentially builds a ground for the structural analysis of any system, not only linguistic ones. His notion of value showcases how meaning does not arise in isolation, but one must also consider the context surrounding it. By appealing to semiotics, we can therefore pay attention to both the whole and its units. As is shown

in the following section, this method can apply to all levels of language, from semantics all the way to the smallest unit, the phoneme.

## 1.2. Distinctive features and markedness

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One of the greatest contributions to the theory of binary opposition can be found in the Prague Linguistic Circle's research of phonology. In *Principles of Phonology* (1969 [1939]), Nikolai Trubetzkoy states that it is precisely the oppositions between the phonemes, and not the phonemes themselves that play the most important role in phonology. He goes on to define an opposition as being based not only on "those properties that by which the opposition members are distinguished from each other, but also those properties that are common to both opposition members" (Trubetzkoy, 1969). Things that are simply different do not necessarily form an opposition: there needs to be a shared feature allowing for comparison in order for the pair to become oppositional.

Trubetzkoy categorizes oppositions as *bilateral* and *multilateral*, where bilateral oppositions are based on their shared features being only present in the respective pair only, whereas the common features of a multilateral opposition can be found in several pairs. This initial categorization is then further divided based on different characteristics. For our purposes, it is the types which focus on the relation between opposition members, *privative*, *gradual* and *equipollent*, that are the most interesting. A privative opposition is based on the absence or presence of a mark, such as voiced/voiceless or nasalized/nonnasalized. The opposition member where the mark is present is therefore called *marked*, while the other is *unmarked*. Gradual oppositions are comprised of members that display various degrees of one characteristic. Usually, one is neutral, or *mid*, while the other is seen as *extreme*, possessing the lowest or highest possible degree of the property. An equipollent opposition is defined as an opposition in which "the members are logically equivalent, that is, they are neither considered as two degrees of one property nor as the absence or presence of a property" (Trubetzkoy, 1969, p. 75).

The theory of distinctive features is further described by Roman Jakobson, mainly in *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis: The Distinctive Features and Their Correlates* (Jakobson et al., 1963) and *Fundamentals of Language* (Jakobson & Halle, 2002 [1956]). In the latter work, Jakobson defines distinctive features as components capable

of differentiating morphemes from one another. Similarly to Trubetzkoy's oppositions, Jakobson's distinctive features are seen as a choice "between two polar qualities of the same category, as in the case of grave vs. acute, or between the presence and absence of a certain quality such as voiced vs. voiceless, nasalized vs. non-nasalized, sharp vs. non-sharp." (Jakobson & Halle, 2002).

Jakobson however did not stay only in the phonetic level. In his essay *Structure of the Russian Verb* (Jakobson, 1984 [1931]), Jakobson also described the presence of markedness in morphology, where he states that morphological categories can also be split into marked and unmarked, where the marked implies the presence of A, while the unmarked does not. For instance, nouns in the feminine grammatical gender are marked, as they can only refer to the female version of said object, while the masculine noun are unmarked since in most contexts they can be used generally without necessarily denoting only the male population.

The typology of oppositions laid down by Trubetzkoy and Jakobson has been tremendously important in further developments of theories on binary oppositions. For our purposes, the legacy has been most important in the works of Algirdas Julien Greimas. The following section will provide more details in his model of the semiotic square, and how it further develops the study of oppositions.

### 1.3. The semiotic square

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The semiotic square, proposed by Algirdas Julien Greimas, serves as a "visual representation of the logical articulation of any semantic category" (Greimas & Courtés, 1982). Greimas builds onto Jakobson's distinction of two types of oppositions: the A/-A type, where the opposition is created by the presence or absence of a trait, and the A/B type, in which the opposition rests in the trait being manifested in two different forms. Rather than simply acknowledging binary oppositions, Greimas strived to create a typology of the relations between the oppositions.

The square is broken down into three generations of categories. The first begins with the *semantic axis*, comprised by the A/B opposition, where each term can further become a member of an absence/presence opposition. The next type of relation defined is a *contradiction*, present in the A/-A. The terms negate one another and therefore it's impossible for them to exist at once. The second type is a *complementary* relation, where the terms inherently imply the existence of one another, such as -A/B. The final



relation is of *contrariety*, present in the A/B opposition, where the terms, while conflicting, can still both appear at once.

The second generation is constituted by the *metaterms*, which are created as relations of contrariety or complementarity. The two terms created by combining two contrary terms are then called the *contradictory metaterms*, while the ones resulting in the relation of two complementary terms create a *contrary metaterm*.

The third and final generation is then further concerned with the terms created by combining contraries. The resulting terms are called the *complex* and *neutral* term. The complex term consists of the joining of the contrary A and B, while the subcontraries -A and -B create the neutral term.

The semiotic square is extremely useful when analyzing arts and cultural objects. Not only does it give us a way to discuss the relationships between individual opposing objects, but also the inner workings of certain signs. The combination of individual, preexisting signs in order to form new ones is a common practice in secondary systems, such as the arts (Barthes, 1972; Lotman, 1981). We can then use the square to map out its origin as well as its relation to other signs. There is therefore an interesting opportunity to work with both linguistic and non-linguistic systems, all while staying in the realm of linguistic oppositions.

Now that we have explored the notion of binary oppositions and the different theories forming around it, it is possible to move to the next section. The following chapter covers the field of narratology, focusing mainly on structural narratology, which makes up an important part of the methodology of the thesis.

## 2. Narratology

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Narratology the study of narratives or storytelling. It's important to first define a narrative and differentiate it from regular statements or conversations. For Herman (1997), a narrative sequence differs from a nonnarrative by playing with the recipients' expectations. Taking advantage of the readers previous experience and knowledge, the narrative brings forward the unexpected. This constant breaking of established rules ensures the reader's attention, giving meaning to not only the unusual sequence but also making the reader reevaluate the previous acts. Todorov (1971) also brings up the

differences between narrative and description as being an issue of temporality: “the initial description was certainly situated in time, but this time was continuous; whereas the changes, characteristic of narrative, cut time into discontinuous unities; the time of pure duration is opposed to the sequential time of events”. While both can be fiction, narratives function as more than simply conveying information.

## 2.1 Structural narratology

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The modern beginnings of narratology can be found in Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the folktale* (1968 [1928]). Propp defines the smallest unit of the tale as being a *function*. Through analysing a corpus of 100 tales, Propp arrived at the conclusion of there being 31 functions, which make up the possible events in the narrative structure. All characters are also assigned a character function based on the action they take and their interaction with one another. Bremond (1980 [1966]), however argues that the functions are too specific to only the folktale genre and voices the need for a description of narrative possibilities which would be applicable to any type of literature. Keeping the function as the narrative atom, he proposes the concept of an *elementary sequence*. This sequence is composed of three functions: the first function foresees a certain event, be it through a foreshadowing or an explicit setting of goals. The proposed act is then realized in the next one. The third and last function then shows the result of the previous event and closes the sequence (Bremond, 1980).

Bremond acknowledges that a function does not necessarily lead to the following one in the sequence, which Propp failed to account for. Whenever the initial function foresees an act or proposes a goal, the narrator always gets to choose between the function being actualized or staying in virtuality (Bremond, 1980). The set goal can fail or simply be forgotten. The narrative can therefore be summarized as somewhat of a decision tree, where each function branches out with options to either get fulfilled or vice versa. Bremond also critiques Propp’s strict assignments of the actant roles. Any character is his own hero, and the roles of the villain or the helper change accordingly to each character’s perspective. Propp’s finite assignments then confine us to only seeing the narrator’s or the hero’s point of view, and the whole narrative structure is shaped based on this limited view. To avoid this, Bremond goes on to propose a number of possible functions which can occur in each narrative sequence, with the whole schema being shown from the perspective of every agent involved. Seemingly contradictory actions, such as amelioration and degradation, can then happen

simultaneously, as two different characters can perceive the act in different lights (Bremond, 1980).

The structural approach to narratives is further developed by Todorov (1969). For him, structural analysis is a highly theoretical work, rather than being focused on describing one particular work. The object of study is not paraphrasing a certain story or discovering what it is about, but rather analysing its internal structure. This structure is seen as a sort of model, which any possible narrative is a product of.

Todorov (1969) also points out the similarities between the narrative schema and language: the minimal unit of a plot is akin to a clause, constructed by entities which can be analysed similarly to parts of speech. These are the agent and the predicate, and a quality in some cases. Each clause always consists of at least one agent, which can be treated as a proper noun and serve as the object or subject of the clause. The predicate then corresponds to the verb, which modifies the preceding situation. Finally, the quality serves as an adjective. It does not affect the situation in any way.

Each action can be further analysed based on different categories, such as status of positivity or negativity. Modality is also important: similarly to Bremond (1980), Todorov (1969) states that actions can exist in virtuality, being expressed only as a character's wish or goal. A clause can also express a certain character's perspective: this can be expressed through the use of belief, where an action is only speculated to have happened by a character, while others might see it differently or not be aware at all. Once again, the narrative is not analysed only as presented to the reader by the narrator but can also be viewed through the eyes of different agents.

There must also be a sort of relation between subsequent clauses. Actions can be linked by causality, but it can also be purely temporal, happening one after another with no real reactions happening between them. This link of clauses is called a sequence, which is the minimal form of the narrative (Todorov, 1969).

Ultimately, the most important outcome of Todorov's structural narratology is his theory of the equilibrium. Rather than proposing a typology of functions or character classes, Todorov summarises the whole narrative structure as such:

The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term "equilibrium", which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the

existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement. (Todorov, 1969)

Every story therefore begins with a pre-established equilibrium, a reality with a set of rules. This reality is broken by a rule being violated or something out of the ordinary otherwise happening. Two types of plots stem from this: either the violation is punished or otherwise corrected, and the reality returns to being as before, or a new equilibrium gets established as a result of the imbalance. Rather than being concerned with semantics of narratives, Todorov provides a simple schema of its syntax. This makes his theory well suitable for any work, regardless of genre.

It has now been established that we can break down texts into smaller units, both on the planes of linguistics and that of narratology. In the case of film, however, meaning can be carried not only verbally. For this reason, we must also consider the extra-linguistic aspects of meaning-making and storytelling. The next section will cover the concept of secondary semiotic systems, as well as semiotics of culture and the artistic text, ending with cinematic meaning.

### 3. Non-linguistic meaning

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Though language inarguably makes up a big part of human experience and culture, non-verbal aspects are also significant. This area of non-linguistic meaning is covered by semiotics, or semiology. In the *Course in general Linguistics* (1959), Saussure proposes the field of semiology as such:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek *semeion* 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. (p. 16)

While Saussure notes that only a section of semiology is made up of linguistics, much of his theory is still clearly confined to only signs within language systems. The sign for him is merely an impression of the word's sound in conjunction with its meaning: hence the terms *sound-image* and *content* being used alongside *signifier* and *signified* as the two elements that together make up the sign (Saussure, 1959). It can then be implied that Saussure is specifically concerned with speech, and not even language as a whole including its written form, as the signifier is related to hearing. Taking this into account, we can examine further theories of signification, which apply Saussure's semiology to non-linguistic elements.

### 3.1. Secondary sign systems

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A relevant attempt to involve non-linguistic signs is brought by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972 [1957]). Barthes first notes that semiology is concerned with three elements, and not only the two, signifier and signified: "For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other, but the correlation which unites them" (Barthes, 1972, p. 111). He continues with the example of using roses to show his passion. The roses make up the signifier and the passion the signified. While the two are already pre-existing objects, in this context they are joined to create a new sign. There is a difference between the roses as the signifier, and the roses as the sign. The signifier on its own is empty, while the sign is enriched with meaning (p. 111-112).

Myth, a communicative practice utilizing these composite meaning-making processes, is a form of speech, existing as a "*second-order semiological system*" (Barthes, 1972, p. 113). What is seen as a sign in the first system, language, is actually a signifier of another sign, making up the myth. Mythology is then built on the existence of a sort of secret, hidden meaning which is discovered only when the reader possesses certain cultural understanding. Barthes uses the example of a picture on the cover of the magazine *Paris-Match*. In the image, a black boy is shown wearing a French military uniform while saluting. The image can initially be perceived as simply a sign of exactly what it shows: the signifier is then the photo and the signified the real-life person in it. Barthes however discovers another level of signification, telling us that any critiques of French colonialism are invalid, as the black boy is clearly proud to serve France, and there must be no discrimination.

A similar distinction of a language-centric primary system and a connotative secondary system is made in Jurij Lotman's semiotics of culture. Akin to Barthes's first-order and second-order semiological systems, Lotman also differentiates between primary and secondary modelling systems:

A secondary modeling system is a structure based on a natural language. Later the system takes on an additional secondary structure which may be ideological, ethical, artistic, etc. Meanings in this secondary system can be formed according to the means inherent to natural languages or through means employed in other semiotic systems. (Lotman, 1977 [1971])

Once again, we have here language as a basis, through which other aspects of culture, even non-verbal elements, are created. There is however a difference in the two theoreticians, mainly in their approach to the secondary systems. For Barthes, the idea of myth or signification is seen as a hidden meaning, something that only the initiated can uncover and understand. Much of the essays in *Mythologies* are concerned with ideological issues. Barthes focuses on the culture of the bourgeoisie, which is covered in complex symbolisms. The role of semiology is then to decipher these meanings (Barthes, 1972). For Lotman, on the other hand, the secondary system expands on language, rather than hiding it. Barthes saw signs as something deceiving, while Lotman simply strived to understand culture through them (Sériot, 2016).

### 3.2. The artistic text

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After defining the sign from the perspective of semiology<sup>1</sup>, it is also important to define the text. The concept of the text is a crucial idea to Lotman's semiotics of culture, where it is defined as being composed of systematically related signs (Lotman, 1977). It is entirely dependent on the language it is made in, be it a natural language or a language of the arts:

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<sup>1</sup> Yet another theory of signs is found in Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiotics. Unlike Saussure's semiology, Peirce works with a triadic sign model, consisting of a representamen, interpretant and object. The sign is then further described using different typologies, though commonly categorized in symbol, icon and index. Symbols are the most similar to Saussure's definition of the sign, in that they are arbitrary, with no natural ties between the sign and object. Indices work on a causal relationship, with the representamen being a direct result of its object. Finally, icons are denoted by visual resemblance to their objects (Peirce, 1960, 2.275). It is important to keep in mind that these categories are not mutually exclusionary, and many signs can be described as all types at once, depending on the interpreter's perspective.

The extra-textual bonds of a work can be described as the relations between the set of elements fixed in the text and the set of elements from which any given element in the text is selected. The use of a certain rhythm in a system which does not allow for other possibilities, its use in a system which allows for one alternative, and its use in a system which provides five equally probable methods for constructing verse from which the poet can pick one, obviously give us completely different artistic constructs, though the materially fixed aspect of the work, its text, remains unchanged. (Lotman, 1977, p. 50)

We can see the extra-textual bounds as a paradigm of possibilities, with the verbal texts being only one realisation of its model. It is therefore important to understand the modelling system of the text in order to comprehend the work itself. Identifying the text's absent, but possible elements can tell us just as much about the meaning of it as the elements which are present.

Lotman describes the text as being dependent on three rules: *expression*, *demarcation* and *structure* (Lotman, 1977). Expression is related to the text's composition, saying that it must be composed of individual signs. It can therefore be broken down into smaller units, such as words or sentences in literature. The second characteristic, demarcation, means the work must have clear boundaries which separate it from other works. The novel, for instance, has a beginning and an end, while a painting is defined by its frame.

Since the text is composed of different levels of units, there are also separate boundaries for each level. A book can be split into chapters, paragraphs, sentences and so on, each of which has its own defined space. These units also always form hierarchical relations. The higher units therefore simultaneously determine the boundaries of the lower ones: it is impossible for a chapter to end in the middle of a paragraph. This is further evident in the third quality of the text, structure. There must be a sort of organisation within the signs. A string of elements thrown together in complete randomness cannot be analysed as a text.

Lotman also differentiates between *conventional* and *iconic* signs (Lotman, 1981). Iconic signs are based on a natural resemblance to their objects, while conventional signs are fully arbitrary. The iconicity of a sign is however determined by the viewer's cultural background, as well as temporality. This is especially evident in the use of

allegories or metaphors in visual arts: the portrayed object becomes not only an icon of itself, but also a conventional sign referring to something else (Lotman, 1981).

This becomes ever more complicated when dealing with the language of cinema. Art is a “two-fold experience” (Lotman, 1981), where one must simultaneously believe that what one sees is real, while also not forgetting the unreality of it. If the viewer sees a movie simply as a footage of real life, he cannot see the true artistic meaning of the work. At the same time, if he is too aware that what he sees is rehearsed and false, it also ceases to be valuable to him. One must be able to differentiate what is simply a sign of real life and what belongs to the cinematic language:

On the one hand, images on the screen reproduce some sorts of objects of the real world. A semantic relationship is established between these objects and the screen images. The objects become the meanings of the images reproduced on the screen. On the other hand, the images on the screen may be augmented by some additional, often totally unexpected meanings. Lighting, montage, interplay of depth levels, change of speed, etc., may impart to the objects additional meanings – symbolic, metaphorical, metonymical, etc. (Lotman, 1981, p. 31)

Cinematic language is therefore established by the combination of preexisting signs with the possibilities of cinematography. By showing the viewer signs of real life, it builds a set of expectations, only for those to get broken by an unexpected element. The structure of the cinematic text is composed of two separate codes, where one is built by the repetitions of certain motives or events, while the other strives to violate this rhythm of normalcy. The unexpected elements are inherently seen as meaningful by the viewer for being unique, but simultaneously uplift the surrounding shots. Being confronted with a contrasting image, the viewer is forced to reevaluate their future expectation as well as previous experience with the film. Lotman uses the concept of markedness to explain this phenomenon: the normal, expected scene is the unmarked form, while the unexpected is marked. Examples of marked elements include the uses of distorted lenses, slow motions or extreme close ups as opposed to the unmarked, neutral shots.

The acknowledgment of juxtaposition as a meaning-making process however long predates the work of Lotman or other structuralist film theorists. A rather similar line of thought can be found decades earlier in an essay by soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein:



Everyone who has had in his hands a piece of film to be edited knows by experience how neutral it remains, even though a part of a planned sequence, until it is joined with another piece, when it suddenly acquires and conveys a sharper and quite different meaning than that planned for it at the time of filming. (Eisenstein, 1977 [1934])

The statement only further solidifies the fact that while we can separate the film, or any text, into smaller units, they are the most powerful when looked at as a whole. We need to see the parts in interaction with one another, as taking them out of their context would result in a completely different reading.

We have now established the theoretical framework of the thesis, which is based in three main concepts. First, the notion of binary opposition, which is the focal point to be explored. The subsequent section has cover structural narratology, its general history, before focusing on Tzvetan Todorov and his theory of the equilibrium. Finally, we have discussed secondary modelling systems as a way to capture non-linguistic meaning. The section ends with describing Jurij Lotman's concept of the text, as well as his semiotics of cinema.

The next section shall apply the acquired knowledge onto the film *Sonatine*. First, we will cover the film's narrative structure. The chapter following after will then provide a closer look at the use of oppositions within the film.

Analytical section

#### 4. Sonatine

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*Sonatine* tells the story of Murakawa, an older yakuza member making plans to retire soon. Murakawa's boss Kitajima and his lieutenant Takahashi assign Murakawa a job in Okinawa. Kitajima's sworn brother, the head of the Okinawan Nakamatsu clan has asked for assistance in a war against their rivals, the Anan family. Murakawa is sceptical at first and denies, as his last external job has not ended well. Without the film ever showing him agree to the offer, the next time we see Murakawa he has already arrived in Okinawa. Immediately, the situation is extremely suspicious: Murakawa is repeatedly told that the conflict is not serious, and it turns out it was actually Murakawa's boss who insisted on sending his troops over. However, the situation starts

to escalate again after Murakawa's arrival. A series of ambushes forces Murakawa and the remaining members to leave town and hide at an abandoned beachside house.

Nothing happens for a while, and the men pass time by playing various games on the beach. One evening, Murakawa saves a woman called Miyuki from being raped, and she clings to his side ever since. The peace is broken once again by the arrival of a hitman disguised as a fisherman, killing off Nakamatsu and Murakawa's colleague Ken. Murakawa then finds out Takahashi is in town and goes to confront him. The meeting results in another shootout, leading to more deaths, wiping out much of Murakawa's partners, but also the hitman. Murakawa and his one remaining ally, a member of the Nakamatsu clan Ryoji, then interrogate Takahashi, finding out that the whole situation was indeed a set-up. Turns out the boss has been planning to ally himself with the Anan clan instead, while simultaneously looking to take over Murakawa's prosperous turf. Involving him in the Okinawan conflict was then the perfect chance to get rid of both Murakawa and Nakamatsu at once. After being finished with Takahashi, Murakawa offers Ryoji to finish him off. Ryoji tosses a grenade inside the car Takahashi is held in, leaving the car to blow up and burn along with Takahashi as the two walk away from the scene.

After learning that his boss is set to meet with the Anan leaders the same day, Murakawa prepares an ambush. Ryoji assists him by sabotaging the electricity in the building, making the lights go out. The film then shows only an outside view of the building, with the windows being repeatedly lit up by gunshot. Driving back to the beach hideout, Murakawa abruptly stops by the side of the road and commits suicide by shooting himself in the head. The film ends with alternating shots of Miyuki waiting for Murakawa by the beach, and of him dead in the car.

#### 4.1. Narrative schema

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The most minimal narrative structure of *Sonatine* is clearly of deception and revenge. The first half of the story is about Murakawa simply following orders, despite all his justified suspicions. After the deaths of his allies, he sets to find out the truth behind what is happening, and then avenges his men, or perhaps just takes out his frustration. The initial equilibrium is broken by the murder of his closest partner Ken: after Ken is shot on the beach, we see a long distance shot of Murakawa on the beach, by himself, tossing a frisbee into the air, seemingly continuing the game Ken had been playing just

moments ago. The camera cuts to Katagiri standing alongside the rest of the men, remarking that Takahashi is truly finished now. Murakawa has nothing to lose anymore. The loss truly escalates the violence once more.

Before Ken's death, we see glimpses of peace being restored: the same day of the hitman's appearance, we see Katagiri failing to reach Takahashi at the payphone. Upon arriving back, he announces to Uechi that they will be returning back to Tokyo soon, as there are no more orders coming in. It is implied that the conflict has simmered down, and the men can return back to their respective lives in the city. Had they only left immediately, one could assume how different everything would have played out, how many lives could have been spared. Reality is however different, and Murakawa's emotionless wrath is unstoppable. Murakawa is able to avenge his allies, before riding the world of himself as well, ending the clan war and establishing a new equilibrium with significantly less gangsters in it. The narratological schema would then look as follows:

Takahashi deceives Murakawa. → Takahashi's hitman kills Ken. → Murakawa gets revenge on Takahashi. → Murakawa commits suicide.

The schema also showcases the reversal of roles. Murakawa starts out as the object of the film. Actions are committed upon him: he is sent on a job despite protesting against it and what little is left of his trust to his boss is then violated when he finds out he is being betrayed. In the second act we see him regain power and get back at his violators, propelled by the loss of his closest ally. His suicide is then the ultimate act of violence: he is both the actor and the patient, the subject and object. The taking of his own life is his greatest way of regaining agency and ending the cycle of hurt and betrayal.

There is however a significant complication. A rather large portion of the film is compromised solely by the time the group spends on the beach. The men first arrive at the beachside approximately 35 minutes into the film, and only leave for brief moments towards the end of the film. This can therefore potentially be seen as another equilibrium. The passage is strikingly different to the previous city life. The bright beach creates a striking contrast to the rest of the film: we only ever see Tokyo at night, and the Okinawan town where we first arrive is full of grey and dull buildings as well. The beachside then seems to be the first and almost the only glimpse of sunlight we get. We could possibly treat this section of the film as a sort of side-story within the

main one, a vignette simply serving to showcase the characters and build up intimacy before the conflict escalates again. The case is however slightly more intricate.



**Figure 1.** Ryoji shooting a can off of Ken's head (Kitano, 1993).

Initially, the beach scenes appear almost antithetical to the rest of the film: the yakuza, supposedly in the middle of a clan war, are now seen playing with paper cut dolls and engaging in childish games on the beach. Upon a closer look, this period of time spent at the beach is riddled with rather violent undertones. One game involves Ken and Ryoji shooting empty beer cans off of each other's heads (Figure 1). This quickly escalates upon Murakawa's arrival. The game becomes a variation of Russian roulette, where the men play rock-paper-scissors to determine who gets the gun pointed at him. When there is only one chamber left, Murakawa turns the gun to himself. Panic sets in as the other men attempt to talk him out of what he is about to do. Murakawa presses the trigger, and nothing happens. The gun was empty all along and the whole thing was just a joke.

There are also certain elements of foreshadowing present. During the Russian roulette, it is only Ken who gets the gun pointed at him before Murakawa. Later in the film, when Ken is fatally shot, his killer is hidden behind Murakawa, almost giving the illusion that Murakawa is the killer. Ken lifeless body drops to Murakawa's feet, akin to how he could have had the gun been loaded during the game. Yet another playtime includes the men pretending to shoot at one another with fireworks. The scene is set at night, with the fireworks going off being the only thing illuminating the space. This provides a striking similarity to one of the final scenes in the film, where Murakawa intrudes in the meeting between his boss and the rival Anan clan and attacks them. Similarly to the fireworks, the killing is only shown through flashes of light created by

Murakawa's rifle. The games have become perfect simulacra of the characters' everyday life within the crime world, perhaps fulfilling their underlying habits of violent acts, severed by the need to stay in hiding.

The beach then seems to both oppose and mirror the rest of the film. On one hand, it provides a safe space for Murakawa and his men, allowing them to revert to their childish selves, repressed by their strict lifestyles. On the other, it simultaneously reflects their true nature as criminals, going as far as seemingly predicting their fates. It exists as an agglutination of both peace and violence, using one to highlight the other. This makes it significantly difficult to classify the act: for one it could be seen as a simple device of prolonging the time before the next attack and building up tension. The aforementioned foreshadowing however proposes the possibility of simply showing us the upcoming events in a different modality: the childlike, yet violent behaviour exhibited showcases the true, subconscious nature of Murakawa and others. Accommodating the beach period into the structure results in the following schema:

Takahashi deceives Murakawa → Murakawa and his men pass time on the beach → Takahashi's hitman kills Ken → Murakawa gets revenge on Takahashi → Murakawa commits suicide

We can now see that the aforementioned change in power occurs even before Murakawa's revenge. His desire to regain authority is reflected in the games he engages in with his men, subconsciously putting them into situations simulating their untimely demise. The story is therefore repeated twice, once in the dream-like space on the beach, and then again, getting materialized into reality.

The use of modalities as a form of foreshadowing seems to be a major motive within *Sonatine*. Particularly, we can observe the case of Murakawa's suicide, and a subplot concerning the relationship between Ken and Ryoji.

#### 4.1.1. The three suicides

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The repetitive motive of Murakawa's suicidal tendencies creates an excellent example of using different modal stages. Modality here refers to the state of an actions, which can exist in virtuality as a dream or a thought or become real by being actually performed. We first see a hint of his death drive during the Russian roulette, where it is played of as a prank. Just minutes later, the audience is shown the same event. Once

again, we can see panicked Ken and Ryoji, attempting to halt the situation. This time, the shot is however done from Murakawa's perspective, having the men speak straight into the camera. It becomes obvious that the scene is a dream sequence, as the lens is hazy and no sound can be heard, apart from the moody ambience of the soundtrack. The next shot has the camera turn 180 degrees, instead showing us the men's point of view.<sup>2</sup> Murakawa is standing still with the gun to his head just like before, except this when he presses the trigger, the bullet is in, and he shoots himself. The camera stays still, fixed on his gaze as the blood trickles out his wound, before cutting off to the still alive Murakawa getting up from bed, seemingly unphased.

The film therefore presents the viewer with three variations of the same event.<sup>3</sup> Beginning with the prank, then the dream and finally the realized one. This internal storyline then includes two falsified, negated acts, cut short by their impossibility: in the case of the joke, the bullet simply does not exist inside its intended place, while the dream is entirely unreal. The last attempt combines the two, putting the bullet in its place and making the death reality.

#### 4.1.2. Ken and Ryoji

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Similarly to the games on the beach, Ken and Ryoji's relationship also seems to mirror the progression of this film. Ken clearly represents the dark Tokyo we see at the beginning of the film: he is always dressed in a grey suit, sporting a smug, broody expression. Ryoji on the other hand is a walking personification of the tropical Okinawa, bright and expressive. Ken's cold and distant behaviour mimics Murakawa's attitude to the job. At first, he opposes the journey, visibly annoyed and reluctant to engage with the Okinawans in any way.

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of perspective in *Sonatine* is further discussed in Aaron Gerow's 2007 book covering Kitano's filmography. Gerow remarks on the usage of subjective shots, where a character is shown front facing the camera, and the next shot offers a 180 degree turn to show the audience what the character is seeing. He then highlights Murakawa as being the film's spectator, bordering voyeur, as his character is included in most of these subjective shots (Gerow, 2007, p. 111).

<sup>3</sup> Film critic Casio Abe (2004) connects the three suicides to the film's three different shots of the moon: despite the film clearly showing the passage of time through a day and night cycle, the moon remains full, never changing its phase. Abe explains this as proof of atemporality of the film and the beach specifically (Abe, 2004, p. 113). Furthermore, Aaron Gerow has described the beach in *Sonatine* a sort of liminal space, where life and death can coexist (Gerow, 1999), which is possibly supported by the detail that Murakawa's suicide is not finalized until after he leaves the beach, and right before his return. At the same time, this theory can be questioned by looking at the death of Ken, who is shot on the beach. It could also be seen as an exception, as he is murdered by the hitman, an external force disrupting the established life-death balance.

The film seems to support this metaphor by juxtaposing scenes of the duo to scenes showcasing progression of the conflict: we see them bickering before the camera cuts to the office building getting blown up, and the later bar shootout is preceded in a similar manner. The last scene, before the bar attack, is particularly interesting. It is the first time where we see Ken warm up to Ryoji, or at least give him a response consisting of more than a grunt. In it, he's also changed from his traditional suit to a matching, bright red Hawaiian shirt. After the attack, the group flees the city, with Murakawa growing more distrustful of his boss. Ken's change in appearance and behaviour mimics this, signifying the men's assimilation to the Okinawan clan and simultaneous distancing from their Tokyo roots.

Just by analysing the narrative structure, we were easily able to identify opposing motives within the film. They are evident in the contrast within the clauses themselves – such as the stark difference between the beginning of the film – but also in smaller details. Objects in the film seem to come in pairs: the main character and his rivals, the city skylines and the ocean. However, even the individual members of these pairs seem to be built on internal oppositions, as is the case of the seemingly innocent games which turned out to be rather crude in nature. The next section strives to cover these oppositions in more detail, mainly focusing on the film's plentiful use of contrasting violent acts with still shots.

## 5. Usage of binary oppositions

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Upon reviewing the narrative structures of *Sonatine*, it is easy to see the prevalence of opposing motives. The basic structure of the film is built precisely on the tension between violence filled scenes, typical of the action genre, and the calm scenes, comprised of the characters leisure time. As has been discussed, it however turns out that even this initial black and white categorisation is not so simple. The seemingly peaceful times seem to be underlined with malice. Seemingly innocent games mirror acts of cruelty, and when real violence is committed, it is met with apathy and a lack of concern.

The previous section has uncovered an obvious disparity between the films first act, set in Tokyo, and the subsequent acts. *Sonatine*'s Tokyo is only ever shown in the nighttime. Upon arriving in Okinawa, we, for the first time, step outside in the daylight.



Immediately, we can identify several oppositions: night and day, the modernity and luxury of the metropolis opposed to the rundown buildings of the island, even the appearance of the Tokyo mafia compared to the Okinawan syndicate.

The oppositions are therefore heavily present within the syntagmatic chain. However, we could also easily identify them within the paradigmatic axis, as is evident in much of the film's events being acted out several times, with each scene being a different modal stage. A great example of this is the game of Russian roulette examined in the last section. When the game starts, the viewer is not yet aware that Murakawa has cheated and emptied out the gun beforehand. Therefore, every time the trigger is pressed, a paradigm of the gun going off or not is created. As a result of this, there are two stories unfolding: the events that truly happened, and the unfulfilled possibilities created in the mind of the viewer, which remain in virtuality. This then creates a rather prevalent opposition of an action and the absence of it.

The most prevalent, however, are the unexpected switches between violent acts and calm imageries. For instance, the scene where Nakamatsu, the head of the Okinawan clan, is killed shows him and his men standing side by side, unmoving as they get shot multiple times. The camera then cuts to a man walking away, before showing the dead bodies lying around, overseen by the only survivor, a young woman who has accompanied Nakamatsu before (Figure 2). The woman appears completely unscathed by the events, physically and mentally. There is no panic or sense of urgency in the scene. No one tries to fight back or chase after the hitman, making the killings appear as something that just happens, as if it was something not worth worrying over.

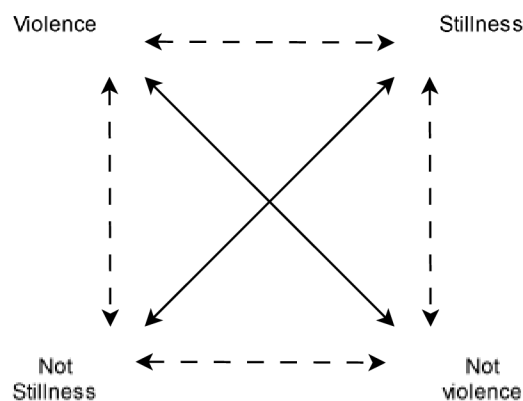


**Figure 2.** The assassination of the Nakamatsu patriarch and his men (Kitano, 1993).



We can therefore see a clear dissonance between the acts committed and reactions towards them. When watching an action movie, one might expect little remorse from the bad guys. Kitano's cinematographic style, however, seems to show us more than just a character's coldness. Murakawa, and most of the others, are not simply unbothered by their actions, they show no reaction at all. In order to analyse the usage of these polarising concepts and imageries, the semiotic square can be of great help.

For the upcoming analysis, it is ideal to sketch out a version of the semiotic square working with the binary of violence and stillness. (Figure 3). While it could be argued that stillness is not necessarily an exact opposite or an antonym of violence, the pair seems to be most prevalent within the film. It is also important to keep in mind that *not stillness* and *not violence* are simply absences of the motives, and not antonyms of them, as in *not violence* does not automatically equal stillness, and vice versa. Instead, we must see it as something that definitely lacks the quality of violence, without relating it to the presence or absence of stillness.



**Figure 3.** Diagram based on A. J. Greimas' concept of the semiotic square, displaying the opposing values "violence" and "stillness".

### 5.1. Intertextuality

Perhaps it is also useful to discuss possible intertextuality between *Sonatine* and other works of Takeshi Kitano, the film's director. Before turning to film, Kitano first rose to fame as a comedian. His beginnings in the industry are as part of a *manzai* duo. Manzai refers to a traditional Japanese form of stand-up, done in pairs. Each member of the duo represents a certain role: either the straight man (*tsukomi*) or the funny man (*boke*). The comedy is based on the boke's misunderstanding of his partner, often

repeating what the tsukkomi has said with slight changes resulting in puns and other linguistic gags. The tsukkomi then attempts to correct and reprimand the boke, resulting in the two performers interrupting one another and often even getting into physical altercations (Gerow, 2007).

Manzai has left a great impression on the shape of Japanese comedy as well as other forms of entertainment. Its influence is also rather clearly visible in Kitano's oeuvre, both in his script writing and the films' overall structure. Possibly the most obvious influence can be seen in his earlier release *Boiling Point* (1990). Though there are many similarities between this film and *Sonatine*, such as much of the plot being set in Okinawa and the sudden bursts of violence, the film seems to lack the calm serenity of the other work. The character of Uehara, played by Kitano himself, seems to find much more indulgence in his acts. Mainly the relationship between him and his girlfriend seems to mimic a comedic gag taken to the extreme: the woman is constantly ridiculed and attacked by Uehara, similarly to how an over the top boke might treat his co-performer.

The interlacing of Kitano's TV persona and his filmmaking career is an interesting phenomenon. Kitano has developed an idiosyncrasy in his films, where he tends to cast himself as the main character, just for the character to commit suicide or otherwise get killed in a conflict that he has lost before it even started. Considering that Kitano oftentimes credits his real name under the director label but uses the "Beat Takeshi" pseudonym for his acting jobs, there have been theories developing around the seeming conflict between the two personas (Abe, 2004, Gerow, 2007, Miyao, 2004). Here we see how, in Kitano's body of work, the ambiguity of the characters leads to a vast possibility for interpretation. The influence of these factors in character writing is further discussed in section 5.3.

Keeping these possible references in mind, we can move on to analyse the usage of oppositions in specific scenes as well as a set of the film's characters.

## 5.2. Oppositions within the narrative scheme

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To fully analyse the dichotomy of violence and stillness, we must first examine the film's key scenes. The goal is to see the presence of the opposing motives, identifying them in both whole sequences as well as finer details within individual shots.

A great scene to begin with happens right at the beginning of the film. The very first scene which opens the film, shows Murakawa and Ken visiting a mahjong parlour owner. There appears to be a conflict about the man running his business on the gang's turf but refusing to pay his protection fees. Back at his office, Murakawa voices a want to mess with the businessman a bit more. Moments later, the man the kidnapped by Murakawa's underlings. Murakawa meets them by the body of water, with the man already bound to a small crane, suspending him above the water surface. He is then tortured by being repeatedly dunked into the water for increasing increments of time. During all of this, Murakawa continues to chat with his lieutenant Katagiri, discussing their feelings about the upcoming Okinawa job. Matter of fact, they get so caught up in the conversation they end up losing track of time, resulting in the man being long death by the time they pull him out of the water.

Upon first look, the scene greatly illustrates the film's usage of opposition. We see a group of men stare at another man slowly getting killed, with no hard feelings showing in their face. The scene is also juxtaposed between two sequences showing Murakawa's meetings with his higherups. The torture of the parlour owner then appears as something done hurriedly between jobs, as if it was a simple matter of running errands between shifts.

There is also a peculiar distinctiveness to the way the act is executed itself. Each time the man is lowered into the water and subsequently pulled up, the film will show a close up of the rope holding him up slowly emerging up or descending down. There is almost a certain elegance created by contrasting the pale material against the night sky and the dark waves of the sea. The act, while still inherently cruel, seems to now lack any real violence. The scene therefore utilizes sombre, nearly still imageries almost as if to hide the true nature of what is really happening. The reckless death of a seemingly innocent man is then overshadowed by these mellow signs, creating a truly unique atmosphere, making the viewer briefly feel as if what he is seeing is much more noble than what it truly is.

A similar sentiment is present during the event of Ken's death. The scene is set as this: Ken and Ryoji are playing with a frisbee, first trying to shoot it in the air, before moving to a game of some sort of improvised baseball, using the frisbee and a wooden stick. Murakawa and Miyuki are sitting on the ground, in front of a wreck of a small boat. A

long shot reveals the same man as who we have seen after the murder of Nakamatsu walking up to them. Mere seconds later, we see Ken stop mid-run, only for us to see an extremely quick shot of the hitman pointing a gun straight at Ken. Ken remains standing still, unflinching as he gets shot straight in the head. Miyuki and Murakawa remain equally unmoving as Ken's body drops right at their feet, and the killer walks away freely once again. There is only one exception to the film, nearly antithetical to the expectations built thus far. Upon spotting the armed man, Ryoji immediately turn back and runs away. This instance makes Ryoji a truly unique character, as he is perhaps the only one to show any true reaction to the brutal things unfolding in front of him.

This scene shares many similarities and parallels with the one described beforehand. The obvious ones being the slowness of the killings, with Ken standing still for an uncomfortably long amount of time before getting shot, and the lack of reactions from the onlookers. But the overall atmosphere feels very different. While the death of the mahjong parlour owner was obscured by the dark night skies, Ken's death happens in stark daylight. The sun and the bright colours of the nature in the background seem to almost bring out the vulgarity of the crime. Every detail of the crime is greatly illuminated, allowing us to see just how brutal it is.

The violence also comes in much more unexpectedly. The men are in the middle of a game, with no way to defend themselves as they have wasted all of their bullets shooting at the frisbee. The combination of the bright beach with the men's childish behaviour then creates an extremely vulnerable atmosphere. When the killer interrupts it, it feels much more pungent than what we have seen before. Unlike the business owner's death, which is slow and drawn out, the hitman comes and goes within a mere minute, leaving little to no time to truly react and take in the situation.

We can now see how the combination of similar motives can create entirely different meanings. In both cases, we can identify significant uses of calm elements: the blinding darkness and silence of the night in the first scene, and the unmoving serene nature of the Okinawan tropics in the second scene. The violent acts committed in both scenes are also rather similar. The drowned man is moved with extreme slowness, and Ken's death is similarly delayed, with him and the hitman staring at one another for up to ten seconds before the bullet is fired. Both deaths however carry completely different connotations, which are mainly created by the preceding and following scenes. The

drowning is portrayed as an irrelevant event, squeezed in-between Murakawa's meetings, as if to illustrate the rawness of his livelihood. On the other hand, Ken's death comes in a time where we see him relaxed and having fun, unlike ever before.

This analysis perfectly illustrates why we need to pay attention to individual signs as well as their surroundings. If we were to isolate these scenes, they would appear almost identical: a blank faced group of people overseeing a dead body. The context in which these events happen however completely changes how the viewer should feel.

The combinations of seemingly contradictory motives are also further evident in the characters themselves. The next section shall strive to describe them in greater detail, further using the semiotic square to categorise them.

### 5.3. Oppositions between characters

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*Sonatine*'s characters are perhaps the place where Kitano's previously discussed intertextuality shines the most. The main characters frequently come in pairs, with dynamic relationships reminiscent of those which might have been seen in Kitano's own comedy routines.

The influences of manzai are perhaps most evident in the relationship between Ken and Ryoji. Since arriving in Okinawa, all the way until Ken's death, the two are almost never seen apart. Much of their shared scenes end up evolving into an argument: upon first meeting, we are shown several short scenes including Ryoji asking Ken whether he is familiar with certain people in Tokyo, including a member of a biker gang and other shady individuals. Ken is initially ignorant of his question, before reprimanding him about not having any normal friends. The irony of Ken, who we up until now only ever see together with the cold Murakawa, complaining about another yakuza only having other criminal as friends is left unnoticed by Ryoji.



**Figure 4.** Ken (left) and Ryoji (right) sitting side by side (Kitano, 1993).

This contrast between the character is also quite evident in their looks. Approximately the first third of the film shows Ken dressed in a grey suit. It appears to mirror the dark gloominess of both Tokyo and the Okinawan city, making Ken almost blend into the background at times. Ryoji on the other hand, sports a light blue T-shirt (Figure 4). The shirt appears to oppose Ken's clothing in two ways: the garment is much more causal than the suit, seemingly pointing to Ryoji's easy-going personality. In contrast to Ken, he appears much more childish and immature, which is only supported by his acts. The second opposition can be found in the colour: the light blue of the fabric nearly perfectly mirrors the clear skies and ocean waves to be seen later at the beach.

As has been established before, Ken and Ryoji also seem to work as an embodiment of the film's greater narrative. The overall opposition between the Tokyo gangsters and the Okinawans can however be seen in nearly every character as well. When the plot first moves to Okinawa, the first scene we see is of a local clan member taking drugs in the back of the bus which the boss Uechi has rented out for the group. The rest of the men then wait to enter as Uechi reprimands the narcotics user. The very first impression of the Okinawans we are given is then rather negative, only clearing up with time.

Referring back to the semiotic square, we can possibly see Ken and Ryoji as being opposites on the stillness axis. At least within the context of their relationship, Ken is obviously much more stoic, giving little to no reactions. We can therefore assign him into the stillness category. Ryoji on the other hand is slightly more nuanced. While his acts are at times sporadic, it simultaneously cannot be entirely correct to assign him the violence category. Unlike certain other characters, there is never any crudeness in his

acts: he is absent from nearly every action scene within the film, only ever participating in the games the men play by the beach. His character seems to even show a sort of aversion to violence, unlike his peers: in the scene where Ken is fatally shot, Ryoji is the only person that runs away while the rest of the group watches on without any reaction. His pure childishness then puts him in a unique spot where he seems to lack characteristics of both members of the first-generation opposition. He is neither violent, nor is he ever still.

A similar opposition can also be found in the relationship of the main character Murakawa and Miyuki, seemingly the only woman in the film. The contrast between the pair however seems to be much more harmonic, bringing them together rather than setting them as opposites of one another. Despite being mostly silent, Murakawa appears much more lively when talking with Miyuki. There is however a clear difference in their behaviour, mainly in relations to violence.<sup>4</sup>

Despite her little screen time, the character of Miyuki is rather complex. She is first introduced roughly forty minutes into the movie, in a scene following Murakawa's suicide dream. We see her at night on the beach, being assaulted by a man she later refers to as her husband. Murakawa, seemingly out of convenience rather than empathy, shoots the man dead and leaves her to herself. Miyuki however continues to show up unannouncedly, and her and Murakawa seem to grow closer, despite little words or affection being shared between the couple.

Miyuki first being introduced as a victim of arguably one of the most heinous crimes possible could automatically put her in the position of *not violence* within the square. Her siding with Murakawa, who shows little to no remorse to her assault and other acts of violence, however, seems to contradict this. She also appears fascinated with him and his acts, frequently asking about his experience with crime and murders. Miyuki's portrayal inherently makes her a walking contradiction. She never actively participates in any violent acts, not even by joining any of the crude games the men play. Apart from asking to shoot Murakawa's gun once, her behaviour is rather peaceful. Yet she

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<sup>4</sup> Casio Abe (2004) connects the pair of Miyuki and Murakawa to the binary opposition of life and death, which he seems to deem as the most integral motive of the film. Abe recalls a scene where the couple is caught in a sudden rainfall. While Miyuki's soaked shirt reveals the outline of her healthy, young body, Murakawa's tattoos, which Abe earlier refers to as a "contraction of life" (Abe, 2004, p. 30), peak through in the same way. Miyuki then can be seen as a sign of healthiness and life, contrasted to Murakawa's unnatural otherness, antithetical to liveliness.

remains unflinching when seeing Murakawa kill her rapist and sticks by him with almost a childish innocence and cheerfulness for the rest of the film, despite seeing the dangers surrounding the gang. It could be said that she lives through him, her violent thoughts being realised through his actions.



**Figure 5.** A medium shot of Murakawa (left) and Miyuki (right) sitting on the ground next to one another (Kitano, 1993).

Miyuki can be described as almost bouncing between all the categories. She is not violent physically, yet she has a morbid curiosity regarding violence. She can also be seen as rather still, never actively taking part in anything, yet she is also likely the most energetic among the cast. Similarly to Ryoji, though she is not averted to it as he is, her violence stays purely virtual. The same can be said about her movement: though she is generally cheerful, she remains a spectator for much of the film. For these reasons, it only makes sense to place within *not violence* combined with *stillness*.

Finally, Murakawa is just as polarising. His character is without a doubt violent. He is constantly inflicting pain upon someone, be it with real harm as well as through the pranks he pulls on others. Matter of fact, his cruelty does not stop with getting his revenge and killing everyone who did him wrong, ultimately driving him to suicide at the end of the film. However, one can hardly describe his behaviour as bloodthirsty. Murakawa does not take pleasure in his acts. He never seems to lament over them either. It looks like there is an absolute dissociation between him and his doings, leaving him to simply not react at all. When compared to Miyuki, one can very clearly see the opposition between them: she is curious about violence, yet does not act upon it, while



Murakawa does commit it, but does not have any sentiment towards the acts. Murakawa is therefore an obvious amalgamation of both *violence* and *stillness*.

The results of the character analysis are captured in Table 1. We can see that with the exception of Ken, all analysed character can only be described as composites of two terms. Ryoji, being characterised by the absence of both terms, is the result of a neutral relation, while Murakawa's contrariness results in a complex relationship. Miyuki is then the only one based in a complementary relation, formed by the absence of *violence* and presence of *stillness*.

	<b>Violence</b>	<b>Stillness</b>	<b>Not violence</b>	<b>Not stillness</b>
<b>Ken</b>	-	+	-	-
<b>Ryoji</b>	-	-	+	+
<b>Miyuki</b>	-	+	+	-
<b>Murakawa</b>	+	+	-	-

**Table 1.** Terms of the semiotic square as they are present in certain characters of *Sonatine*.

Almost all characters also seem to fall under *stillness*. This is most evident in the film's dispassionate voyeurism, where characters remain deadpanned no matter the carnage that happens around them. This characteristic is only lacking in Ryoji, who appears to be the only one to retain his emotions. Perhaps most surprising, however, might be the lack of characters who can be placed under the term *violence*. Despite previously establishing that violence is a fundamental motive of the film – mainly evident in its underlying presence even in seemingly innocent moments of play – it appears now that most characters might not be so violent after all.<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

The focus of the thesis was exploring the usage of binary oppositions in Takeshi Kitano's fourth film *Sonatine*. Paying special attention to the opposing pair of violence and stillness, the goal was to find the presence of these motives in both the narrative

<sup>5</sup> Of course, this conclusion is drawn only on the basis of four characters. The results could possibly be much different have the films "villains", such as Takahashi or the fisherman/hitman, been taking into account. Much of the acts of these characters is however committed of camera, or there simply is not enough content to fully analyse their behaviour. For these reasons, the exploration only includes the four main characters.

structure as well as more visual aspects. The final section concluded with an analysis of the film's four main characters, Murakawa, Miyuki, Ken and Ryoji. Using the semiotic square, we have explored the characters' alignments based on their behaviour as well as their relationship to one another.

The analysis has revealed that despite the opposition appearing rather black and white at first, things are much more complex in reality. Nearly every aspect of the film seems to actually be an amalgamation of the binary terms, rather than belonging to only one. For instance, an integral motive of the film is the beach setting. At first sight, the sea appears to be antithetical to the rest of the film: it is much more brighter than the suffocating streets of Tokyo, and the men spend their time there playing childish games, which seems to be the exact opposite of their daily lives as crime syndicate members. As we have found out, the games however appear to very closely mimic the violent acts they have or are about to commit. This is most evident in the fate of the main character, Murakawa, who's falsified game of Russian roulette somewhat indirectly spirals into a real suicide.

Analysing two exemplary scenes from the film has also proved the importance of looking at objects both in isolation and in relation to one another. The two scenes, a death of a business committed almost by accident by Murakawa, and the assassination of Ken appear to follow nearly identical structures when looked at isolated. Both deaths are slow, filmed with long, unmoving shots. The aftermaths are also met with little to no reaction from both the perpetrators and onlookers: in both cases, the killer walks away free in the end. However, when we take in the context of the preceding scenes, things change drastically. Both scenes therefore utilise very similar editing and motives, just to portray a completely different meaning in the end, when we see them together with the rest of the film.

The blurriness of the lines between the binaries is also supported by the character analysis. Apart from one character, everyone was rather difficult to categorise. Many characters seem to be built precisely on being contradictory, as is the case for Murakawa, who is without a doubt violent, yet his coolness and indifference inherently places him into the category of stillness as well.

The fixation on binary opposition appears to have perhaps inadvertently created a shortcoming in the methodology. While the usage of the semiotic square appeared ideal

at first, it quickly became obvious that the problem is more complex than accounted for. With many characters being fit for any category, perhaps using a sort of scale would be more suitable. Especially in cases such as that of Miyuki, who appears fascinated with violence, but does not act upon it, making her therefore violent in virtuality but not violent in reality. The semiotic square does not seem to be the most suitable for such situations.

Miyuki being the sole woman of the film, or at least the only one significant enough to earn more than one scene, also proposes the question of gender in *Sonatine* as well as the rest of Kitano's filmography. Women seem to play a small, yet significant role in his works, but remain fairly unexplored. Despite already existing mentions of the problems (Karatsu, 2013, Redmond, 2013), a feminist reading of the works might be valuable, especially with the rather common motive of sexual violence, present not only in *Sonatine*, but also in Kitano's other films such as *Violent Cop* (1989) or *Boiling Point* (1990).

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