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# Introducing Students to the Cinematic Art of Akira Kurosawa and Hayao Miyazaki

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Following Donald Richie's observation that the "Japanese film is richest in mood or atmosphere, in presenting characters in their own surroundings," I introduce undergraduate students to the cinematic art of Akira Kurosawa and Hayao Miyazaki emphasizing each director's use of *mise-en-scène* or the way in which the elements of the scene are arranged. For the purposes of the two courses (ASIA 4490/FILM 3220 and HONORS 4490: The Films of Kurosawa and Miyazaki), *mise-en-scène* was used strictly in reference "to the elements within a scene" or sequence of scenes "which places greater emphasis on pictorial values within a shot" or sequence of shots (Beaver, 2007, pp. 160-161). In both semesters students viewed and analyzed representative films from both directors. Francois Truffaut's conception of *auteur*ship is used in order for students to understand each director's creative authority. In conjunction with Bela Belazs's seminal essay "Visible Man," students identified both directors' presentation of embodiment in each film studied. Since both courses took place in conjunction with Kennesaw State University's Year of Japan program, students also studied both directors in terms of their respective inclusion of elements of traditional and modern Japanese culture particularly the aesthetics of *mono no aware* and the ethos of *yasashisa*. Finally, students also studied the ways in which Kurosawa and Miyazaki exemplify international cinema.

*If the American film is strongest in action, and if the European film is strongest in character, the Japanese film is richest in mood or atmosphere, in presenting characters in their own surroundings.*

--Donald Richie, *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* (1971)

The significance of Richie's above statement for Japanese cinema cannot be overstated because it illuminates not only a unique strength of Japanese cinema generally but also an important link between early forms of Japanese cinema and the modern to contemporary cinematic art of both Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) and Hayao Miyazaki (1941-). Yet, at the same time, Richie's observation about the unique characteristic and contribution of Japanese cinema highlights important differences between early forms of Japanese cinema—1930s and 1940s—and the works of both Akira Kurosawa, who directed films from 1943-1993, and Hayao Miyazaki who has been directing films since 1979. For both Kurosawa's live action cinema and Miyazaki's animation, the above continuities and discontinuities with early Japanese cinemas are a useful context for students when analyzing each director's film style. Connecting both directors with the older Japanese film styles allows students to gain a deeper appreciation for Japanese film history as well as the larger Japanese cultural context in both Kurosawa's and Miyazaki's cinematic art.

One of the main characteristics of early Japanese cinemas was its static use of the camera in long frontal shots thereby making the viewer a spectator of a staged performance. Often, entire scenes were shot in one long take revealing the actors in full length. For Kurosawa, the use of the long frontal shot, but with a much shorter duration, shows up in some of his samurai films such as *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Kagemusha* (1980), and *Ran* (1985). Furthermore, one of the things that Kurosawa is most known for is his use of multiple cameras which broke with the “traditional shot-by-shot method” (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 196). Multiple cameras allowed him not only to shoot from multiple angles but also allowed him in the editing process to combine camera shots in order to vary the pace of the action as well as to repeat scenes in familiar ways. Influenced by the 1920s’ emphasis on free and realistic movement, Kurosawa reduced his use of the long frontal shot often by combining it with over-the-shoulder shots, a technique he uses masterfully in the testimony scenes in *Rashomon* (1952). Going beyond the front long shot he utilized modernist filmmaking techniques such as superimposition, montage, jump cuts, wipes, and other interesting forms of transition.

Another significant break with early Japanese filmmaking was Kurosawa’s use of structure. Kurosawa rejected the Kabuki influence on the structure of early Japanese films and instead utilized the structures of both the European symphony and traditional Japanese Noh drama. He writes in *Something Like an Autobiography* that,

[a] good structure is that of the symphony, with its three or four movements and differing tempos. Or one can use the Noh play with its three-part structure: jo (introduction), ha (destruction) and kyu (haste). If you devote yourself fully to Noh and gain something good from this, it will emerge naturally in your films. The Noh is a truly unique form that exists nowhere else in the world. I think the Kabuki, which imitates it, is a sterile flower. (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 193)

Kurosawa’s expressionistic interpretation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, *Ran* (1985), is a prime example of Kurosawa’s use of the Noh structure. The formality of the Noh structure allows Kurosawa to establish a structural counterpoint between the chaos of the kingdom wracked by civil war and the “stately, formal, hieratic” acting (Richie, 1996, p. 217).

He also adopted an emphasis on everyday life situations and characters, particularly of the lower and middle classes popular in Japanese filmmaking during the 1930s. In part, this concern of depicting life as it is can be linked to Kurosawa’s realist aesthetic. In realist cinema the primary emphasis is on “creating a semblance of actuality” in which “the subject [interacts] with the surrounding environment” (Beaver, 2007, p. 217). *Seven Samurai* (1954) exemplifies the focus on everyday life of the lower class as part of what Richie refers to as “immaculate realism” (Richie, 1998, p. 97). In the film Kurosawa shows us the rural poor of the farming village not as stock characters but as human beings who are capable of treacherous deeds and heroism, and who are capable of pitiful despair and light-hearted joy. For me the highlight of his depiction of the villagers comes in the last sequence of scenes in which the entire village participates in rice-planting. In his *Everyday Life in Traditional Japan*, Charles J. Dunn (1967) explains that rice planting,

was one of the great occasions of the year. It was organized as a communal operation, with persons from a group of farms co-operating. The actual planters were usually young women, partly perhaps because of their dexterity, but mainly from a traditional feeling that

their potential fertility as child-bearers would transfer itself to the rice . . . . An important duty of the owner of the field was the provision of food, and pictures of rice planting nearly always include a young girl loaded with trays and carrying liquid refreshment. The work is very arduous, done with bent backs and requiring speed, rhythm, and endurance, in many places songs were sung accompanied by music and dancing on the embankments. (Dunn, 19672 pp. 49-50)

This is exactly what Kurosawa shows us: not a formulaic ending but a realistic portrayal of the life of a farming community.

For Hayao Miyazaki, early Japanese filmmaking is adapted in terms of both pacing and his signature long shots of both architecture and landscape. This is apparent in his first animated feature in which he is both writer and director *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979) and in a later film such as *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). For Miyazaki, the influence of 1920s Japanese filmmaking is clearly visible not only in his rightly famous detailed drawings but also in his emphasis on everyday life albeit in often fantastic contexts. It is this latter difference from early Japanese film making that marks anime film in general and Miyazaki's cinematic animation in particular. I will further develop Miyazaki's emphasis on everyday life albeit in fantastic contexts later in the essay.

The import of Richie's insight into Japanese cinema points away from *mise-en-scène's* use to elicit a specific mood or compose a particular atmosphere and toward the larger context of Japanese culture itself. Richie's observation that "the Japanese film is richest in mood or atmosphere" is an oblique reference, intended or unintended, to significant elements of both Japanese social comportment of individuals and groups as well as traditional Japanese aesthetics include citation here (Richie, 1971). The deferential dimensions of traditional Japanese social comportment—non-ostentatious display, sober and respectful interaction, intimacy within the social group, and Confucian social hierarchy—are often so subtle as to be almost identical, in their interplay, to "mood or atmosphere." In traditional Japanese aesthetics, there is an emphasis on ephemerality, transience, and decay. In his book length study of Miyazaki's anime art, Dani Cavallaro (2006) observes that Miyazaki's style is pervaded by the "distinctively Japanese sensitivity to things, their beauty and the sadness of their passing away, encapsulated by the principle of *mono no aware*" (p. 8).

The importance of the aesthetic principle of *mono no aware* for both Kurosawa and Miyazaki cannot be overstated especially when considering Richie's declaration that "the Japanese film is richest in mood or atmosphere, in presenting characters in their own surroundings." (Richie, 1971) One might just as easily say that it is the long-standing aesthetic tradition of *mono no aware* that makes Japanese film unique. For the Japanese, the experience of *mono no aware* can indicate "the 'ahness' of things" or even characterizing things as either "'pleasant' or 'interesting'" (De Bary, 1995, p. 44). Nara era sources such as the *Man'yōshū* and the later Heian classic *The Tale of Genji* both suggest that *aware* is intimately linked with the human emotional response to natural phenomena: "the melancholy calls of birds and beasts" or "seeing the spring rain" (De Bary, 1995, p. 44). Later developments of the idea included an acute sensitivity to "sights and sounds" particularly the object's "beauty and its perishability" (De Bary, 1995, p. 44). H. Paul Varley (1995) in his appraisal of the contemporary writer Yasunari Kawabata highlights that author's participation in an "enduring Japanese tradition of sad beauty that is also connoted by *mono no aware*" (p. 307). One thread running through the aesthetic history of

*mono no aware* is the direct experience of self and nature in an aesthetic experience of identification. This identification is not a loss of self (*muga*), but is rather a deep moment of empathy tinged with sadness at the fragile beauty of transience whereby one feels one's way into the ephemerality of life in its passing away, a bittersweet experience that resembles nostalgia, an idea I will return to in a brief discussion of Miyazaki's film *Porco Rosso*.

### Sources: Films and/as Texts

The primary objective of both courses was to have students study, discuss, present, and write about selected films from both directors according to literary filmic terminology and techniques and elements of Japanese culture. In this way, students would begin to become conversant in the elements of pre-modern, traditional, modern, and contemporary Japanese culture as portrayed in the films. All of these eras in Japanese history are important to both directors. For Kurosawa, various aspects of Japanese culture range from the anti-feudalism remarks in *Drunken Angel* (1948), the legal formalities in *Rashomon* (1950), and the rice planting ceremony portrayed in the closing sequence of *Seven Samurai* (1954) to the incorporation of a baseball game in *Stray Dog* (1949) and current environmental concerns in *Dersu Uzala* (1975). For Miyazaki, elements of Japan's past and present often play important roles in his films, from the depictions of Master Yupa's traditional warrior ethos in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and the direct references to Shinto in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) to current environmental problems both in Japan and world-wide in films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001).

I emphasized close reading of both literary and cinematic elements for a strong filmic interpretation of each director's use of *mise-en-scene* and film literacy. Film literacy, as part of a larger project of cultural aesthetics, involves being able to speak and write knowledgeably about *what* a film says and *how* it says it; however, in order for students to perform these intertwining tasks well they must develop relative fluency in both literary and film terminology. Developing film literacy enables one not only to widen and broaden aesthetic delight in film viewing but also allows one to participate in a wider social conversation about film and its cultural roles. The core concepts in literary analysis suitable for film interpretation that I included but did not limit students to were setting (time and space), character, point of view, and theme. The core topics in film analysis that I included but did not limit students to include: uses of the camera with types of shots, composition, diegesis, film types, lighting, narrative and plotting concepts, optical effects, sound, and transitions. To accomplish this goal I cannot stress enough how important it is for students to have access to a film dictionary.

#### *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*

Despite having to endure critical claims that his films were not Japanese enough even though Kurosawa always maintained that "he made films only for Japanese, for young Japanese," he remains one of the great filmmakers of the 20th century (Richie, 1996, p. 245). Having made 31 major motion pictures it was no easy task to select eight (fall semester) and seven (spring semester) films for study. In retrospect, Kurosawa is so

formidable an auteur that he deserves a semester to himself so varied and impressive is his filmography. Nevertheless, I aimed for as representative a sampling as possible that included both well-known and lesser known films. I write this as a non-Japanese professor teaching non-Japanese students because in Japan he was and is still very well known: “[t]he twelve films that Kurosawa made between 1950 and 1965 were all box-office successes in Japan” (Kurosawa, 1983, p. vi). The only difference in the films selected for the fall semester and those selected for the spring semester is that after hearing Dr. Kerim Yasar’s excellent presentation “The Body in the Films of Akira Kurosawa” for the Year of Japan on November 14, 2013, added *High and Low* (1963) replacing *Stray Dog* (1949), which students viewed in the fall semester’s class, a decision I later regretted given *Stray Dog*’s use of humor and assorted wipes. Below is the full list, both fall and spring semesters, of films students viewed:

*Drunken Angel*  
*Stray Dog* (fall only)  
*Rashomon*  
*Ikiru*  
*Seven Samurai*  
*High and Low* (spring only)  
*Dersu Uzala* (fall only)  
*Ran*  
*Rhapsody in August*

In addition to having the students use a film dictionary, I required two texts for the section on Kurosawa: Kurosawa’s own *Something Like an Autobiography* (1983) and Donald Richie’s comprehensive *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1996). The former gave students an intimate glimpse of this international film icon while the latter offered both overviews of each of the 31 films as well as Ritchie’s insightful interpretations of Kurosawa’s films. Furthermore, Richie often cites other film critics to give each essay a strong critical depth and range of views.

### ***The Films of Hayao Miyazaki***

The choice of films from Miyazaki’s corpus of which he is both writer and director was made easier by the fact that as both writer and director Miyazaki has made far fewer films than Kurosawa. *The Wind Rises* (2013) wasn’t released in American theaters until 2014 and so I couldn’t use it fall semester. I wanted to include this film in class discussion, but only one of the students and I saw the film during the semester. I still had to get the number of films down to eight; hence, I chose the following:

*Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro*  
*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*  
*My Neighbor Totoro*  
*Kiki’s Delivery Service*  
*Porco Rosso*  
*Princess Mononoke*

*Spirited Away*  
*Howl's Moving Castle*

As with the section on Kurosawa I also had the students acquire Miyazaki's prose collection *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. Miyazaki's writings collected in *Starting Point* cover a large variety of genres including interviews, reviews of other people's works, production notes, speeches, and essays. Having the students read Miyazaki's own words would give them a glimpse of his viewpoints on different aspects of filmmaking and the film industry, his own film projects, Japanese culture, people with whom he has worked and whose work he encountered, and his intentions as an artist. I highlighted Miyazaki's writings about his own work because they offer direct statements on his own motivations as a filmmaker. The texts collected in *Starting Point* reveal that Miyazaki's main intentions are to make films that present the reality of life for Japanese kids; offer compelling views on how to live, "the nature of families [and] the meaning of humanity;" and demonstrate a sincere interest in people (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 108). In his short essay written on October 12, 1993, Miyazaki asks and responds to his own question, "[i]n this new era, what sort of films should we make? Let me suggest that we must return to the essence of what being alive means" (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 269). It could be said that this statement summarizes Miyazaki's intentions for the films he makes.

Dani Cavallaro's excellent exposition and critique of Miyazaki's work *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki* was chosen for its excellent critiques of all of the films we watched. His book offers valuable information on the specific features of anime that make it different from interpreting and communicating one's ideas about live action cinema. Unlike *Starting Point* (1996), the book covers all of the films the students viewed. Incidentally, while *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki* is not the only single-authored text on Miyazaki's work, both Helen McCarthy (1999) and Jeremy Robinson (2012) have authored fine studies. I chose Cavallaro's text for its extensive and accessible commentary. There are some strong journal articles out there as well as book chapters, but I found that none of them were as strong and succinct and student-friendly as Cavallaro's book.

## Auteurship

In the above section I briefly gave some reasons for choosing the films used in class, but it may occur to some to ask why when both directors made films based upon specific works of Japanese and non-Japanese literature I did not include a section in the course for the students to analyze each director's use of the literature. In the case of Kurosawa, he made use of plays by Shakespeare and novels by European authors as well as works of Japanese modernist literature. Most well-known are *The Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985), which were based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, respectively. Of the Japanese works used by Kurosawa, the most well-known are the two short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927) "Rashomon" and "In a Bamboo Grove," which formed the basis of *Rashomon* (1950). In the case of Miyazaki, some of his films were based on Japanese as well as non-Japanese children's literature. An example of the former is *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which was based on his own manga of the same name and of the latter is his use of Diana Wynne Jones' (1934-2011) novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) for Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). My response to the above question,

then, is three-fold: I was more interested in having the students learn about the directors, their respective films, and each director's use of traditional, modern, and contemporary Japanese culture in the films rather than focusing on the larger question of the film's relationship to their correlative literary texts. Furthermore, the question of a director's use of a pre-existing text is a huge and important topic in itself and as such deserves to be the main focus of its own course.

The question of a film's relation to its antecedent text is a concern of Francois Truffaut (1932-1984) in his influential essay "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (1954). Thus, the question has a direct bearing on the concept of an auteur as Truffaut and others associated with the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* theorized it for both film criticism and a new conception of the director as auteur. Truffaut's 1954 essay in *Cahiers du Cinema* was an important piece influencing the development of contemporary French and international cinema and a key critical element of the French New Wave during the late 1950s and into the 1960s. In it, Truffaut (1954) argues for an "auteur's cinema" to replace two earlier tendencies in French Cinema: "psychological realism" and "poetic realism," the former replacing the latter during and after World War II (Truffaut, 1954, para. 3-5). These two tendencies, according to Truffaut, constitutes the "Tradition of Quality" whose cinematic emphasis lies in both fidelity to the written scenario and the director's talent in simply "adding pictures to it" (Truffaut, 1954, para. 78). Alternatively, "Auteur's cinema" is characterized by the director's signature or authorial uniqueness in which creative control and directorial authority are also understood to be the critical basis for appraising an auteur's work. For Truffaut and the others who came together at *Cahiers*, "[a] man of the cinema" is first and foremost one who embodies "the virtue of always remaining, in his films, honest with himself" (Truffaut, 1954, para. 19). This means, among other things, that he takes his position as writer and director seriously and thereby doesn't shy away from the realities of existence. Truffaut (1954) argues, "[T]hey are auteurs who often write their dialogue and some of them themselves invent the stories they direct" (para. 66).

When the focus of much academic/critical film studies has shifted to analyses of "film production and reception in social, cultural, economic, industrial, and historical contexts"<sup>1</sup> one might wonder why I chose to include it as a major aspect of the course. Two of the learning outcomes that I identified for the course focused on students being able to identify the salient features of each director's work and the cultural and aesthetic influences on each man's respective works. Thus, auteur theory is a useful device in showing how both Kurosawa and Miyazaki's respective films are each uniquely their own within the larger context of Japanese cultural history. Also, as an introductory survey course I started out assuming that students needed the basics of viewing and writing about film—as it turned out, only two out of 39 students in both sections had taken a film course. Furthermore, in an introductory course I think that auteur theory can be fruitfully utilized in helping students recognize a particular director's style. This could serve them well if they choose to take another film course by having background knowledge upon which to interpret and critique another director's style.

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<sup>1</sup> This comment was made by a reviewer of this essay and I found it well-stated and so use it as it was communicated in the reviewer's report.



### *Akira Kurosawa as Auteur*

Kurosawa has made an oft quoted declaration that, “There is nothing that says more about its creator than the work itself” (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 189). As an auteur, Kurosawa meets Truffaut’s dual criteria of being both writer and director and goes a step further by being intimately involved in the post-production editing process. One known case in which he left the editing to someone else was his creative interpretation of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s (1821-1881) novel *The Idiot* (1951). In many instances Kurosawa’s attention to the details of each scene led him to take longer in the editing process than he took in shooting the film. Thus, his direct participation through his creative control in each stage of a film’s production is an additional sign of Kurosawa’s auteurship. Furthermore, if a sign of a director’s auteurship is his “virtue of always remaining, in his films, honest with himself,” then Kurosawa is an auteur (Truffaut, 2014, para.19). In the “Epilogue” to *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa (1983) states that after having composed his autobiography he remains doubtful that he has “managed to achieve real honesty about myself in its pages” and so if someone really wants to know who he is, wants to uncover his true self, then he advises one to “...look for me in the characters in the films I made after *Rashomon*” (p. 188-189).

Existential self-transparency in one’s chosen medium of art reveals further and deeper characteristics and themes not only of Kurosawa as auteur but also his cinematic modernism. Truffaut insists that an auteur is someone who does not shy away from the darker aspects of existence. In one film after the next Kurosawa maintained a strict focus on and preoccupation with stark reality. For Kurosawa, this meant that he challenged many of the long-standing shibboleths of both the pre-modern and modern worlds: the emphasis on metaphysical certainty as well as an ever-increasing reliance and dependence upon the efficacy of techno/instrumentalist-rationality. Kurosawa emphasized the modernist epistemology of perspectivalism and contextualism thereby allowing him to highlight both the ambiguity and precariousness of the human condition. An early film example is *Stray Dog* (1949) in which the novice detective Murakami played by Toshiro Mifune, loses his gun to a pickpocket and must find and retrieve it before it’s used in criminal activity. In order to accomplish this, however, he must journey into the dark environs and minds of thieves, gangsters and, subsequently, the murderer himself who all populate the seedy underworld of downtown Tokyo. As Richie has noted, Murakami is on a journey in which he “harrows hell and endures purgatory” (Richie, 1996, p. 58). In other words, he must leave behind the rational world of law and order, civility and transparency and enter a non-rational reality taking on other perspectives in various contexts in order to know and locate the man who has his pistol. Key to showing us Murakami’s dilemma in his quest is his use of visual techniques such as montage and superimposition which heighten the feelings of dislocation and alienation.

Kurosawa’s auteurship extends to his film techniques including his use of “the counterpoint between sound and image” rather than the conventional use of sound in heightening emotion in a scene or sequence of scenes (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 163). In *Something Like an Autobiography* Kurosawa (1983) writes about collaborating with composer Fumio Hayasaka in developing the sound-image counterpoint in a scene in *Drunken Angel* (1948):

The day of the actual dubbing we performed our experiment. From a loudspeaker the sound of “The Cuckoo Waltz” flooded over the sorry figure of the gangster Mifune as he walked. Backed by this light music, the gangster’s dark thoughts leaped to the screen with amazing force. Hayasaka looked at me and smiled happily. (p. 163)

The emphasis on a creative tension between sound and image is what Kurosawa refers to as his “pet theory,” his belief “that cinematic strength derives from the multiplier effect of sound and visual image being brought together” (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 107).

It is his use of the camera, however, that is acknowledged as Kurosawa’s premier area of technical genius. While much has been made about his use of multiple cameras, the fact is that he used this technique sparingly even in action films such as the internationally renowned *Seven Samurai* (1954) and his impeccable and equally acclaimed *Yojimbo* (1961). What I have emphasized in class as marking Kurosawa’s signature is his use of the camera rather than focusing on the number of cameras used. There are many distinctive uses of the camera including his surrealistic use of superimposition, “an optical technique in which two or more shots appear within the same frame, one on top of the other,” as in *Drunken Angel* (1948). Furthermore, Kurosawa expertly employed the alternating use of long, medium, and short shots to establish pacing. A now-famous example of this is in *Rashomon* (1950) during the much lauded forest scene at the beginning of the film when the woodcutter played by Takashi Shimura moves toward and away from the body of the story’s victim.

### ***Hayao Miyazaki as Auteur***

As both writer and director of the films chosen for my courses, Hayao Miyazaki also embodies Truffaut’s conception of an auteur. Internationally, Miyazaki is known as an auteur for re-defining the standards of contemporary animation. He has been reluctant in allowing his works to be dominated by the latest technologies of both digital and computer graphics enhancement and instead keeps to hand-drawn storyboards thereby effectively resisting over technologizing of visual art. Even though he has used these latest techniques in both *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), he has done so sparingly allowing the greater part of each film to be shot from hand-drawn storyboards. Dani Cavallaro explains that “[a]lthough at times Studio Ghibli uses 3D digital objects such as wiremesh frames, it essentially follows the former modality [the two-dimensionality of hand-drawn images], being devoted to the preservation of an overall look that fosters the drawn and the painterly over the sculptural” (Cavallaro, 2006, pp. 25-26). So, in updating Truffaut’s conception of auteur we might add selective use of new techniques according to the director’s personal vision.

Like Kurosawa, Miyazaki’s auteurship emphasizes his own artistic and didactic vision. As Truffaut, Jean Renoir (1894-1979), Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930), and other French directors of the internationally influential French New Wave resisted the “Tradition of Quality” in the 1950s and 1960s, so have Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli (est. 1985) resisted the commercially and technologically driven animation industry epitomized by the Disney Corporation. Indeed, Miyazaki’s integrity as an auteur is, as Truffaut implored, significantly informed by “the virtue of always remaining, in his films, honest with himself” (Truffaut, 1954, para. 19). Cavallaro (2006) has observed that the ethical

dimension of Miyazaki's cinema "is akin to the one favored by Akira Kurosawa" insofar as Miyazaki's "films never descend to the level of populist rhetoric, being in fact fearlessly explicit in their representation of evil and of its seductive powers (p. 12). Miyazaki's intentions in the stories he writes demonstrates his commitment to his own vision: the intention to make films that are a presentation of the deep tradition of Japanese human values indicated by the term *Yasashisa*, specifically the virtues of kindness, compassion, and sensitivity.

While apparently anthropocentric, for Miyazaki these values are tri-extensive being directed toward one's own humanity, other human beings, and the natural world. Nausicaa is the preeminent character in Miyazaki's corpus who exemplifies and embodies *yasashisa*. In *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), both Miyazaki's manga and the film, Nausicaa fights tirelessly and eventually sacrifices her own life in order to restore relational harmony between human beings and the natural world. The character of Nausicaa demonstrates another way by which Miyazaki's values, intentions, and actions run crosswise to prevailing conventions both internationally and in Japan. For Miyazaki, children's films, especially animation, usually depict both evil and conflict in facile ways that contribute to the infantilization of youth. Furthermore, mainstream animated features typically wrap up any problems raised in the films with neat, simplistic, and sentimental endings that obscure rather than reveal the complex nature of how one should live in a more than human world; however, Cavallaro (2006) writes that, "Miyazaki's universes are ambivalently inconclusive resisting simplistic didacticism" (p. 12). Miyazaki's films often end in an open fashion, a true *denouement* that is neither the attainment of certainty nor ostensive closure, showing the messy complications of life, but doesn't leave the viewer without the resources by which to confront the tenuous relationship, between human desire, nature, and daily life.

### **The Body Made Visible (Once Again)**

It was in attending Yasar's presentation for the Year of Japan program that I was persuaded that not only was Kurosawa's emphasis on the human body an important dimension but also that Bela Balazs' theory (1884-1949) would help students understand how film has been crucial in recovering our sense of embodiment,

In his essay "Visible Man," Balazs (2011) argues that "[t]he discovery of printing has gradually rendered the human face illegible" (p. 9). As human beings became ever more dependent on printing "the word [became] the principal bond joining human beings to one another" (Balazs, 2011, p. 10). Balazs (2011) also explains how the invention of the cinematograph by Leon Bouly in 1892 and the development of modern film have the power to allow "the whole of mankind" to re-learn "the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions . . . *Man will become visible once again*" (p. 10). It is "the language of gestures," Balazs (2011) claims, that "is the true mother tongue of mankind" (p. 11). Balazs's (2011) comments about filmmaking the body visible ring true for both Kurosawa and Miyazaki.

## *Kurosawa and the Body*

As Yasar explained, Kurosawa often made use of both close-ups and extreme close-ups in order to draw the viewer's eye to specific body parts: the feet in *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), facial expressions in *Drunken Angel* (1948), and fingers and eyes in *Rashomon* (1950), among many others. One reason that Kurosawa shows us the body so closely and carefully may have to do with Richie's observation that the "Japanese film is richest in mood or atmosphere, in presenting characters in their own surroundings" (Richie, 1971). Instead of letting the eye wander across the frame following the action, a close-up of the feet directs the eye to a specific spot in the frame and momentarily holds it there. The shot has the two-fold effect of slowing the pacing and thereby the eye as well. Doing so prepares the viewer for what is to follow. Another reason could be as Georgia O'Keefe once explained after being asked why she paints flowers so big: so that people will pay attention to flowers in a way they are not used to doing and because we do not take the time to look carefully at flowers we take them for granted. Writing about *Stray Dog* (1949), he references the French writer Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) who "instructed writers to extend their vision into realms where no one else could see, and to keep it up until the hitherto invisible became visible to everyone" (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 172).

Emphasizing the mind's embodiment is another way to understand Kurosawa's cinematic presentation of embodiment. His creation of a heroic cinema, of presenting male characters who are self-vindicating and who have no hope of being understood by others close to them or even the world at large, depicts the significance of mind-body connection. These characters, invariably in the end, rise to the occasion surprising both themselves and others. Whereas Westerners tend to separate mind, associating it with will, volition, and/or reason, while relegating the body to inert matter that simply follows the mechanical laws of nature, Easterners tend to understand mind and body as inseparable and include emotions along with reason as crucial to a living being's existence. The terms *xin* (Ch. "heart-mind") and *shin* (Jap. "heart-mind") bear this out. Furthermore, the Japanese situate human beings within the larger intimately intertwining bodily energies of nature (Ch. *Qi*, Jap. *Ki*), thereby allowing for a full range of both sympathetic and empathetic exchanges between human beings and the rest of the natural world. In terms of Kurosawa's male protagonists, the intimate mind-body connection manifests in ceremonial and relational social contexts and sometimes the mind-body connection is traumatized ending in their death, as in *Drunken Angel* (1948) and sometimes it ends in a kind of social redemption as in the case of *Stray Dog* (1949).

Another reason for focusing on the body is to emphasize, as Eastern cultures do, the intimate connection between emotion and the contexts of space and time. In Kurosawa's 1963 film *High and Low* he offers us a flawlessly shot scene in which the body and its setting are necessarily linked in order to make an identification between the main character Gondo, played by Toshiro Mifune, and his affluent life in his hill-top home. The scene begins with a low angle shot of a staircase at the top of which is a large picture window symmetrically set in the center of the upper floor's wall. In the center of the frame is the staircase with bannisters. Gondo walks slowly and precisely along the upper corridor turning to his left to face the camera in the very center of the window frame and between the bannisters. He then walks slowly down the stairs toward the camera. When he gets to the bottom he makes a slow and exact 90 degree turn and continues walking into the living

room to one of several large windows and draws the curtains. There is neither diegetic nor non-diegetic use of sound in the entire scene. Throughout the scene Gondo's face is taut and almost mechanical as are his movements. The austerity and symmetry of both the setting and Mifune's gait tell us that Gondo is disciplined and self-controlled to the point of callousness, a typical example of Kurosawa's theme of masculinity under duress. Thus, the scene is composed by Kurosawa emphasizing the inseparability of place and body, time and space, actor and scene. As Belazs (2011) has written, not only does Kurosawa make the body visible but also shows that, "whatever is expressed in his face and movements arises from a stratum of the soul that can never be brought to the light of day by words . . . [t]he body becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless" (p. 9). What cannot "be brought to the light of day by words" is Gondo's agonizing dilemma: either saving his chauffeur's boy's life or saving his own position in the shoe company where he is a top executive (p. 9). What complicates the decision for Gondo is that his success as a strict no nonsense businessman is what has enabled him to buy the elaborate life style he lives at the top of the hill.

### ***Miyazaki and the Body***

In viewing Miyazaki's animated features one becomes struck by the attention that the writer/director pays to facial expressions. Miyazaki's characters sometimes display the conventional manga style of exaggerated, in both size and color, eyes and mouths ubiquitous in anime since its inception, but he does so sparingly. For the most part, his drawings of characters' faces, both human and non-human, reject the manga-style conventions and instead are drawn in order to convey subtle emotional states or inner experiences such as thought, meditative states of consciousness and inner conflict. In Miyazaki's films he emphasizes the facial expressions of his female characters. As Cavallaro (2006) points out, Miyazaki's "redefinition of feminine physiognomies runs parallel to Miyazaki's distinctive—indeed unique—approach to the *shoujo* subgenre of anime" (pp. 10-11). *Shoujo* "is commonly used to designate girls aged 12 or 13. On a metaphorical level, *shoujo* alludes to the transitional stage between infancy and maturity, and its admixture of sexlessness and budding eroticism" (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 11). Some Miyazaki heroines that fall into the *shoujo* category are Clarisse (*Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro*, 1979), Nausicaa (*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, 1984), Kiki (*Kiki's Delivery Service*, 1989), and Fio (*Porco Rosso*, 1992).

For Miyazaki, *shoujo* character has a dual purpose: giving young Japanese girls strong role models and showing the wider Japanese society that young people generally and young girls in particular are much more capable than are traditionally thought to be. In his essay "Kiki—The Spirit and the Hopes of Contemporary Girls," dated April 1988, Miyazaki (1996) explains that in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) he wants to convey the message that instead of independence being marked by economic advantage "[t]he true 'independence' girls must now confront involves the far more difficult task of discovering and expressing their own talents" (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 262). The "far more" that Miyazaki gives us in the character of Kiki in her search for independence is the realistic portrayal of both psychological and social difficulties she faces and must surmount. As the narrative of Kiki's challenges in moving to another city and starting her own business unfolds Miyazaki (1996) shows her "repeatedly becom[ing] dejected and then regain[ing] her cheery vitality"

(p. 378). Miyazaki shows us the various faces of Kiki in different social contexts in order to highlight his belief that “one characteristic of adolescence is learning to understand the appropriate use of these various facial expressions” (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 378). Hence, the depiction of facial expressions in *Kiki’s Delivery Service* plays the role of portraying a realistic case of a young girl gaining independence which thereby, Miyazaki hopes, will provide a truer life model for contemporary girls to emulate. Furthermore, uniting facial expressions with social situations and psychological states reveals the importance of the body in the process of maturation.

## Japanese Cultural Elements in the Films of Kurosawa and Miyazaki

The films of both Kurosawa and Miyazaki reflect the above aspects of Japanese culture, but often within a larger context of post-war and contemporary Japanese society. In an early Kurosawa film such as *Drunken Angel* (1948), for instance, elements of traditional Japanese culture and Occupation Era-modernity are juxtaposed in a startling example of realism: scenes of traditional home design and characters in kimonos exist alongside nightclub scenes set in a kind of colonialist décor and characters outfitted in 1940s-era American fashion. In Miyazaki’s production *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979) for example, Lupin’s Citroen is juxtaposed with a horse-drawn cart and modern day INTERPOL detective Zenigata replete in a Colombo-like trench coat set alongside Lupin’s friend and occasional partner Goemon who is modeled on a traditional samurai.

In his essay on *Ran* Richie states that Kurosawa uses multiple elements from traditional Noh drama in the film in an even more prominent way than he did in either *The Throne of Blood* (1957) or *Kagemusha* (1980). He writes that the “costumes . . . are . . . particularly and ostentatiously gorgeous,” “the Noh-like hats, the strings of which tie tightly under the chin and make the face resemble a mask,” and the use of “the Noh *fue*, that piercing, plaintive flute” appears many times in the film (Richie, 1996, p. 217). The sequence of scenes in *Ran* depicting the last battle in which Hidetora loses his mind stands out as a striking example of Noh masking. Richie explains that, [d]uring the burning of the castle, each succeeding cut finds the makeup [on Hidetora’s face] deepening until at the end the actor is “wearing” a known Noh mask, that of the old man who has, presumably, seen life (Richie, 1996, p. 217). As Hidetora emerges from the castle he walks ghostlike through a gauntlet between the living and the dead just as the Noh drama takes place in a liminal zone between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Traditional Japanese cultural elements also pervade Miyazaki’s films with varying degrees of emphasis. One film that is explicit in its depictions of traditional elements of Shinto, the indigenous religious tradition of Japan, is *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). Rather than being “a set of beliefs formalized into a creed or identifiable act of faith,” Shinto stresses “sensitivity to nature, purification, and simplicity” by which one may experience awe at the mystery of life as a direct experience of the sacred (Kasulis, 2004, p. 1). It is primarily direct experience of the sacred in nature; thus, many holy places are in natural settings whether in the mountains, on the seashore, or within traditionally prescribed boundaries of urban and suburban shrines. As in the case with the famous wedded rocks at Futami, one not only experiences the awesome interconnectedness of nature but also the person’s connection to nature as well as the connection to one’s own deep feelings of awe.

Thus, Shinto as a pathway home has the two-fold purpose of helping one be at home in the world and with our own experiences of sacred mystery.

Throughout the film we are treated to rural scenes of rice paddies, pure running water, and The Great Camphor Tree that stands as an awe inspiring presence over the valley in which the principal characters live and, as all things vibrating with sacred energy (*kami*) do, “beckon and even demand our attention” (Kasulis, 2004, p. 10). Rice and water are the two elements signifying purity and simplicity, life-force, and abundance, and are routinely encountered by the films’ characters particularly Satsuki and Mei, the two children at the narrative center of the film. The Great Tree also functions as home to all of the *kami* we meet including the *totoros*. As both home and the way home, Shinto as portrayed in Miyazaki’s animation shows that “when we spiritually encounter mystery, it is inseparably about something (the inexplicable) and about how we respond to that something (with wonder)” (Kasulis, 2004, p. 10).

Several times in the course of the story’s unfolding we are treated to long shots of a *torii* gate that stands at the entrance to the forest wherein is sited the Great Camphor Tree. At one point in the film Satsuki, Mei and their father enter the forest through the Torii Gate and approach the Tree. As Kasulis points out, “[t]he *torii* functions as a bookmark for connecting people to awe-inspiring power” (Kasulis, 2004, p. 18). Tied around the tree is a *shimenawa* rope made of rice fibers designating the tree as holy. The father communicates his awe at the age and size of the tree and also observes that in first seeing the tree he knew that they would be safe there. The father tells them that this is indeed a very old tree and that they ought to pay their respects. Bowing, they formally pay their respects to the Tree as an eruption of the sacred in time and space and leave marking the end of the scene. It seems like such a brief and largely uneventful moment in the film, one which a non-Japanese might be left wondering what happened that caused the characters to bow in such a gesture of reverence and respect; however, what can be of help in understanding this scene is that in Shinto the *torii* gate does not function in a singular way, as an entrance point. Instead, “[t]o function properly, the mysterious power beyond the *torii* must be in an internal relation with what the person is” (Kasulis, 2004, p. 23). Thus, it is because of the innocence and simplicity of the children and the sincere and compassionate heart-mind of the father that when they pass through the *torii* gate they have the wondrous experience of the *kami* and its spiritual power (*tama*). One of the main points of Shinto is that the sacred mystery and sacred power of life, *kami*, are always right before our eyes if only we had the clarity of vision, simplicity of living, and the purity of heart *to see* as the girls and their father demonstrate.

## The International Cinema of Kurosawa and Miyazaki

While the films of both Kurosawa and Miyazaki are indisputably Japanese in the above senses, both directors are also auteurs of international cinema. I use the term international cinema to describe the globalization of cinema. No longer is it sufficient to rely on outdated terms such as foreign film or world cinema. Due to the shrinking gaps between U.S. cinema and the film industries of other countries in terms of technological sophistication as well as the increasingly shared cultural references and points of view moving around the globe with fewer restrictions, international cinema is a more apt concept for the reality of filmmaking today. Both Kurosawa and Miyazaki exemplify international cinema because

their respective films are truly international in scope as well as still distinctly Japanese. Indeed, this is the challenge film makers face in an increasingly globalized world: being faithful to one's own cultural tradition while participating in the evolving global culture.

### ***Kurosawa as International Auteur***

Kurosawa is an internationally known director whose work has won numerous accolades beginning with winning the Venice Film Festival's top prize the Golden Lion in 1951. In the United States *Seven Samurai* was so highly esteemed that John Sturgis re-made it as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) while in 1964 Martin Ritt re-made *Rashomon* as *The Outrage* (1964). In Italy, spaghetti western auteur Sergio Leone re-shot *Yojimbo* as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Many American auteurs such as Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas have all acknowledged their respective debts to Kurosawa by alluding to his work in their own films as well as sometimes offering help in finding funding for his films in the 1980s. Yet international recognitions, re-makes and homages, however, are only the veneer of international cinema. As globalization, the intensification and extensification of inter-cultural contact, continues unabated, the Earth's peoples are sharing both cultural contact and points of view more and more. Kurosawa films show us how our shared humanity can give us deeper communicative meaning as we move into a more intimate future.

While Kurosawa's films in the Occupation Era and into the 1950s often show how American and Japanese cultures were exchanging aspects of their respective cultures, it is with his film *Dersu Uzala* (1975) that Kurosawa steps onto the international scene in an important way. Not able to secure funding for his projects in Japan, Kurosawa found financial help from the Soviet Union with help from the Russian auteur Andrei Tarkovsky (*Solaris*, 1972). Kurosawa made the film in the Soviet Union utilizing Russian speaking actors and a local story. In so doing he made a film in which the human values of friendship and concern for and love of the natural environment transcended the boundaries of Kurosawa's Japanese citizenship and the film's locales. Yet, it is with *Rhapsody in August* (1991) that Kurosawa shows the depths of his international cinematic genius. *Rhapsody in August* is set in contemporary Japan in which the catastrophic atomic nuclear attack against mostly Japanese civilians is shown to be an on-going, complex international phenomenon given the lasting effects of radiation poisoning and the inter-marriage of Japanese and American peoples before and after the war. By complexifying the human relations between the Japanese family members and their Japanese-American relative Clark (played by Richard Gere) Kurosawa gives us an international film in which we see the attempts to understand and heal the memory of nuclear war. When the four children take a day trip to Nagasaki and "visit the memorial park and little Shinichiro notices monuments from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, China, Cuba and the U.S.S.R. and says with surprise that there is none from America, Tami responds, 'Naturally, it was Americans that dropped the bomb'" (Richie, 1996, p. 224). Instead of fanning the flames of hatred, the film shows the relations deepening between the characters especially when Clark displays obvious remorse and sorrow at the memorial, attends the August 9th memorial service in the grandmother's village, and when Clark and the grandmother share a moment of understanding and affection under a beautiful full moon. Most significantly, the film



conveys the important message that nuclear war affects us all and remains a shared threat on Earth's horizon.

### ***Miyazaki as International Auteur***

Like Kurosawa, Miyazaki is also an internationally influential and widely acclaimed director who has been the recipient of many international awards beginning in 1980 when *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* won Italy's Fantafestival award for Best Short Film. Also like Kurosawa, Miyazaki's status as an international auteur is not based solely on that reputation and influence but on his unswerving dedication in writing, directing, and producing animated features that, as he wrote in an essay entitled "Why Shōjo Manga Now?" that since "[w]e have clearly entered an era of volatility . . . we must return to the essence of what being alive means" (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 269). The theme of return, especially a return to *yasashisa*, our true hearts, is a recurring theme in Miyazaki's work. In terms of human psychology the yearning and longing for return is an experience of nostalgia, which is available not only to the Japanese but also to all human beings.

Nostalgia as a yearning to return home, "homesickness," has been one of the concept's identifying connotations since the term's inception as a neologism in late seventeenth century Europe (Nosco, 1990, p. 3). In his study of the concept of nostalgia in Japan, Peter Nosco (1990) shows how the European concept was adapted to fit Japanese longings for a return to a paradisiacal past. He observes that in the concept's development "nostalgia came to be identified with a temporal as well as a spatial sense of dislocation" (Nosco, 1990, p. 3). While Europeans have sought paradise in some future utopia, Nosco explains, "Asian thought has traditionally located the idealized condition in the past" (Nosco, 1990, p. 4). For the Japanese, however, the experience of nostalgia is further complicated by the aesthetic experience of *mono no aware*, a "sensitivity to things, their beauty and the sadness of passing" (Cavallero, 2006, p. 8). While the theme of nostalgia appears in several of Miyazaki's films, it is in *Porco Rosso* (1992) where we see a beautiful example of the combination of nostalgia with *mono no aware* eliciting a universal longing to return home, that is, to love.

In *Porco Rosso* (1992) Miyazaki uses nostalgia as a core motif in order to show us that despite the difficulties of life—the loss in death of one's comrades in the case of Porco/Marco and the loss of love not once but twice in the case of Gina—there is hope that one may yet return to a condition of compassion, kindness, empathy, and love. In an exquisite sequence of scenes that begin 10 minutes into the film in Gina's hotel and Lounge in which she performs the song "The Time of the Cherries," Miyazaki cuts back and forth between Gina in the lounge and Porco flying at twilight on his way to Gina's Hotel. The melancholy tune is parallel to the twilight sky's hues of amber suffused with a subdued golden light, the kind of light typical of sunset just after the sun has set and before darkness comes. As the song's lyrics propose, however, the good old days pass like the cherry blossoms, "they are short-lived, the happy times." Through the act of memory we can hold on to those wonderful moments in our lives when "the jolly nightingale and the mocking blackbird will celebrate!" and "the pretty girls will have folly on their minds/ and lovers will have the sun in their hearts!" The cost of remembering paradise, however, is an ache due to the disjunction of time and space and of the present and that of the past: "I will always love the time of cherries/it is from those times that I hold in my heart/an open wound" (citation

here). This scene is important not only because it evokes nostalgia but also because it joins nostalgia with the older aesthetic tradition of *mono no aware*.

As we shift back and forth between Gina and Porco we are meant to attribute loss to both characters' lives and especially the loss of love between Porco/Marco and Gina. Such loss and its terrible beauty is a deep human experience, one that is common across cultures. It is moments like this in Miyazaki's films that join together the members of the human family despite the differences between cultures and thereby marks Miyazaki as an exemplary international auteur.

## Kurosawa's and Miyazaki's Cinema of Hope

One of the distinguishing features of both directors' work is that they both take an unflinching look into both the maladaptive tendencies of human beings and the moments in our lives when we are at our very best displaying what the Japanese call *yasashisa* or our basic human values of kindness, compassion, and love. Because both directors tend to offer films that seriously engage the deeper aspects of what it means to be human and what it means to live a meaningful life without shying away from the damage that human beings do, their films often display a sobering view of humankind and the worlds we make and inhabit.

One of Kurosawa's films that directly addresses the question of what does it mean to live a full life is *Ikiru* (1952). The title itself is Japanese for "to live." Kurosawa was influenced by some of the existential thinkers and artists, particularly Fyodor Dostoevsky, who take as their main concern the exigencies of the human condition. Like Peer Gynt who upon realizing that he is about to die, Kanji Watanabe, played by Takashi Shimura, desperately searches for something he can do, some act that will validate his life and give it meaning. In his essay on *Ikiru*, Richie (1996) quotes Richard Brown's comment that,

*Ikiru* is a cinematic expression of modern existential thought. It consists of a restrained affirmation within the context of a giant negation. What it says in starkly lucid terms is that "life" is meaningless when everything is said and done; at the same time one man's life can acquire meaning when he undertakes to perform some task which to *him* is meaningful. What everyone else thinks about the man's life is utterly beside the point, even ludicrous. The meaning of life is what he commits the meaning of his life to be. There is nothing else. (p. 95)

Watanabe finds his task in helping a group of neighborhood women turn an open sewer into a park. In traversing the landscape of his past actions that are all marked with failure because he failed to act in any of them with commitment, risk, and freedom, he struggles with choosing from a handful of available courses of action from drunken revelry to attaching himself to a young girl in his office who to him appears to be living a meaningful life and ultimately discarding all of them until he hits upon constructing the neighborhood park. When he dies at the end of the film, his life is summed up in the last action he performs and becomes a kind of hero to the people in the neighborhood and to at least one of his co-workers who is inspired by Watanabe's action but cannot bring himself to risk choosing a similar path. Thus, *Ikiru* is both a "moral document," as Richie observes, but it is also an affirmation of being human when we discard all of the ought-to-be identifications

that are offered us by everything and everyone around us and instead choose the course of action which entails both risk and freedom. It is this that marks Kurosawa's film as an intimately human document.

Miyazaki's animated features also show us characters struggling with the various choices that confront them in order to establish a meaningful life. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is a superb example of characters struggling with complex and difficult situations and in the end establishing meaning for themselves and others around them. Ashitaka, whose fierce dedication to and strong sense of purpose in establishing relational harmony between human beings and the ancient forests with the various *kami* that inhabit them causes everyone else in the film from the wolf god to the inhabitants of iron town to a cynical and opportunistic Buddhist monk to acknowledge him as unique. Key to Ashitaka's moral authority is his refusal to take sides in the war between the forest gods and the humans of iron town led by Lady Eboshi who appears to have no qualms in destroying the old growth forests in order to facilitate industrial progress. As the two sides edge closer to an all-out war that will destroy everyone and everything, Ashitaka must carefully negotiate the contending forces that threaten the existence of life itself. Miyazaki eschews facile characterization and instead offers us complex characters none of whom are simply good or bad. Thus, the main antagonist in the film is not a character per se but an impulse to destroy existence, the fragile harmony of life and death.

*Princess Mononoke* (1997) reveals the important concept of *musubi* or life-renewal which is important to the development of what Hiroshi Yamanaka (2008) terms Miyazaki's neo-spirituality. On Yamanaka's reading of Miyazaki's concept of *musubi* is a complex interweaving of Shinto's emphasis on the purity and simplicity of nature and the human heart, fertility, physical health, creation, and abundance as well as the Buddhist teachings and practices of compassion. Furthermore, Yamanaka has argued that "Miyazaki's motif of self-renewal is based on his reverence for life as the powerful force at work within nature and human existence" (Yamanaka, 2008, p. 246). Having read *The Cultivation of Plants and the Origin of Agriculture* (1966) Miyazaki adopted Japanese botanist Sasuke Nakao's (1916-1993) idea of the shiny leaf culture which posits that evergreen broadleaf forests that range from the Himalaya Mountains to southern Japan are the basis for Japanese culture. Yamanaka (2008) claims that Nakao's book lifted him out of an identity crisis and "awakened [him] to the beauty and richness of the Japanese natural environment" (p. 250). Nakao puts forth the controversial idea that Japanese culture is neither isolated nor unique, but is part of a larger agricultural world. Indeed, Miyazaki's concept of *musubi* has an eco-historical grounding with profound eco-transcultural ramifications.

Miyazaki shows that *musubi*, is a complex concept directly relevant to our current environmental crisis. For instance, we learn in the course of the film that Lady Eboshi has rescued young women from urban brothels and has given them the opportunity to help build iron town, find husbands and live meaningful and productive lives. The women are all hard-working and dedicated to renewing their lives. *Musubi*, in Yamanaka's sense, is renewing one's life. This reveals a complex dimension to Miyazaki's feelings about conserving the environment. In his notes written for the laserdisc release of *The Man Who Planted Trees* (1987), Miyazaki resists the simplistic dichotomy of human life or conserving the environment. He states, "[w]e human beings need both nature left as it is and man-made habitats" (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 144). Ashitaka also recognizes this when in his conversation with Moro, the wolf god, toward the end of the film he asks why the forest

and its inhabitants can't live side by side with the human beings of iron town. The film allows us to interpret our current global environmental crisis as a human problem not restricted to one particular country but is a shared situation for which working together may be our best hope. Emphasizing the importance of responding with a deep sensitivity to things and recognizing the fragility of life may be distinctly Japanese sensibilities but they are not unfamiliar to other cultures. Beyond gaining international success, Kurosawa and Miyazaki's unique expression of such values provide a unique opportunity for further study and analysis and are therefore most apropos for inclusion in Asian Studies' curricula.

### **Closing Pedagogical Thoughts**

My evaluation of student performative competence was based on the completion of three tasks: in-class power point presentation in which the student analyzes a scene or short sequence of scenes from a film by either Kurosawa or Miyazaki, two exam compositions in which they respond to one of four prompts on Kurosawa and Miyazaki, and attendance at seven Year of Japan events. If a student could not attend the events, I offered the option of composing seven summaries of *New York Times* articles (KSU receives free copies on campus Monday through Friday as part of the American Democracy Project) directly relevant to the course.

The above discussion of the principle content areas of the cinematic art of both Akira Kurosawa and Hayao Miyazaki that I emphasized in the two sections of the film course I taught during the Fall 2013-Spring 2014 term are aligned with the learning objectives that I established for the courses. These learning objective are that the student will: 1) identify, through writing and speaking, the salient filmic and literary features of selected films by Kurosawa and Miyazaki; 2) use, in both writing and speaking, key terms in film analysis; 3) identify, through writing and speaking, important Japanese cultural and aesthetic aspects informing selected films of Kurosawa and Miyazaki; and, 4) identify, through writing and speaking, important structural and thematic elements in the major films of Kurosawa and Miyazaki. The attention to each film's technical details (e.g., camera angles, shots, pacing, lighting, sound, and how two or more of these contribute to the *mise-en-scene*) and the literary aspects noted above helped to fulfill objectives one and four. Use of a film dictionary helped students to perform well on the second objective, while attendance at Year of Japan events helped students identify cultural elements in the films (objective three), and the use of oral presentations, class discussion, and exam compositions helped students develop their overall performative competence in writing and speaking. Furthermore, the addition of Truffaut's auteur theory helped students discriminate between a Kurosawa and/or Miyazaki film and other Japanese films.

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