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## AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO THE NATURE/SOCIETY BINARY IN KUROSAWA'S DERSU UZALA: AN OBSERVATIONAL ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

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AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO THE  
NATURE/SOCIETY BINARY IN KUROSAWA'S *DETSU UZALA*:  
AN OBSERVATIONAL ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Laura L. Sharp

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Stanley D. Brunn, Professor of Geography

Lexington, Kentucky

2013

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO THE NATURE/SOCIETY BINARY IN KUROSAWA'S *DERSU UZALA*: AN OBSERVATIONAL ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

Geographers researching cinema have predominantly been interested in how geographic meaning is constructed and negotiated within film, but have been less productive in accounting for how these constructs are received by viewers. Using the method of observational online ethnography, I therefore investigate how fans in online reviews have interpreted the nature/society binary in the film *Dersu Uzala*. Working from a social constructionist view of nature I begin by deconstructing the binary as it appears in *Dersu Uzala* before proceeding to illustrate the way this constitutive absence is made up for by the visuality of the film's landscapes and techniques of geographic realism. Turning to the fan reviews I find that, rather than challenge the historical and constructed division between nature and society, many fans accept the binary as inevitable and consistent with their ideas about contemporary reality. More than passive consumption however, this concurrence is actively rearticulated in the ways that the fans incorporate the binary into their own lives and in the new discursive practices of the internet. In so doing I make headway into the exploration of audience analysis by geographers and continue to advance geography's foray into cultures of the internet.

KEYWORDS: Nature and Society, Film, Online Ethnography, Deconstruction, Kurosawa

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Laura L. Sharp

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May 31, 2013

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Figure 3.1. Map by author indicating locations where the film is set, where the film was shot, and where Arseniev's historical exploits as described in his book *Dersu the Trapper* took place

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

In 1974 Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa arrived in the Soviet Far East to shoot a film adaptation of the memoirs of Russian imperial military explorer V.K. Arseniev. Although it was Kurosawa's only film shot outside of Japan and in a language other than Japanese, it was not the director's first time adapting a piece of Russian literature. He directed Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in 1951 and Gorky's play *The Lower Depths* in 1957. Unlike *Dersu Uzala*, filmed on location in Siberia, *The Idiot* was widely criticized for attempting to transplant a story about the unique nineteenth century Russian psyche to contemporary Japan (Yoshimoto 2000, 190). *The Lower Depths*, perhaps due to the universality of the tenement slum condition and the experimental film form, was considered more successful by critics in this respect. While adapting these works of Russian literature for a Japanese audience, Kurosawa also decided to adapt Arseniev's *Dersu the Trapper* ([1941] 1996) and had the story scripted for a Japanese setting and characters. This initial adaptation was to be set in the Meiji period (Yoshimoto 2000, 344), but did not come to fruition, perhaps because of the centrality of the unspoiled landscape to the film's plot. Kurosawa's choice of the Meiji period in Japanese history, an era of "continuous transition from an agrarian and rural to an industrial and urban way of life" (Black 1975, 11) is significant, however, in that it points out the film's core thematic of modernization.

The process of modernization presents itself in *Dersu Uzala* as the tension between the modern Tsarist military officer Arseniev and the pre-modern figure Dersu Uzala, a lone member of the Nanai tribe present across the Far East in Russia, China, and Mongolia. Arseniev is on assignment for the government to map the Ussuri wilderness for the use of the state so that it may solidify its own territory by bringing urban development and civilization to the region. Dersu, a hunter who has known no other life than of self-sufficiency and survival in the harsh conditions of the Siberian forest, embodies not only the tribal people of the area whose way of life will be



lost as this modernization of the frontier continues, but also the values of selflessness and a pre-agrarian existence that are lost with the development of a modern industrialized society. The division between the two characters and their incumbent worldviews is strikingly visualized as the difference between the landscapes of the wilderness and the city.

While this relationship between the modern and pre-modern worlds is inherently antagonistic, its representation is complicated by the bond of love and admiration that the two men share for one another. A master-pupil relationship develops wherein the wise Dersu teaches Arseniev to appreciate nature according to his own pantheistic worldview. Though Arseniev never explicitly adopts Dersu's attitude toward nature, he is won over by the fact that so "primitive" a soul could selflessly look out for people whom he would never meet, as when he leaves behind leftover food and matches for others to find. In these moments Dersu's behavior expresses an altruistic and conservationist outlook that is in contrast to Arseniev's own supposedly "civilized" soldiers. Unlike Dersu, the military men look out only for themselves and waste valuable resources, throwing unwanted food into the fire rather than doing as Dersu suggests and leaving it for animals, and using glass bottles for target practice, failing to notice the reusable potential that Dersu sees in them. In juxtaposition with Dersu the soldiers appear as precursors to a modern consumer society that no longer sees the worth in common objects and materials, considering them instead to be endlessly reproducible. As the student of Dersu's lessons about nature Arseniev has the potential to absorb Dersu's knowledge and use it to promote thoughtful and sensitive modernization, though the film ends without the viewer knowing to what extent Arseniev has shouldered this responsibility.

Unlike in the film where Arseniev's future actions are left unspecified, we know that the historical Arseniev wrote about Dersu in his memoirs and that these memoirs went on to become a popular book and two films, a 1961 Soviet made-for-television movie and Kurosawa's. With each new version of Arseniev's story new commentary has accrued, yet since the debut of Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* critical and academic reviews have been minimal. They have included

newspaper synopses, brief discussions within compendiums on the works of Kurosawa or the cinema of Japan more generally (Mellen 1976; Richie 1996; Prince 1999; Yoshimoto 2000; Cowie 2010), and a handful of academic analyses (Daney 1976; Kopper 1995). With the exceptions of Daney (1976) and Yoshimoto (2000), whose essays, though lacking in depth of analysis, provide critical insight on the film's complex relationship with space and representation, the majority of critics have dismissed *Dersu* as one of Kurosawa's least accomplished films.

Stephen Prince's *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* in which he considers *Dersu Uzala* in the wider context of the Kurosawa canon is representative of this unenthusiastic position and provides a useful point of departure. While Prince is generally appreciative of the film he situates *Dersu* within Kurosawa's "later films," a period that for Prince signals the director's growing inability to communicate in the language of modern cinema or effectively champion the socio-political issues of the day in the same way that his early films had (1999, 250). Prince's examination is constrained by his decision to categorize this and Kurosawa's other films of this period as lacking in the critical edge and social commitment of Kurosawa's former films. In considering *Dersu* relative to Kurosawa's oeuvre Prince sets the bar for what social criticism ought to look like. This is particularly evidenced in his treatment of the relationship between Arseniev as the modern city dweller, and *Dersu* as the innocent native, where he criticizes what he perceives as Kurosawa's uncritical use of the Romantic binary:

*Dersu Uzala* embodies an idea of nature that in the West is familiar from the romantic tradition [...] While Kurosawa attempted to venerate the unspoiled wilderness and by implication to criticize social life, the conception of nature he employs is but a cultural category. Attempting to escape culture, he falls back into it. *Dersu* and his wilderness remain an aesthetic fiction, compelling but duplicitous. (271)

At the heart of Prince's comment is the impossibility of representing nature through the use of modern culture without deploying the very thing that is being criticized. For Prince this is specifically the culturally constructed notion of wilderness, however, when we consider the general critique in the film of technology, industrialization, and urbanization, we may also include in this critique Kurosawa's own use of technology – cinema – to capture and appropriate

the wilderness. According to this argument it seems that Kurosawa has weakened or even negated his intended anti-modern message. However, while Prince is quick to critique Kurosawa's "failed social protest," he forecloses on the film without elaborating on how the social protest is attempted, on what specific terms it should be considered a failure, and most importantly, why anyone should care.

If we view nature from a poststructuralist standpoint then there can be no doubt that *Dersu Uzala* utilizes a culturally constructed idea of nature because what counts as "nature" is always already an effect of competing discourses. How these discourses of nature come to be codified as "natural" or "cultural" is not random but, as Derek Gregory (2001) explains, are codified as such because they

are encased in apparatuses – in books and journals, in instruments and equipment, in interactions and procedures – which are produced and reproduced through interlocking networks of individuals and institutions, and their physicality, materiality, and durability help to naturalize particular ways of being in and acting in the world. (86)

From this perspective, how nature is constituted discursively as an object of knowledge via cultural practices such as the film *Dersu Uzala* is a question of power. What becomes of interest then is not, as Prince (1999) assumes, whether the wilderness that is presented as natural is actually cultural, but instead, how and with what effect the culturally constructed wilderness is presented as natural.

For some, the social constructionist view of nature that I suggest is tantamount to a "new environmental villain" on the block (Proctor 1998). According to such realist critiques scholars wielding a "relativist" conception of nature have all but given the green light to powerful interest groups to ravage the world's remaining wilderness. What a social constructionist view actually calls for, however, is simply a more nuanced understanding of humanity's relationship to nature. As Castree and Braun (1998, 3) explain:

From this perspective human intervention in nature is [...] neither "unnatural" nor something to fear or decry. This does not rule out limiting human actions in specific situations, but from this perspective what is at stake is not preserving the last vestiges of the pristine, or protecting the sanctity of the "natural" body, but building critical

perspectives that focus attention on how social natures are transformed, by which actors, for whose benefit, and with what social and ecological consequences.

The purpose of this project is not to investigate these relations, however, at least not directly. Instead, I look at how these dynamic connections between nature and society continue to be obscured by the production and reproduction of dualistic thinking that positions nature as “outside of history and human context” (Escobar 1999, 1). Thus, although the nature/society binary is the focal point of the project my interest is not to contribute something original to nature and society studies or political ecology. Instead, my interest in the binary is in how it can help to map the relationship between cinema and the audience.

I find that the binary is ideal for understanding audience relations to geographic content in film because, despite increasing recognition of the binary as a cultural construct, it is nevertheless a pervasive mindset within society. In focusing on the binary we are able to see how powerful actors in the film industry translate this geographic construct into cinematic form for popular consumption. Most importantly, by tracing the binary from production to audience we are able to see the effect that cinematic geographies have, if any, on how viewers conceptualize their own relationship with the world around them, and specifically, how the nature/society binary is reified or contested at the site of the audience. This, expanding the breadth of media geography’s currently limited engagement with the site of the audience, is the primary concern of my project, which I achieve by 1) showing how audiences engage with the nature/society binary both by relating it to their own lives and worldviews, and through the act of rearticulation, and 2) demonstrating the methodological potential of online ethnography for media geographers interested in the site of the audience.

*From Production to Consumption: The Flow of Arguments*

Taking the discursive construction of nature as necessarily power-laden means that *Dersu Uzala* is not “merely” entertaining, but has the potential to effect social and material consequences. To understand how meaning is constructed in the narrative and cinematography of *Dersu Uzala*, paying particular attention to the nature/society binary, I work within the textual metaphor. However, although I use the text metaphor, my research is situated within the growing concern that purely textual readings of movies based on hypothetical audiences fail to account for the ways that cinematic geographies impact our worldviews and experiences of everyday life (Fletcher, Lukinbeal, and McHugh 2012, 60). Accordingly, to understand how cinematic geographies affect audiences, I turn to online fan reviews of the movie, using the method of online ethnography, or netnography, described in Chapter 2. These reviews give insight into how the construction of nature in the film is interpreted, reproduced, or contested in new discursive practices of the internet. While I realize it may seem counter-intuitive at first to use the recent technology of the internet to study the effects of a film produced in 1975 it is through this “temporal gap” between the two “speech acts,” the film and the reviews, that the chance for iteration to break down appears (Braun and Wainwright 2001, 57), making contestation of the meaning of nature in *Dersu* possible.

The audience, however, like the film itself, does not stand outside of the competing narratives of the film’s meaning derived from its production and reception history. I therefore take up these issues in Chapter 3 by contextualizing the film in its historical time period and place, highlighting key aspects of the historical events described in the book, the filmmaking process, and the film’s reception. By emphasizing the audience’s agency in creating the film’s meaning I disempower the director as the sole arbiter of meaning but recognize the function of the director as a mythic figure whose role as “author” encourages certain readings of the film by viewers and

curtails others (Foucault 1977). I therefore consider some of the different aspects of the personal life of Kurosawa, the production process, and the film's initial reception that have had the effect of guiding viewer responses to the movie as implied by the online reviews. Furthermore, Kurosawa is known to have been notoriously reluctant to discuss his films, opting to let them speak for themselves, and has been reported as saying that his reason for making *Dersu Uzala* was simply that he wanted to make a movie about the environment (Richie 1998, 196). On one hand this statement works to assure anyone skeptical of this paper's narrow focus on the film's nature that this is not unreasonable in that the film "really is about" nature according to the director's own words. It also shows, however, that relying on statements of intent by Kurosawa to understand the film's message will not go very far, necessitating a closer look at the film itself. Therefore, in the fourth chapter I turn to the content of the film.

My own textual analysis of the film in Chapter 4 focuses on demonstrating the conflicting messages that appear in the film as a result of the filmmaker's techniques. Therefore, I begin by deconstructing the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala*, using as my "lever" Derrida's notion of the supplement, the object within the text that "threatens to collapse" (Spivak 1997, lxxv) the system or foundation on which the structure of the text is built. I accomplish this by showing how Dersu is never actually fully present in the film, but is instead a construction of Arseniev, brought into being by the external or supplementary devices of technology. Dersu and the notion of a pristine wilderness are therefore absent, empty signifieds that Arseniev must continually recreate in the form of his narrative, journal entries, photographs, and the map. The film itself, like Arseniev's technologies, is part of the same system of supplementation, bringing Dersu and the pristine wilderness into existence through the visualization of the landscape and the ability to manipulate space and time.

Therefore, after showing how the film "deconstructs itself," or how the binary between nature and society, the pivot on which the film turns, is shown to be false within the film, I proceed to illustrate the way these absences are supplemented, or made present, by the visuality

of the landscape and the use of geographic realism. As Lukinbeal (2006) explains, “Geographic realism can be thought of as relating to the (1) factual events and locations from which a narrative derives and/or (2) relating to the realistic quality of the geography as it is represented in a movie” (339). While *Dersu* may be said to have a high degree of geographic realism due to the fact that it was filmed on location not only in Siberia but also in the very same region where the historical events of exploration on which the film is based took place, we must also keep in mind that “[g]eographic realism is subjective and fluid, not objective and factual. Realism is a cinematic style which uses techniques to create a more ‘real’ movie-going experience; it does not mean the objective re-presentation of events or locations” (Lukinbeal 2006, 339). Realism is a tool used by filmmakers to make what is on screen believable, or natural. Using Lukinbeal’s (2005) four functions of cinematic landscapes, the film’s wilderness landscapes can be interpreted as naturalizing the binary by emphasizing geographic realism, making it appear self-evident despite the ways it has otherwise been undermined throughout the film.

Finally, Chapter 5 explores responses to the film by viewers. In order to understand audience responses I use a schema deployed by Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh (2012) that arranges audience responses according to the extent to which the reviewer actively engages with the film’s cinematic world in terms of comparative, subjective, and incorporative type responses. According to this arrangement comparative responses are those that reinforce a distinction between the world of “real” events, and the cinematic or “reel” world. Subjective responses are those that “exhibit a belief in the televisual world, but maintain a distinction between the mediated place and [the viewers’] own lives.” Incorporative responses are when “respondents fold televisual place into their own lived worlds” (96–97); it is these incorporative responses that provide the clearest understanding of how media affects viewers’ worldviews and everyday experiences. By looking at fan reviews of *Dersu Uzala* in this way we see that, rather than challenge the historical and constructed division between nature and society, many fans accept the binary as natural, inevitable, and consistent with their ideas about contemporary reality. More

than passive consumption however, this concurrence is actively rearticulated in the ways that the fans incorporate the binary into their own lives and in the new discursive practices of the internet.

In the pages that follow I elaborate on each of these points in order to show how, by naturalizing the nature/society dualism through techniques of geographic realism, the film perpetuates what is a potentially disempowering cultural construct that is then rearticulated by fans of the film across the world. In this way I make headway into the exploration of audience analysis by geographers and continue to advance geography's foray into cultures of the internet. Before I can accomplish this however, it is necessary to elaborate on the theoretical framework in which I situate this endeavor and also the methods by which I approach it. These are the subjects of the following two chapters.



## CHAPTER 2

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I discuss the different literatures and concepts in which this project is grounded. I begin by explaining what it means to describe nature as socially constructed and how this necessitates studies such as the current one that look into the cultural politics of nature in film. To do this I draw from poststructuralist political ecology theory, a nuanced body of thought that brings together multiple philosophies and approaches to dispel notions of nature as existing ontologically outside of humanity's knowledge about it. Following an example by Braun and Wainwright (2001) who show the political implications of nature discourse I look to how we can think of both film and the internet as discursive practices that blur binary logic between discourse and materiality. I do this by first surveying film geography as a sub-discipline highlighting both cultural politics *in* film as well as the cultural politics *of* film. Although geographers have long been interested in how issues such as nature, gender, or race are constructed in film, they have been less productive in accounting for the effects on viewers that these constructions have. This lacuna leads me to a discussion of how geographers can use online research methods borrowed from the humanities and marketing to understand audience responses to issues presented in movies. Although this approach has currently only been applied by Klaus Dodds in the area of popular geopolitics, it is not entirely dissimilar from the ways some geographers are currently using the internet and social media.

#### *A Brief History of "Nature"*

As a concept nature, and its relation to society, has been thought of and discussed in a diversity of ways throughout time and across disciplines. For my purposes it is not necessary to

go deep into the history of this thought (though I will highlight a few strands of this history as it applies to current theoretical debates), but rather to focus on the contemporary discourse of nature and the implications of these different perspectives. I draw from several poststructuralist political ecologists and theorists of nature (Cronon 1996; Castree and Braun 1993, 1998; Braun and Wainwright 2001; Castree 2001; Escobar 1996, 1999) whose discursive social constructionist views of nature began to emerge after the linguistic turn in geography (Demeritt 2001). Following this brief introduction to theories of nature I explain why an anti-essentialist approach to nature is necessary and how this causes us to question the power relations behind the construction of nature in *Dersu Uzala*.

Although the nature/society dualism had been a long-standing way of envisioning nature dating back to the Greeks, it was only after the Scientific Revolution beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that this division itself bifurcated into two competing movements, the Enlightenment and Romanticism (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 10). The scientific method, according to Enlightenment thinking, was the only way that a true understanding of nature could be achieved because, “unlike religious superstition, scientific knowledge is objective in the double sense that it is not based on subjective belief but on direct, impersonal, and in that sense, objective observation of an independent reality” (Demeritt 2001, 26). Approaching nature from this rational standpoint that was supposedly removed from subjective values made possible a utilitarian attitude toward nature as something that not only needed to be dominated and managed, but used for human advancement. In response to the perceived alienation of society from nature caused by Enlightenment practices of industrialization the Romantic period developed as a predominantly aesthetic critique that, through literature and the arts, sought to express nature’s “original innocence.” Nature from this perspective was conceived of as having a redemptive quality that through direct interaction and reverence could help humans make up for the despoliation of the environment and their own souls (Soper 1995, 29–30).

Despite Romanticism's critique of the Enlightenment the two movements share the common sticking point of approaching nature from an ontology of realism which assumes that nature is something that exists independently of human thought or activity and that can be known through direct physical experience. This outlook corresponds to contemporary views of nature within the discipline of geography, specifically what Castree (2001) calls the "technocratic" and "ecocentric" approaches. Here, these two approaches serve as two legs of a triad making up "nature geography," Castree's own "intrinsically social" approach being the third.

Within this division the technocratic category is composed of those who operate from sub-disciplines such as resource and environmental management and that, from Castree's perspective, fail to acknowledge the socio-economic causes behind environmental problems and discourses (3). Like Enlightenment thinking then, the technocratic approach is derived from an "objective" and "scientific" outlook that views nature as a resource for human consumption. The second of these contemporary perspectives is the ecocentric approach, a way of thinking that took off in the 1970s, which like Romanticism frames nature as something that has been lost as a result of the increase in humans' destructive activity. In this line of thought proponents hope to "get back to nature," a process "achieved through a profound critique and dismantling of existing systems of production and consumption" (Castree 2001, 3). Cronon (1996, 81) in particular has been critical of modern environmental movements that stem from Romanticism and the notion of nature as fundamentally at odds with civilization, because by defining nature as everything that humans are *not*, such movements preclude any chance for humans to find out what a just and sustainable relationship to nature would look like. The emphasis placed by Cronon on the power of the very definition of nature itself is characteristic of the third approach to nature described by Castree, the social constructionist approach.

### *The Social Construction of Nature*

The third approach described by Castree (2001) is a response to the technocratic and ecocentric approaches, which critiques both for proffering the belief that nature is an ontologically stable category that can somehow be separated from human action or thought. Rather, it is posited that the dichotomy between society and nature is itself a social construction and thus power-laden and partial. As Castree explains it:

[N]ature is defined, delimited, and even physically reconstituted by different societies, often in order to serve specific, and usually dominant, social interests. In other words, the social and natural are seen to intertwine in ways that make their separation – in either thought or practice – impossible. (3)

For Demeritt (2002), a social constructionist view of nature such as this can be broken down still further, which he does using Hackings's (1998) division of social constructionism, into two categories, "social-construction-as-refutation" and "social-construction-as-philosophical-critique." A social-construction-as-refutation approach to nature utilizes "construction talk" in order to dismiss a widely held belief, climate change for instance, as "merely" social, while ardently defending traditions of "empiricism, positivism, or critical realism" and rejecting other postmodernist viewpoints (Demeritt 2002, 769–70). In contrast, a social-construction-as-philosophical-critique is deeply suspicious of scientism, and is concerned with questioning the metaphysical conception of reality on which claims about nature are based.

Demeritt further defines the social-construction-as-philosophical-critique approach as being comprised of phenomenological constructionism, sociology of scientific knowledge, discursive constructionism, and actor network theory. Although these different types of constructionism operate using different theories and practices, Demeritt suggests that all four falter by poorly defining the object of study – whether "nature" is taken to be conceptual, material, or both – in any particular case, a problem that is exacerbated by the word "construction" itself,

which can be taken both in a metaphorical sense referring to the concept of nature, or in a literal sense, referring to the materiality of nature.

I find Demeritt's elucidation of the different spheres of poststructuralist political ecology and how each approaches nature as an object of study epistemologically and ontologically to be useful in clarifying the understanding of nature within this project. Specifically, by working within a discursive constructionist framework and hence a conceptual understanding of nature that is constructed metaphorically through language and discursive practices, I am able to blur the lines between epistemology and ontology in a way that questions the binary logic dividing nature into these two seemingly simple categories of either conceptual or material. That is to say, whether or not there really is a material nature, I suggest there is no way to access or discuss it without the intervention of language. Because nature is always culturally mediated in this way even what counts as "material nature" is a product of discourse. It is these discursive practices, which render nature either conceptually or materially intelligible, that must be rigorously questioned as Braun and Wainwright (2001, 41) tell us, because "how nature comes to be stabilized as an object of knowledge has concrete effects, both social and ecological," which in turn "forces us to recognize the fundamental openness, or undecidability, of what counts as nature" (Braun and Wainwright 2001, 42).

In an example that shows the power such discursive practices have in framing the politics of environmental management Braun and Wainwright describe the case of timber harvesting in British Columbia in the 1940s, arguing that, while debates between the state, environmentalists, First Nations, and corporations focused on the fate of the forest – whether it would be harvested using sustainable yield forestry or left intact for use by the First Nations – the real question was not what would happen to the forest but who got to decide what the definition of the forest was in the first place. At this level it was the debate between the competing discourses of the meaning and significance of the forest that would decide the forest's ultimate fate. Drawing on ideas of the forest established by colonists in the region who had made it common practice to divide the

region into two categories – a “primitive” social side, and a “natural” resource side – the construction of the forest in the government’s report was made to appear “under the guise of the ‘real’ [due to] the acceptance of a particular understanding of the forest as common-sense, that is, it’s sedimentation as ‘reality’ through processes of iteration” (Braun and Wainwright 2001, 53). Only by producing a counter-discourse of the forest, maps made by the First Nations depicting the forest as not “natural” but as culturally modified, was the original formulation able to be challenged and overturned and the forest allocated to the First Nations.

As we see from this example it is not enough, as environmental realists operating from either a technocratic or ecocentric, Enlightenment or Romantic persuasion might claim, to study, manage, protect, or get back to nature. Rather, we must understand how nature is defined in the first place, and how these representations are handed down as common sense. Popular media such as cinema, television, and the internet, which reach millions of people across the world, are some ways that this iteration takes place.

### *Cultural Politics in Film*

Like the government report and the First Nations maps in Braun and Wainwright’s example, film is also a discursive practice. As such, how cinematic space is used to construct places, regions, nations, or nature is not only indicative of “prevailing cultural norms, ethical mores, societal structures, and ideologies,” but also has the power to shape these same norms, mores, and structures within the audience (Aitken and Zonn 1994 5). For this reason it is important for geographers to understand film so that we may be critical of the power behind the images and their construction. Thinking of film in this way makes it necessary to take it seriously; as film scholar Robert Kolker argues, “[F]rom the late nineteenth century onward, people have turned to film as entertainment, escape, *and* education – as an affirmation of the way they live or think they ought to live their lives” (2006, 1, emphasis in the original).

Despite invocations such as Kolker's that cinema be taken seriously, it has only been since the mid-1980s that geographers have seen it this way (Escher 2006). Taking into consideration where film geography scholarship was focused during this time, Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) created a taxonomy that divides the sub-discipline of film geography into four potential research trajectories for the future: geopolitics, cultural politics, issues of representation, and the culture industry. Of these four areas geographers have predominantly been interested in cultural politics, or how meaning is constructed and negotiated within film (Lukinbeal and Zimmerman 2006, 318). They have since taken on issues such as race and ethnicity (Banerjee and Marx 2008; Natter 2002), landscape (Youngs 1985; Lukinbeal 2005), national identity (Gold and Gold 2002; Mains 2004 Zimmermann 2008), and gender (Aitken and Lukinbeal 1998; Craine and Aitken 2004; Holmes, Zonn, and Cravey 2004; Lukinbeal and Aitken 1998; Zonn and Aitken 1994), to name just a few.

Research in cultural politics within film is focused on the process of "naturalization," or "when a narrative seeks to pass off that which is cultural as natural" (Lukinbeal 2005, 13). One way that filmmakers do this is by relying on geographic realism in order to make a narrative more convincing, that is, to show that events are "taking place." Another way is by using binaries where two seemingly fixed objects or ideas (nature/society, feminine/masaculine, or rational/emotional) are pitted against one another in order to show the dominance of one over the other in a way that conceals the constructedness of the binary, making them seem natural or inevitable (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997; Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2006, 318). As Lukinbeal and Zimmerman (2006, 318) remind us however, these binaries "are not ontologically 'given' or static objects awaiting inquiry; they are living testaments to a specific era's cultural political dialogue."

## *Cultural Politics of Film*

As we've already seen in my discussion of the cultural politics of nature and in film, this binary logic permeates geography as a discipline and is not limited to discussions of nature or how it is presented in film. It further affects how geographers approach film as an object of study in the first place and has emerged in the sub-discipline of film geography as the "normative belief that film is a re-presentation of reality" (Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2008, 18). Kennedy and Lukinbeal (1997) have traced this binary within geography back to Lowenthal's (1961) essay "Geography, Experience, and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology," which places emphasis on cognitive or sensory experiences of the environment ahead of what have come to be thought of as "secondary" experiences of the environment through media. This fracture was further widened in the 1980s and 1990s as debates between "traditional" and "new" cultural geographers appeared. Where traditional cultural geographers (Lewis, 1979; Meinig 1979; Price and Lewis 1993) focused on empirical analyses of material landscapes, new cultural geographers (Cosgrove 1984; Daniels and Cosgrove 1988; Barnes and Duncan 1993; Duncan and Ley 1993) established a focus on non-material landscapes and representations.

We can see this binary logic at play in one of the early explorations by a geographer into film, "Natural Hazards in Novels and Films: Implications for Hazard Perception and Behavior" (1985), where Liverman and Sherman attempt to plot the (in)accuracy of representations of natural disasters as compared with real-life events. Driving this comparison is the authors' belief that "if the [hazards] information in these widely-viewed films and popular books is not accurate, then exposure to this type of media may lead to increased risk to life, and greater damage to property" (1985, 90). However, because "film is more than just mere *re*-presentations of some ontologically stable Cartesian space" (Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2006, 321) we should not think of geographic realism in cinema as the degree to which a secondary experience of the world



matches up with a more direct or primary experience of the world, but rather as the degree of correlation between the represented geography on the screen and what audiences accept as reality (Duncan and Ley 1993, 4). Just because an “inappropriate” response to an earthquake or tornado is portrayed as appropriate, it does not necessarily mean the audience will accept that this behavior coheres with their ideas about how to behave in the world. Further, while Liverman and Sherman suggest that social behavior and attitudes toward natural disasters may be (negatively) modified by popular culture, especially as these disaster films and novels often rely on professional scientists and organizations to lend an air of (false) authenticity, they do not acknowledge that the body of scientific knowledge on which they base their comparison is equally constructed and unstable, or that hazards themselves may be thought of as a social construct (Dake 1992).

Moving past this normative binary several film geographers (Clarke 1997; Doel 2008; Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh 2008; Lukinbeal 2004; Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2008) have taken up a Baudrillardian notion of cinema as simulacrum. As Doel’s (2008) account of this history of early cinematic form explains, in the early days of cinema the new technology of animated photography was lauded for its verisimilitude. With the introduction of new editing techniques however, “animated photography ceased being a *referential* medium, bound to the Real, to become a *simulacral* medium, free to fabricate a reality-effect” (Doel 2008, 96). Or, in Lukinbeal and Zimmermann’s (2008, 19) words:

Cinema makes no claims that it is anything but a mechanical re-production. Rather than re-producing the ‘real’ or re-producing what is ‘seen’, cinema produces a ‘reality-effect’ – a simulacrum of the real. Cinema is a machine for constructing different relations between space and time.

Put into practice this take on cinema has brought to light an interesting new way of conceptualizing audience reception of cinematic geographies, illustrated by Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh in their book *Place, Television, and the Real Orange County* (2012), which I will turn to after looking at the way other geographers have approached the audience before them.

### *The Audience in Film Geography*

In the field of film studies reception research has been notoriously underdeveloped owing to the theoretical and methodological complexity involved in such undertakings (Allen 1990). It is not surprising, therefore, that the nascent sub-field of film and media geography would mirror film studies' research trajectory in this way: although the audience has long been the implicit driver of much film geography research, as can be seen in Liverman and Sherman's (1985) essay, there have been extremely few attempts by geographers to understand how audiences actually engage with cinematic geographies. Outside of popular geopolitics (Dodds 2006, 2008; Dittmer and Dodds 2008) there is a notable absence of any discussion on what the goals of reception research in media geography might look like or how such investigations might be theoretically and methodologically approached. Robert Allen (1990) has outlined an agenda for film reception studies by highlighting four areas of research – exhibition, the audience, performance, and activation – which can be helpful for understanding some of the ways media geographers have approached reception studies thus far.

According to Allen (1990, 349) film *exhibition* includes “the institutional and economic dimensions of reception,” as well as the physical sites of reception. Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings's (2003) book *The Place of the Audience* is a collection of essays on the different contexts of movie and television viewing practices (the theatre, the drive-in, the living room, the drawing room, etc.) that falls into the grouping of exhibition research, and is a tack which Zonn (2007) has shown interest in pursuing. Significantly, *The Place of the Audience* also represents the only sustained endeavor into reception by geographers; all other references to the audience by geographers tend to be either tangentially related, brought in secondarily to bolster a primarily production-centered or text-centered argument, or simply lack depth of analysis.

These characteristics can be seen for instance in some geographers' work with film audiences, or who actually goes to what movies (Allen 1990, 351), a type of reception study that might investigate factors such as the age, gender, sexuality, political persuasion, ethnicity, or class of an audience of a particular film or genre. Bruno's (1997) work on silent-era Italian cinema, for instance, describes the formation of the modern Neapolitan cityscape of Naples through cinema's "mobile gaze" (49) and the films of Italy's first woman filmmaker, Elvira Notari. Echoing the voyage of Italian immigrants to New York, the street films of Notari, Bruno explains, reached a predominantly female immigrant audience, who enjoyed them as a way to experience the return voyage to Italy that they themselves would never make. While Bruno touches on the role that the films played in creating "the illusion of social participation" (52), or what might be called a type of reception *performance*, as a historical study with limited empirical material there is little real engagement with how these women felt toward the images of Naples in the cinema Bruno describes. Similarly, Zimmermann (2008) describes the role that landscape plays in the post-World War II German *heimatfilm* genre in creating an imagined national community by showing beautiful people exhibiting traditional German values in idyllic settings away from the war-ravaged urban areas. Zimmermann tells us that these films were most appreciated by an older generation of Germans who could remember a time before the rise of the Third Reich (175). Rather than deal with the future or recent traumatic past, viewers of *heimatfilm* could revert to an idealized portrayal of Germany in a distant past as a way of coping with the nation's identity crisis, and thus the landscapes of *heimatfilms* can be said to play a role in the "'secret' mission of nation building" (172). Again though, we are asked to accept the author's explanation for the effect that the *heimatfilm* genre had on its audiences without hearing from the viewers themselves about their own perceptions of participation in the nation building process that Zimmermann describes. Working from the angle of contemporary geopolitics Bunnell's (2004) article critically analyzes a different type of audience, angry political elites in Malaysia on the film *Entrapment*, and its potential to negatively influence "ordinary viewer"

perceptions of the country – though how ordinary viewers came to see the offending material is ignored.

Like Bunnell, Dodds (2006, 2008) has also engaged cinema as a type of political discourse. However, rather than focus on the few at the top of the political hierarchy, Dodds's interests have been to shift the attention of popular geopolitics away from analyses of geographical representations to how the ordinary viewers (such as those marginalized in Bunnell's [2004] account) actually receive and interpret geopolitically charged information found in cinema and other media forms. Allen (1990, 353) calls this type of reception study *activation*, or "how certain audience groups make or do not make sense, relevance, or pleasure out of particular moments of reception." To engage with the ordinary viewers and the geopolitical messages they actually glean from cinema, Dodds (2006, 2008) has used the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and the James Bond movie series as a case study. The type of participatory culture found on websites such as IMDb is significant in the case of Bond films, Dodds (2006, 188) explains, "because they indicate that Bond films may be important precisely because of the extent to which they can command such devoted attention rather than whether viewers are necessarily reflexive about the geopolitical knowledge being put to work in a particular film." Online participatory culture may also be thought of as a type of identity performance, which "is itself consumed by those who witness the act or later learn of it," a phenomenon that "is increasingly prevalent with ever-expanding online opportunities and new media practices" (Dittmer and Dodds 2008, 447). This understanding of performance, influenced by Butler (1990), significantly expands Allen's notion of performance as "the immediate, social, sensory, and performative context of reception" (1990, 352). Tina Kennedy (2008) pushes this notion of identity performance to its extreme in her essay "Living with Film: An Autobiographical Approach." Here, the author describes an entire lifetime of experiences and choices influenced by cinema in order to "provide gist for the mill of speculation on possible relationships between film,

emotions, actions, place, and identity formation; on the conscious and subconscious impacts of film on our daily lives” (188).

What separates the approach to reception taken in Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh’s (2012) work from the others described here is the attention to not only the effects of audience activation (*incorporation* in their terminology), but also to the *process* of audience activation, or how we can theoretically understand audience engagement with cinema and television’s geographic content. This occurs, the authors explain, as audiences negotiate or transcend the real/reel binary and bring television watching to the level of “televisual place-making.” As noted above, this approach is tied to the authors’ understanding of cinema and television as neither real nor reel, but as simulacral (24):

Television and cinema are simulacral, which shifts the mode of inquiry away from the problematic reel/real binary to the openness afforded by mediated places. We are not passive viewers or voyeurs of movement-images; we are active itinerates participating in, and creating, meaningful experiences and connections vis-à-vis place.

In taking this stance the authors’ work comes closest after Kennedy’s essay (2008) to an understanding of how cinematic geographies come to be incorporated in the worldviews and everyday experiences of television and film viewers, but which, unlike Kennedy’s approach, is more broadly applicable. This task has been accomplished by analyzing the construction of place and geographic realism through Lukinbeal’s (2005) functions of cinematic landscapes of three television shows centered on Orange County, California: *The OC*; *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*; and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*; along with survey data collected from several groups: fans, mid-western college students, students living in Orange County, and colleagues. This survey asked questions about viewers’ thoughts on Orange County and to what extent these thoughts have been influenced by the named television shows. The survey data were then divided into either comparative, subjective, or incorporative type responses. According to this arrangement comparative responses are those that reinforce a distinction between the world of “real” events and the cinematic, or “reel” world. Subjective responses are those that “exhibit a

belief in the televisual world, but maintain a distinction between the mediated place and [the viewers'] own lives." Incorporative responses are when "respondents fold televisual place into their own lived worlds" (96–97); it is these incorporative responses that give the clearest understanding of how media affects viewers' worldviews and everyday experiences. Overall, the researchers found that the majority of respondents reported with answers falling into either the comparative or subjective categories, with a smaller portion indicating active place-making engagement with the television shows.

Following a similar interpretative framework in this project, I have attempted to understand to what extent viewers of *Dersu Uzala* have actively engaged with the film's cinematic nature, which I also analyze through use of the concepts of geographic realism and Lukinbeal's functions of cinematic landscapes (2005). However, whereas surveys worked for Fletchall, Lukinbeal and McHugh because they worked with a very specific place, Orange County, and with a very popular set of contemporary television series aired regularly on cable television, the relative obscurity and age of *Dersu Uzala* means that finding a large sample of people who have seen it would be difficult. Therefore, rather than use surveys, I explore audience responses by utilizing the internet research method of online ethnography. Although relatively unexplored by film geographers, this method has significant potential for understanding both audience activation and performance.

#### *The Geoweb: Using Web 2.0 as Audience*

One way of accessing audience responses to cinema that has been introduced to media geographers by Dodds (2006, 2008) and Dittmer (2010; Dittmer and Dodds 2008) is online ethnography. The term *ethnography* used here is intended to refer to the ability of the researcher to interact with user-generated internet content, termed *Web 2.0* by O'Reilly (2005), at the same level of those that the researcher is analyzing (Dittmer 2010, 146). Even when referencing the

phenomenon of Web 2.0 the term *user*, Rose notes (2012, 273), has recently become the chosen epithet for viewers rather than *viewer*, *audience*, or *fan* because it emphasizes the level of engagement that viewers have with the content of what they are viewing. For this reason it is also the term used throughout this text.

The aspect of engagement indicated by this term is the key difference between Web 2.0 and its predecessor. Whereas previously the internet was a one-way process that allowed consumers to view internet content passively, with the development of new technologies in the early 2000s this turned into a “bi-directional collaboration in which users are able to interact with and provide information to central sites, and to see that information collated and made available to others” (Goodchild 2007, 27). What this amounts to is an interactive experience where users are able to comment on or discuss daily news articles, upload videos of themselves on YouTube, or interact with friends in other parts of the world via social networking sites such as Facebook.

Web 2.0 and its user-generated content (UGC) have become particularly interesting for geographers for several reasons. For one, when this two-way process is combined with new web-based geospatial applications such as Google Maps, Wikimapia, or OpenStreetMap, it has put power in the hands of ordinary citizens to create maps of their everyday lives, thus disrupting the traditional and hierarchical domain of knowledge production (Goodchild 2007; Elwood, Goodchild, and Sui 2012). Whether these services are truly democratizing, however, has also been put into question (Graham 2011; Haklay 2013).

Another reason that geographers have become interested in UGC is that often when users contribute information to the internet through social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, or blog-posting, data on the geographic coordinates of the person at the time of their contribution is collected that can be used by geographers as data for spatial analysis. This type of information accompanying user-generated content, termed *volunteered geographic information* by Goodchild (2007) and which in social networking sites such as Twitter appears in the form of *geotags*, or geo-coded spatial data, is, in the context of more generalized user-generated content, “the subset

of UGC that concerns the explicit characterization of the geographic domain; in other words, the Earth's surface and near-surface" (Elwood, Goodchild, and Sui 2012, 574).

As the emphasis on the earth's physical coordinates in this definition suggests geographers have predominantly viewed UGC as a way to ask and answer questions of how certain phenomenon are distributed across space (Haklay, Singleton, and Parker 2008). Like film geographers, geographers of the internet have been interested in transcending the binary between digital space and material space and showing how the two are actually co-constitutive (Zook and Graham 2007; Kitchin and Dodge 2011). The use of this geo-coded data, called "big data" in reference to the seemingly unending quantity of it, has therefore been used to map cultural and social phenomena such as race (Crutcher and Zook 2009), religion (Shelton, Zook, and Graham 2012), or even the price of marijuana (Zook, Graham, and Stephens 2012), but also to highlight the spatial nature of otherwise seemingly aspatial phenomena such as Wikipedia (Graham, Hale, and Stephens 2011) or Flickr photos (Hollenstein and Purves 2010; Wall and Kirdnark 2012).

As Crampton et al. (2013) have recently argued however, the reliance of these types of studies on geo-coded information are limited in the claims that can be made about society, a result of social media users not being representative of the population as a whole, in addition to the simplistic spatial ontology on which the geo-coded information is based. Recognizing these flaws, the authors have called for an incorporation of new strategies in working with geo-coded information (2013, 132):

By understanding the geoweb through a diversity of quantitative data sources and methodologies [...], while also augmenting such analyses with in-depth qualitative analysis of users and places implicated in these data, we can understand the geoweb as something beyond a simple collection of latitude-longitude coordinates extraneously attached to other bits of information, and instead understand it as a socially produced space that blurs the oft-reproduced binary of virtual and material spaces.

As this statement indicates, what tends not to be seen from geographers are close readings of the detailed or lengthy information in the form of statements made by users on blogs, comment sections of newspapers, thoughts expressed on social networking sites, or film reviews, all of



which have the potential to reveal users' more personal or abstract ideas about their spaces and environment. Therefore, rather than thinking of VGI as numerical data that can be mapped to identify spatial patterns, in this project I propose that we can also think of VGI as volunteered geographic *ideas* as well as information, which directs our attention to the inherently unstable, nuanced, and personal nature of reflections about certain geographically related topics that don't necessarily have to be geo-coded to be useful.

This type of research that investigates the ideas and opinions put forward in the online communities of Web 2.0 and referred to as online ethnography or "netnography" has become ubiquitous in disciplines outside of geography such as marketing, communications, political science, and anthropology (Kozinets 2009). Kozinets (2009), scholar of online consumer culture, posits that "there are at least 100 million, and perhaps as many as a billion people around the world who participate in online communities as a regular, ongoing part of their social experience" (2). According to Dodds's work (2006, 2008) on the popular geopolitics of the James Bond movie series, the online communities found on the Internet Movie Database have the potential to provide geographers researching film reception with valuable information about how users engage with cinematic geographies. Dodds describes IMDb as an online community where users congregate to discuss opinions and ideas about movies, providing "a platform for some contributors [...] to interpret, represent and perform certain understandings of the contemporary geopolitical condition," as well as "provid[ing] insights into how fans negotiate specific films and generic conventions ranging from plot, character development, special effects, locations and themes" (2008, 490). Whereas Dodds's use of Web 2.0 is focused on its applicability for gathering geopolitical discourse about a particular films series, in this project I use the Internet Movie Database to answer the question of how nature and the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala* is interpreted, reproduced, or contested by users of this online forum.

It is helpful to think about this in terms of Hall's (2011) model of encoding/decoding as an analysis of the process of decoding. In this model, though a filmmaker may have a "preferred

message” that they would like viewers to gather from a film, how that message is actually received and “reassembled” for “use” may be entirely different. As Hall explains,

Before this message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to a ‘use,’ it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect,’ influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. (80)

With this model in mind we can see this project as geared toward how people decode a particular message about nature, but also how they put that message to “use” by rearticulating it on the internet and discussing it in relation to their own lives. Throughout this paper the term *rearticulation* is used in a Derridean sense to mean the process by which the film’s ostensible “meaning” is reproduced but which, owing to the temporal and spatial disjuncture between the first utterance and the repeated utterance, is necessarily different or altered. It is in this space, or what Derrida would call *differance*, that contestation over the film’s meaning and how it is put to use is made possible. Thus, although I cannot claim to account for all of the effects that these particular decodings have on how viewers engage differently with the world after seeing *Dersu Uzala*, I am able to provide insight into the social practice of recommunicating these interpretations to the growing online community that ensures that *Dersu Uzala* will continue to be relevant, long after its initial release.

In focusing on the way this movie has been received I move beyond the author- and text-centered approaches that have dominated film geography (Dixon, Zonn, and Bascom 2008). By substituting Dodds’s focus on geopolitics with a focus on nature this research is also exemplary of how media geographers can use Web 2.0 to understand audience interpretations of cinematic geographies and cultural politics more broadly. Moreover, films do not cease to exist after their initial construction, but continue to be seen and experienced for years to come; as Barthes would say, “[A] text is eternally written *here and now*” (2011, 348). By considering *Dersu Uzala*, a film whose production is no doubt situated in a very specific moment in history, as it is seen today rather than at the time of its release, this study seeks to understand not how that historical moment

impacted the final product, but how that product continues to be remade, today and in the future.  
The specific methods I use to understand this are the subject of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

The aim of this project is to understand the discursive construction of nature and society in *Dersu Uzala* and whether or how this impacts viewers' worldviews or understandings of nature and society in their own lives. To do this I use the "author-text-reader" (ATR) model as an organization framework. This framework has guided the formation of my research questions and which will be explained below. Following this explanation is a description of my approach to each of the different "sites of meaning" outlined by the ATR model. I begin with the site of the film and explain what it means to deconstruct a film and why this is useful. Next, I discuss what it means to "read" a movie like a text and the different considerations one must make when doing so. Finally, I discuss my approach to using the Internet Movie Database and Amazon.com websites through the method of observational netnography as outlined by Kozinets (2002, 2009).

#### *The Author-Text-Reader Model*

The ATR model is an organizational tool that has been borrowed extensively by geographers from literary theory (see Natter and Jones 1993) which assumes that a text's meaning can be said to occur at three different sites – the sites of the author, the text, and the reader. A thorough explanation of the ATR model can be found in Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2012), which is my primary guide, assisted by Barnes and Duncan's *Writing Worlds* (1992), Duncan and Ley's *Place, Culture, Representation* (1993), and Lukinbeal and Zimmermann's *The Geography of Cinema: A Cinematic World* (2008). While each of the three sites is typically recognized as significant in one form or other, in practice almost no study attempts to account for all three sites. Instead, the emphasis of any project usually falls on one of these sites, and how the

geographer or social scientist determines this emphasis depends on the theoretical assumptions that they bring to the framework to begin with. Because I have placed the brunt of my inquiry on the site of the audience the research questions guiding this project and modeled on this framework are as follows:

- 1 What are the contextual factors of the film's production and reception that may be said to influence how the film has subsequently been received?
- 2 How are nature and society constructed in *Dersu Uzala* and how are these constructions supported or undermined in the film's form and narrative?
- 3 How have contemporary audiences interpreted the film's portrayal of nature and society and articulated these ideas via the "user review" functions of the Amazon.com and the Internet Movie Database websites?
  - a How do these interpretations relate to the researcher's findings in questions one and two?

Film theory as an academic pursuit came into being in the mid-twentieth century with the *auteur* theory, or the idea that any film worth critical analysis is the product of a unique artistic vision that has to be analyzed and critiqued. Most analyses of film began with and still depend in large part on this site of meaning (Yoshimoto 2000). Although I am most interested in the effects that the film has produced rather than the director's unique artistic vision, I recognize the role of the author in sculpting the text and influencing how it is subsequently seen. Thus, I approach the site of the author and context of production through the lens of the "author function" articulated by Foucault (1977). According to Foucault, the author is conceived of as an invocation which limits the chaotic proliferation of a text's potential interpretations.

This type of approach which moves away from the author as sole arbiter of meaning was made possible following poststructuralist French thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s such as Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida who questioned the authority invested in the author. Rather than view texts as the expression of one individual whose intentions must be known in order to clearly grasp the text's definitive meaning, texts were viewed as a combination of never-ending cultural references that would always be read in new time periods and places. As Barthes (2011, 348) explains, "[A]

text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.” Only by removing the author and thinking of texts as functioning independently in society, creating new meanings that may have little or nothing to do with the author’s intent, were text- and reader-centered approaches made possible. This is because in each of these types of analyses rather than attribute meaning-making to the text’s author, the meaning of the text is determined either solely by the researcher, in the case of the text-centered approach, or the audience, in the reader-centered approach.

Assuming that the film *Dersu Uzala* is like a text is advantageous because it communicates the film’s inherently unstable meaning, lack of authorial control, and dependence “upon the wide range of interpretations brought to bear upon it by various different readers” (Barnes and Duncan 1992, 6). This enables me to consider that the online user reviews on which my audience research is based are valid interpretations of the film’s meaning irrespective of the author’s intended meaning or even the meanings I attribute to it as researcher. That said, rather than being a true polyvocality of meaning on behalf of the audience, the result is rather my own selective and authorial reading of user interpretations, based on a research agenda directed toward one particular topic among many possible topics and made sense of through an array of additional outside sources and personal experience. One source in particular that I utilize to put user interpretations into perspective is the film itself.

#### *Deconstructing Dersu Uzala: Derrida, Rousseau, and the Supplement*

In order to answer the second research question, I use two methodologies. Working backwards, I begin Chapter 4 not by showing how the nature/society binary is constructed but how it is a false dichotomy within the film’s structure and narrative. To do this I use the method of deconstruction explained in Chapter 2 of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1997). Derrida

demonstrates the method of deconstruction by applying it to the texts of Jean Jacques Rousseau. In the preface, Derrida's translator Spivak succinctly explains the process of deconstruction as a search for that "positive lever" onto which one can grasp, a tool which points to the contradictory expressions within a text and which undermine the surficial purpose of the text. "It must be emphasized," Spivak warns, "that I am not speaking simply of locating a moment of ambiguity or irony ultimately incorporated into the text's system of unified meaning but rather a moment that genuinely threatens to collapse that system" (1997, lxxv). In deconstructing Rousseau, Derrida finds that moment or tool in the notion of the *supplement*, the name Derrida gives to the "something more" that is always necessary to complete the thing that, according to Rousseau, *should* always be fully present or complete, but is actually always absent and lacking.

In Derrida's account the thing that should always already be fully present for Rousseau is nature, which for Rousseau includes the speech act. Writing, on the other hand, is seen as something external and corrupting, an extension of a depraved civilization. However, as a writer himself, Rousseau is forced to confess that in order to continue his work and convey his ideas even he cannot escape this corrupting force. Pointing out the different ways Rousseau is constantly in need of supplementing what should already be fully present, or ideal – in Rousseau's case speech, melody, and sex – Derrida draws our attention to the way that the things Rousseau takes to be natural are never fully present or complete. Rather, these things that Rousseau takes to be nature are always already supplemented, brought into existence by the very thing Rousseau claims they are not, civilization. This then is Derrida's *constitutive outside*, or the act of bringing what is thought to be marginal to the center. For my research on *Dersu Uzala* the constitutive outside is important because it helps us see that the foundation on which the film rests, a pristine wilderness uncorrupted by human interference, is not fully present or complete; that is, it does not actually exist without the film itself supplementing it, bringing it into existence. In other words, the pristine wilderness of Siberia filmed by Kurosawa is not reality, but a reality-effect, made possible by the techniques of the filmmaker.

The same process of deconstruction can be applied to practically any hierarchical division or binary and is useful because it allows us to disrupt and question society's most taken-for-granted assumptions. As we have seen though, the division established by Rousseau between an ideal nature untainted by the deleterious effects of the civilized world is key to the Romantic notion of nature on which *Dersu Uzala* is based. I therefore find the process of deconstructing *Dersu Uzala* to be relatively straightforward. Following Derrida's example I use as my "positive lever" the supplement, which appears in the film as writing (Arseniev's journal entries that would later go on to become the book on which the film is based), but also as other types of representational technology, the map and the photograph in particular. By showing the way that Dersu and the wilderness are never fully present or complete, but are always brought into existence through Arseniev's representation of them I show the way that the film's narrative deconstructs its own foundational binary.

As is hopefully evident from this description, the process of deconstruction is necessarily a negative act, meaning that rather than produce meaning it breaks meaning down, showing what was once taken as stable to be contingent. Rather than leaving the film in these broken pieces and moving on, after showing the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala* to be a false reality, I show the ways that this false reality is made to appear real. That is, I show the way that the filmmaker has naturalized the nature/society binary to make it seem as if it is not actually a social construct, but an objective fact and existing social relation. To do this I look to the film's form and the way that the binary is supplemented by the film's cinematic landscapes.

### *Reconstructing Dersu Uzala: Film Form and Landscape*

The approach I take to the film's landscapes is what is often called a *close reading*, or what Rose (2012) refers to as *compositional interpretation*. As Rose explains, this method lacks explicit steps and varies according to the medium being analyzed (2012, 58). There is general



agreement, however, that compositional analysis of a film (“reading a film”) comprises a few key considerations: analysis of the film’s shot lengths and sizes, editing, which includes shot sequences and transitions, lighting, camera movement and angle, music, and knowledge of technical equipment (Rose 2012; Bordwell and Thomson 1997; Kolker 2006; Singerman 2006), all of which can be further broken down to very specific levels of detail. In his *French Cinema: The Student’s Book* (2006) Singerman has given a particularly concise introduction to the process. “To describe a film – that is to analyze it,” Singerman tells us, “it is necessary first to break it up into its component parts. This critical first step is then followed by an attempt to understand the relationships between those parts in order to gain an appreciation of the manner in which the film produces its various meanings” (2006, 19).

In order to read a film then one must have a grasp of the different elements that constitute the film and how to analyze these in relation to one another. Some useful terminology for film analysis are *shot*, *sequences*, *scene*, and *camera angle* and *movement*. A film shot is the most basic unit of the film, consisting of everything that is within the frame of visibility, also called film *space*. The formal arrangement of objects within the shot, i.e. within film space, is called the film’s *mise-en-scene*. A sequence is a series of shots associated with one another through editing. A sequence differs from a scene in that the former implies the passing of time, whereas the latter presents an unbroken temporal unit. How shots are linked together through editing is one way that meaning is created within film. A simple example of this can be seen in the difference between using a *cut* and a *fade in/out* to change from one shot to another. While simple cuts from one shot to the next are considered value-neutral and can take on different meanings according to the juxtaposition of different shots, the use of fade in/out from one shot to another may imply the passage of time or a stronger correlation between the events of the first shot and those of the second.

The meaning of individual shots also depends on the shot’s size and length as well as the angle and movement of the camera. The size of the shot is measured by the distance of the

camera from the body of a person in the frame. An *establishing shot* is one in which the camera is so far from its subject matter that individuals are not, or are just barely, discernable. The purpose of these shots is to situate the viewer geographically and establish the film's setting. After setting is established shot sizes become increasingly more precise in illustrating character position relative to location. A *long shot* is one in which the entire body of a person can be seen relative to her/his geographical location. A *medium shot* is one in which the setting has already been established and attention is focused on character action and dialogue, as emphasized by attention to the body, typically from waist up. A *close-up* is a shot of a person's face or portion of the body, meant to draw attention to some aspect of the character themselves, such as their thought process, indicated through facial expressions.

This terminology of how the film image is divided and discussed is necessary to understand how to apply Lukinbeal's (2005) taxonomy of the function and meaning of landscape in film, which I have used as a key to conceptualizing nature as landscape in *Dersu Uzala*. Drawing on Higson (1984), Lukinbeal argues that landscape in cinema serves multiple functions within a film depending on the needs of the narrative; landscape is described as encompassing place, space, spectacle, and metaphor, sometimes alternately, sometimes simultaneously. According to this framework, while landscape as place "provides narrative realism by grounding a film to a particular location's regional sense of place and history," landscape as space is associated with "placelessness." Establishing shots and long shots characterize landscape as place, helping the viewer to understand the ties between narrative and location, as well as different scales of geography at which the action is occurring (Lukinbeal 2005, 6). Medium shots and close-ups characterize landscape as space and it is in these shots which focus on character dialogue and facial expressions that landscape as place becomes significant; it is through narrative and character development that the "social meaning of place" is created (Fletcher, Lukinbeal, and McHugh 2012, 63). At other times landscape operates as spectacle, a scene that fully engages the viewer's attention as something visually pleasurable in its own right (Lukinbeal

2005, 11). At the other end of the spectrum landscape may function as metaphor, where the meaning of the landscape is tied to narrative in order to help naturalize events. The different functions of landscape are not always cut and dry however, but overlap in a continual process of place-making. In Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh's (2012, 64) words:

The process of televisual place-making requires constant tension and continuous scalar movements between landscape, place, and space. Where space constructs a localized sense of social place and allows televisual place to become meaningful through the unfolding of narrative events, place grounds the narrative, provides geographic realism, and establishes broad cultural meanings.

Although it would not be expected that user reviews would dissect landscapes in this way, after reading user reviews of the film on Amazon and the Internet Movie Database it is clear that users have definite ideas about the landscape, how it is filmed, and how it functions metaphorically.

#### *Using Web 2.0 to Understand Audience Response*

To approach audience responses I have engaged in internet research of a particular online community – internet users that use Amazon.com and the Internet Movie Database to review *Dersu Uzala* and discuss it with other internet users. Internet research can be divided into two basic types: online research and web-based research (Garland 2009, 61). Online research consists of traditional research methods such as surveys or interviews that incidentally take place over the internet. Web-based research focuses on the pre-existing venues of social exchange that are principally located on the internet. Web-based research is then divided into two types: observational and engaged (Kitchin 2003; Garland 2009). Engaged web research means that the researcher introduces themselves to the other users of the website(s) of interest, makes their research intentions known, and actively participates in the online community's culture. The benefits of this approach are a potentially deeper understanding of the community's thoughts and behaviors, as well as being arguably more ethically sound. Observational web research is when

the researcher downloads and analyzes communications of online users without making their presence known, directly interacting with the users themselves, or informing the users of the research that is taking place. The benefits of this approach are that it is unobtrusive and therefore less likely to influence the data collected, and it is more time-efficient (Garland 2009, 62–63). For this project I chose to use the latter approach, for reasons that I will explain.

### *Netnography*

My use of observational web-based research has been largely informed by the extensive work of Robert Kozinets (1997, 2002, 2007) on the method called *netnography*, a term Kozinets coined in his 1997 essay about the online fan culture of the television show *The X-Files*. Yet, while Kozinets (2009, 75) has recently cautioned against purely observational netnographies because they run the risk of becoming “flat and two-dimensional” and lacking in “deep understanding and thick description,” others (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kitchin 2003; Garland 2009) have found that their research benefits from the observational approach’s timeliness and unobtrusive nature. This last factor, that observational netnographies do not directly interact with research subjects but rather collect and analyze information that is publicly available, is significant, explains sociologist Heather Kitchin (2003), because it can be considered exempt from consideration by ethical research review boards.

With these considerations in mind I chose to use a purely observational approach to netnography in spite of Kozinets’s warnings, believing that in addition to being within my ethical jurisdiction the method was suitable for my stated research objective of understanding how or whether users describe the construction of nature in *Dersu Uzala* and its impact on their understanding of nature in their own lives. Furthermore, despite Kozinets’s disinclination toward observational netnography, because he has provided some of the most detailed and well organized methodological texts on netnography, I have continued to rely on his work, especially his 2002

article “The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities” and 2007 book *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, to organize the steps taken during part of my project. Following Kozinets’s suggestions I divided my research on *Dersu Uzala* reviews into the following phases: *Entrée*, how I chose the websites that I used, *Data Collection*, how I decided what information from these websites to work with, *Data Analysis and Interpretation*, how I categorized and made sense of this information, and *Ethics and Member Checks*, or how I position my own role and the role of my research relative to those that have provided the information I am working with.

### *Entrée*

I was inspired to work with the Internet Movie Database by Dodds’s description of its potential for geographers, but I also included in my analysis the shopping website Amazon.com, which Dodds did not. I decided to include both websites for two reasons. The first is that together they provided more information to work with (151 reviews together) than the Internet Movie Database would alone (64), a factor which increased the chance of encountering users discussing my particular research topic. Second, both are two of the most widely trafficked English language websites on the internet that provide the ability for users to review and rate films. Out of all websites on the internet, Amazon ranked as the 6<sup>th</sup> and IMDb as the 46<sup>th</sup> most visited websites, with Amazon attracting an estimated 88.9 million visitors and IMDb attracting 19.2 million visitors for the month of February 2013 (Qantcast.com). While it may seem like a large difference between the two, when considered relative to the millions of possible websites available on the internet, the fact that both are in the top 50 of all (English language) websites indicates the extreme popularity of both. The fact that both websites are so heavily trafficked means that even though not every person that visits the *Dersu Uzala* page of these websites will provide a

response to *Dersu Uzala*, there are millions of readers of the reviews found there whose understanding of the movie will be shaped by what previous users have written.

Despite some similarities in popularity and function, there are differences between the two in the stated goals and intentions of the websites as well as in how they are used. The Internet Movie Database began in the 1980s as the bulletin board rec.arts.movies. Based on mutual interest of the discussion board's participants volunteers began writing scripts and designing software in order to create a comprehensive and manageable site of movie data, led by the database's primary initiator and CEO Col Needham in Bristol, England (Lowe 2008). As of 2010, the Internet Movie Database offers users information on 1.5 million movies and television shows and 3.2 million cast and crew members (Kaufman 2010). Although the Internet Movie Database has since become a subsidiary of the Amazon.com group of companies, besides the incorporation of ads, the spirit of the Internet Movie Database has remained the same. The popularity of the Internet Movie Database has been attributed in part to the fact that if you use a search engine to look for information on nearly any television show, movie, or celebrity the Internet Movie Database is the first link that appears (Siklos 2006). In addition to these search engine "tourists," the Internet Movie Database offers features that one must be a member to participate in. Members of the Internet Movie Database can log in and contribute to any number of discussions with millions of other fans around the world. As a website dedicated to cinema it has also developed a reputation as a credible source for information on industrial aspects of the film business, giving details of productions such as filming locations, ticket sales and cost, cast and crew information, and detailed biographies of people in the industry.

The Internet Movie Database's sole dedication to cinema and television sets it apart from Amazon, which is an online shopping website dedicated to selling products, some of which happen to be movies and television shows. In the case of Amazon many of the reviews are likely to have been prompted by the website itself via e-mail which, by the nature of the interaction, elicits not only a review of the film and its content, but also the film as a product and purchase.

The review component of Amazon is pushed heavily by the company in order to help sell products, but also to help the company understand what products to retain (Streitfeld 2012). This encouragement to review, combined with the website's status as one of the top online retailers in the world, has created an Amazon review microcosm where users vie with one another to establishing their names or pseudonyms in the Amazon "Top Reviewers" hierarchy or the "Hall of Fame Reviewers," based on the votes by other users as either "helpful" or "unhelpful."

In describing the popularity that has sprung up around Amazon product reviews Heffernan (2010, par. 2) of the *New York Times Magazine* writes:

The product review, as literary form, is in its heyday. Polemical, evocative, witty, narrative, exhortative, furious, ironic, off the cuff: the reviews on Amazon use all the tools in the critic's cubby – and invent some of their own. The ones that rise to the top, in the site's parallel "favorable" and "critical" categories, adroitly win your trust and close their cases.

The seriousness with which the company and its users approach product reviews can be seen in the company's recent actions to cull between 1,000 to 10,000 product reviews which it took to be false or misleading, an action that resulted from recent accusations made against Top Reviewers for selling their reviews to interested parties and book authors that used fake identities to promote their own products. In a similar wave of indignation many users took it upon themselves to rally against over-inflated product reviews by down-voting such reviews, a movement organized through the website's message boards (Streitfeld 2012). These actions go as far as to include an off-site blog ([harriet-rules.blogspot.com](http://harriet-rules.blogspot.com)) dedicated to hating Amazon's number one Hall of Fame Reviewer, Harriet Klausner, who has accumulated over 28,000 reviews, on account of what are perceived as over-inflated reviews.

In the end, while there are overlaps with Internet Movie Database users discussing *Dersu Uzala* as a DVD for instance and Amazon.com users discussing the content of the film, Amazon.com reviews are less spontaneous and more focused on the film's cost value and personal internet glory. Despite this, I find the Amazon product review culture to be vibrant and worth including in this study.

## Online Identities, Online Communities, and Communities Online

Demographics regarding income, ethnicity, and gender for both websites are available via audience analytics website such as Quantcast.com, which I used to find the popularity of each website. As Kozinets explains, netnography is more useful for understanding attitudes towards particular products or topics, not how these attitudes were motivated by individual identities (2002, 64). It is important, however, to keep in mind that one of the uniting factors between all of the reviewers besides that they have allegedly all seen the film is that they all have access to a computer with internet (hence are all on one side of the digital divide), are technologically savvy enough to navigate it, and knowledgeable enough about internet entertainment and consumer culture to make their way to these websites in the first place. By looking at individual user profiles I have been able to find out how frequently each reviewer participates in either Amazon or Internet Movie Database review boards or discussion threads. While for some their review of *Dersu Uzala* constitutes their only activity, for the majority their review of *Dersu Uzala* is one of many, and for some it is one of thousands of reviews and comments.

These users who provide the information that I have used then are a very particular subset of all *Dersu Uzala* viewers ever, and thus this study cannot claim to be comprehensive. In this sense my research is focused on what Kozinets (2009, 64) describes as an “online community” rather than a “community online” because my focus is entirely on how the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala* is rearticulated via the specific internet forums that I have identified, and not how it is discussed with friends and family at home or simply thought about in one’s own head. In light of the film’s focus on the negative impacts of technology and modernization I feel that it is important to keep in mind the particular setting of the reviews (the internet) because how the users discuss these elements of the film’s plot are potentially influenced by the users’ own embeddedness in this culture of technological production and consumption.



## *Data Collection*

At the macro level I approached the reviews in a similar way to how social scientists deal with a large quantity of interview material, which I take to be a type of discourse. The online reviews are obviously not interviews, but as film reviewers we can think of them as responding to the general questions, “What do you like or not like about the film?” or, “Why should other people see or not see this movie?” Thought of like this, the online reviews are not much different from film scholar Ien Ang’s seminal study *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (1982) for which she placed an ad in a magazine asking for readers to write to her simply explaining why they do or don’t like watching the television show *Dallas*. The 42 letters she received were not interviews in a traditional sense, but they nevertheless provided key information to how viewers felt about their experiences watching *Dallas*.

Approaching the reviews as a form of discourse data, I used Crang’s “Analyzing Qualitative Data” (1997) for the beginning stage to help me organize this large quantity of information, which turned out to be 151 reviews, equal to about 100 pages of single-spaced 12-point font text. While some reviews were short, about one or two sentences, others were as long as three pages single-spaced. From here I read and reread these reviews countless times so that I could identify commonalities and discrepancies between what different users said. Throughout the collection process I found 27 reviews that I felt to be entirely unhelpful and eliminated these from my files. These were reviews that consisted of one or two lines, such as “Excellent,” or on two occasions were repeat posts: one user posted identical reviews on both the Internet Movie Database and Amazon, while another posted the same review under two different user names (or this was done by someone else).

After refining my collection to only content-rich reviews I found that themes that I had thought might be prevalent when I started this project – the geopolitical and historical aspects of

the film's production, questions of territorial acquisition and imperial expansion – were nearly absent. Instead, reviewers focused on the more overt issue of the loss of nature resulting from modern development. This caused me to return to and narrow my original research questions. Rather than ask, “How do reviewers interpret geographical concepts in the film and how does this contribute to their understanding of the world?,” I asked, “How do reviewers interpret the film's representation of nature and how does this contribute to their understanding of their own relationship to nature?” This resulted in 73 reviews that together were approximately 36 single-spaced pages of text at 12-point font. As I ferreted out these reviews however, I had simultaneously been categorizing reviews that related to other prevalent themes that I considered significantly related to the topic of nature as portrayed in the film, including ideas about technology, the film's relation to the viewers' understanding of reality, as well as the lasting impact that the film had on the users' lives. Although these reviews don't all appear as primary “evidence” in my study, I saved these different themes as being potentially useful when considering the broader implications of this research.

### *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

Following Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh's (2012) example, I chose to categorize the reviews in terms of *comparative*, *subjective*, and *incorporative* type responses because this would give insight into how or whether the nature/society binary was rearticulated by users, and to what extent, if any, it was incorporated into the users' worldview. Using this logic, a comparative type statement is one that discusses the binary in the film in terms of its narrative function, implying that it is a convention of storytelling rather than a more profound truth about the world. In doing so they make a distinction between the world of the film and their understanding of the world in which they live. An example of a comparative response would be:

This clash of cultures, therefore, turns into a celebration of friendship with its succession of dramatic, poignant, even humorous vignettes. Dersu's incompatibility with modern civilization – an oft-used device during this particular era in cinema – brings to mind THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER (1975) and THE ELEPHANT MAN (1980); curiously, all three films were inspired by real events. (Mario Gauci 2007, IMDb)

In this review the user compares the film with “real events” and sees and describes the film as simply a form of entertainment without making deeper connections to the “clash of cultures” they describe.

Comparative responses differ from subjective responses in that a subjective response will go beyond the superficial presentation of binary to engage with what this binary means, accepting what is presented, but still making a distinction between the film’s world and the user’s world. See for instance this statement: “Using wide shots throughout the movie, Kurosawa shows how insignificant men are in comparison with the nature surrounding them, how beautiful the world is and how blessed we are to live in it” (Eumenides\_0 2009, IMDb). In this example the user suggests that they understand how the director has used filming techniques to achieve a certain emotional effect, but also moves beyond the simple description of techniques by ascribing to them a subjective meaning of beauty and blessedness that is beyond the world of “men.”

Finally, an incorporative type expression is one that not only accepts the binary, but actively uses it to structure the user’s own ideas about the world and their relation to it. As Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh (2012, 97) explain, quoting Ingold: “[T]hese respondents fold televisual place into their own lived worlds, by ‘place[ing] themselves in relation to [its] specific features [...] in such a way that their meanings may be revealed or disclosed’ (Ingold, 1993, 171).”

This type of response can be seen in the following:

[Dersu] always knew what to do and what was best in the woods. Which is actually a great deal like what the rest of the world really is, and what is best for the whole world. However, modern society, as we all know, will not embrace Dersu's beliefs. We will not give even though we have no use for the item, Dersu did. And, Dersu gave often when he could have used the item, remember the leaving of food in the shelter for others who might be in need.

This person repositions the film character Dersu into the “real” world, drawing a connection between nature (the woods) and “the whole world.” They continue to delineate between the ideal behavior of the woods/the world and what they understand to be the actual behavior of modern society, or “we.” In other words, this person uses the film’s nature/society binary as an interpretative framework to think through their ideas about the way the world is.

Using this categorization system was not simple. Unlike the data used by authors who employed this system originally, my data often went well beyond one- or two-line sentences prompted by very specific questions. Instead, much of the information I have worked with consists of one- to two-page rambling essays that alternate between themes as the author thinks of them. The disorganized and unfocused nature of the reviews means that in some cases one review may be categorized in terms of all three response types. For instance, the user may begin by discussing the film qua film, and end by expounding on the meaning of life. In these cases I have chosen to include the review in only one category to which it seems to mostly apply. At the same time, some reviews did not clearly fall into any of the three categories, minimized somewhat by the fact that I had already purged reviews that were entirely unrelated to the research questions. By and large these somewhat ambiguous reviews were placed into the category of *comparative* as reviews that focused on the film as purely entertainment without drawing connections to any ideas outside of the film itself.

### *Ethics and Member Checks*

What constitutes an ethical netnography comes down to what counts as publicly available material and what does not. As I have already mentioned, while an engaged web research project would qualify as human subjects research and therefore require a review process by an Institutional Review Board, “the research use of spontaneous conversations, if gathered in a publicly accessible venue, is not human subjects research according to the Code of Federal

Regulations' definition" (Kozinets 2009, 141). The current research project would only be affected in the event that I were to publish portions of this thesis containing user commentary, in which case I would elect to seek consent from the individuals I would be quoting as well as under what moniker they would choose to be associated with (their real name or their internet name). Furthermore, before publication I would make a final draft of the material available to users of both websites to ensure that their ideas or opinions had not been misrepresented.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE AUTHOR, THE INDUSTRY, AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE

To some extent the biographical details of Akira Kurosawa, as the creative force behind *Dersu Uzala*, as well as the particular constraints placed on him by the Japanese and Soviet film industries as political and financial backers of the film, are necessary to consider in this study. However, as much as Kurosawa's vision and artistry contributes to the film, "an author's intentions and the meaning of a text often cease to coincide" (Barnes and Duncan 1992, 6). Because I seek to understand the consequences of the film itself, I choose to establish only the details that lend to structuring audience interpretation. We may think of this information as Kurosawa's "biographical legend," the discursive construction of the director produced either by the film industry, critics, and fans, or by the director himself via interviews or self-published statements (Bordwell 1988, 5). According to Bordwell, this biographical legend functions in two ways, "to permit works to come into being, as fulfillments of the legend; and to orient perceivers to them, to favor certain construals and to block others" (Bordwell 1988, 5).

This perspective on the director extends to the context of the film's production more generally in that, while certain social, cultural, and political aspects directly impact the film's being produced in the way that it was, or at all, only certain aspects of this directly affect how the film has been received. Thinking of the biographical and historical context of production in this way, I highlight in this chapter only those aspects of Kurosawa's life and the political and economic relations of the film industry that have been discussed by critical and popular interpretations of *Dersu Uzala*. While professional critics and scholars have been more interested in the geopolitical implications of the film and the role of the Soviet government in the film's production, I find that the online users are most concerned with the idiosyncrasies of Kurosawa as an auteur director, the fact that the film is based on "real events," and that the film won an Oscar

in 1976 for Best Foreign Film. Therefore, in this chapter I discuss certain aspects of each of these issues. These elements include the personal life and tragedy of Kurosawa leading up to the film's production, the director's relation to the historical period in which the film is set, including the Russo-Japanese War, the social and economic conditions of Japan and the Japanese film industry that led to Kurosawa's choice to accept the offer made to him by Mosfilm, and the political and cultural constraints placed on the director by the Soviet cultural politics.

### *Soviet International Relations and Culture Exchanges*

The era of Soviet history under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev (1953–1964) is often referred to as *the Thaw*, signaling the relaxation of certain aspects of Soviet life and politics. During his time as Party secretary Khrushchev initiated the process of “de-Stalinization,” openly rejecting at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress his predecessor's abuse of power and rule by fear. With hopes that a more honest and open society would gain the allegiance of Soviet citizens Khrushchev eased repression in the arts and media, returned millions of people from Gulag labor camps, and pursued a foreign policy based on “peaceful coexistence” (Zubok 2008).

According to the principles of peaceful coexistence it would be possible for the Soviet Union and its socialist allies to exist alongside Western countries despite ideological differences. Furthermore, it allowed Khrushchev to redirect attention and resources away from the military industrial complex to the quality of life in the Soviet Union, including the development of new policies in agriculture and housing. This redirection was facilitated by the rapprochement in trade of resources and technology with other states that would be necessary to reach the much-desired parity in these fields. This trade was especially marked between the Soviet Union and the United States by the Lacy-Zarubin agreement signed in 1958, an arrangement at the government level that allowed for the equal exchange of scholars, tourists, culture, technology, sports, and performing arts between the two superpowers (Richmond 2003).

At the same time that relations were improving between the US and USSR so were those between the Soviets and the Japanese. One of the effects of this warming was an increase in the exchange of resources and cultural material, including cinema, between the two countries. In addition to agreements to show films produced by the other country's national film industry in domestic theatres, this cultural exchange resulted in eleven Soviet-Japanese co-productions (Melinkova 2002). The fourth of these was Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* (1975), the product of a special invitation to the director by the largest film production house in the USSR, Mosfilm. According to this agreement Kurosawa would have 100% of artistic control, but the film would be entirely funded by and the property of the Soviet Union (Nogami 2006, 127–28).

In a way this short-term period of the Cold War when international relations were marginally improved, referred to as *détente* in the case of the US-USSR (approximately 1972–1980), is reflected by the production and reception of *Dersu Uzala*. Not only is it a Soviet-Japanese co-production, reminding us of these improved relations and the Soviet interest in obtaining Japanese investment, it also went on to win the US Academy Award for Best Foreign Film the year following its release, among other awards around the world including the FIPRESCI Prize and Golden Prize at the 9<sup>th</sup> Moscow International Film Festival, a David for Best Foreign Director at the David di Donatello Awards, and a CEC Award for Best Art and Experimental Film at the Cinema Writers Circle Awards of Spain. Although *Dersu Uzala* won the US Academy Award in 1976 (for the year 1975), it was not actually released to American audiences until *after* it won the award (1977), when it grossed \$1.2 million in the United States and Canada (Zemlianukhin and Segida 1996, 118). The award therefore helped the otherwise obscure film garner a certain level of mainstream attention upon its release. The fact that it won this award over two other well-known directors that year, is almost always invoked when describing the film. While there are no (accessible) accounts of the reason for the Soviets' decision to choose Kurosawa for a co-production, it is likely that this was a combination of their interest in creating an international “prestige” film that could be part of the film festival circuit



and that could be submitted to the Academy Awards, combined with a rare opportunity to capitalize on Kurosawa being effectively banned from the Japanese film industry.

### *Kurosawa and the Japanese Film Industry*

*Dersu Uzala* is the 26<sup>th</sup> film of Kurosawa's 31-film oeuvre, coming five years after the critical failure of *Dodes 'ka-den* (1970) and the infamous disputes with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox over the direction of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), and four years after the director's attempted suicide. While some assert that the suicide attempt stemmed from Kurosawa's adherence to a traditional Buddhist practice of a warrior ending his life when he has ceased to be a useful member of society (Richie 1996), others maintain that the director was merely at a desperate moment in his life (Prince 1999; Yoshimoto 2000). In either case, it is generally agreed that it was a response to Kurosawa's relationship to the failing Japanese film industry that began its decline in the 1960s.

With the arrival of television in the 1950s film production in Japan underwent a major setback. The vast economic wealth that was accruing as a result of the postwar "economic miracle" meant that there was more disposable income among families and television quickly became the medium of choice (Yoshimoto 2000, 335). Between 1953 and the end of the 1960s television ownership rose from only 866 television sets in total throughout Japan to 95% of the population owning one; correspondingly movie theatre ticket sales "dropped from a high in 1958 of 1,127 million to under 100 million after 1975" (Prince 1999, 5). Although this problem was felt by most developed national film industries, they all responded differently. In the United States for instance this was the beginning of the "blockbuster" film where movies with massive budgets, such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, were favored for their ability to sell equally large numbers of tickets, a phenomenon that continues today (Hall 2006). Similarly, in the Soviet Union a shift was made to popular films; under the new direction of Fillip Yermash at Mosfilm Studios, the Soviet film industry began emulating Hollywood by favoring popular productions that would sell more

tickets. Sales from these popular films were then funneled into the less popular auteur films that did not generate enough money to support themselves (Beumers 2009). In Japan the response was to emphasize television production over cinema, and within the film industry to favor low-budget films and soft-core pornography (Standish 2006, 267). In light of Kurosawa's two most recent film "disasters," *Dodes'ka-den* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, as well as his tendency to make large-scale epics with enormous budgets, nothing that Kurosawa pitched to the studios at that time was funded. When Mosfilm came to Kurosawa in 1973 he agreed to their offer immediately, already having a film adaptation of Arseniev's memoirs long in mind.

### *The Book and Its Contextual History*

The story of *Dersu Uzala* originates in the partly fictionalized memoirs of the Russian geographer, ethnographer, and imperial military officer Vladimir Arseniev, who worked in and explored the Siberian Far East from 1900 until his death in 1930. Arseniev's story, *Dersu the Trapper*, takes place over the period of three survey expeditions between 1902 and 1907, and relates the story of how he came to meet the Nanai tribesman by the name of Dersu Uzala who helped lead these expeditions in the uncharted region. Mixing scientific observations with narrative, the story becomes an integration of Arseniev's work mapping the territory and describing native plant species and indigenous populations for the use of the state, with a romantic tale of inter-ethnic friendship. Although Arseniev is nominally in charge of the expedition, he admires Dersu for his intuitive understanding of the taiga,<sup>1</sup> illustrated through his pantheistic worldview and expert ability to read the signs of the forest (animal tracks, weather patterns). Through Dersu, Arseniev learns to "see" and understand the taiga.

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<sup>1</sup> *Taiga* refers to the predominantly coniferous forest that extends across Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern regions.

As Gordon points out, the story of a modern traveler being saved, literally and metaphorically, by his “wild” other is characteristic of the “noble savage” genre, though “in Arseniev’s work it is clear that the very means by which this unique wilderness is opened up to scientific investigation will soon put an end to its richness and beauty” (1996, vi–vii). Ultimately, trying to return the many favors Dersu has bestowed upon him, Arseniev brings Dersu to live in his house in the city of Khabarovsk, believing that the trapper’s old age will prevent him from making a living in the taiga alone for much longer. Dersu finds life in the city abominable however, and returns to the forest. Within a short time of his return Dersu is killed in the night by a thief who robs him of his expensive new rifle, a parting gift from Arseniev. Never explicitly stated, the tension between modernization, technology, nature, and traditional livelihoods is immanent to the story. The reader is left wondering how long people like Dersu, and by extension the taiga to which he is inextricably linked, will last in the face of Russian exploration.

Although the region is frequently described as “uncharted” within Arseniev’s book and Kurosawa’s film, many groups including the Chinese, Americans, and British had been exploring the region hitherto. Sensing the need to demarcate the shared territory, in 1860 Russia and Qing China ratified the Treaty of Aigun. Through a series of loopholes, misunderstandings within the text, and Russia’s strategic use of China’s unfavorable occupation by the British and French, St. Petersburg succeeded in establishing the better part of this agreement, including both banks of the Amur River, a border with North Korea, and complete access to the Sea of Japan (Stephan 1994, 47–50). Arseniev’s position as a scientific researcher stationed in Vladivostok from 1900 until his death in 1930, first on behalf of the Imperial military and then as Far Eastern Nationalities commissar for the new Soviet government, illustrates the need felt by the Russians, and later the Soviets, to maintain established military outposts and surveillance in the region, viewing it as especially vulnerable to Chinese, Japanese, and American influence and irredentist aspirations. Thus, Arseniev was present in the Far East through many chaotic periods, including the Russo-Japanese War, which took place during the time period in which *Dersu the Trapper* was set, the

brief independence of the Far Eastern Republic, and its reassimilation after the Russian Revolution (Stephan 1994). Like other low-level bureaucrats assigned to oversee the Soviet Nationalities Policy, Arseniev died with warrants out for his arrest as a traitor to the Japanese (Stephan 1994; also see Brown 2009).

The perception of the Far East as particularly susceptible to outside influence was not a strictly Tsarist anxiety, and reappeared in full force as relations with China declined in the late 1950s over ideological disagreements interpreting Marxist-Leninist doctrine. When, in 1964, Chinese leader Mao Zedong unexpectedly declared that the Chinese people were still waiting for the Soviet Union to recognize China's historic right to the land from the Trans-Amur region, which they had taken in the "unequal treaties" with the Qing dynasty, the Soviets responded by amassing troops and nuclear weapons at the border. Although confrontations never reached the level of war, many small-scale but bloody skirmishes took place, especially throughout 1969 (Whiting 1984, 143–45). An atmosphere of anti-Chinese and anti-Russian sentiment permeated the Soviet Union and China, especially the Trans-Amur region. In Russia, Chinese historical presence in the Far East was being wiped from textbooks, while "by 1981 the Arctic Ocean was being called China's northern frontier in the thirteenth century" (Stephan 1994, 18). In 1975, the midst of this geopolitical turmoil, the Japanese director Kurosawa arrived in the Soviet Union to shoot his film *Dersu Uzala*.

While the book *Dersu the Trapper* may seem a surprising choice of material for a Japanese filmmaker, in his *Something Like an Autobiography* (1983) Kurosawa explains that he had always enjoyed Russian literature growing up, an interest he acquired from his older brother. In fact, it was not unusual at all for Japanese to be well versed in Russian literature, as this was a common trend during the period during which Kurosawa grew up (Melinkova 2002). Writing about his adolescent years, Kurosawa (1982, 46) describes his interest in Russian literature, and additionally the beginning of his fascination with nature:

At that stage in my life I didn't understand very much about people, but I did understand descriptions of nature. One passage of [the Russian author] Turgenev I read over and over again, from the beginning of *The Rendezvous* where the scenery is described; 'The seasons could be determined from nothing more than the sound of the leaves on the trees in the forest.'

Unfortunately, Kurosawa ends his *Something Like an Autobiography* before describing the years of his life during which *Dersu Uzala* was made, but in this passage we see the enthusiasm for nature as subject matter that appears so prominently in *Dersu Uzala*. Although Kurosawa is known for rarely describing in words what he believes can only be told in images, he is reported as having said in a conversation with Harry Belafonte (whose music is purportedly the only he listened to during the shooting of *Dersu Uzala*) that he was motivated to make the film by a concern over the alienating effects of technology and loss of appreciation for nature (Richie 1996, 196).

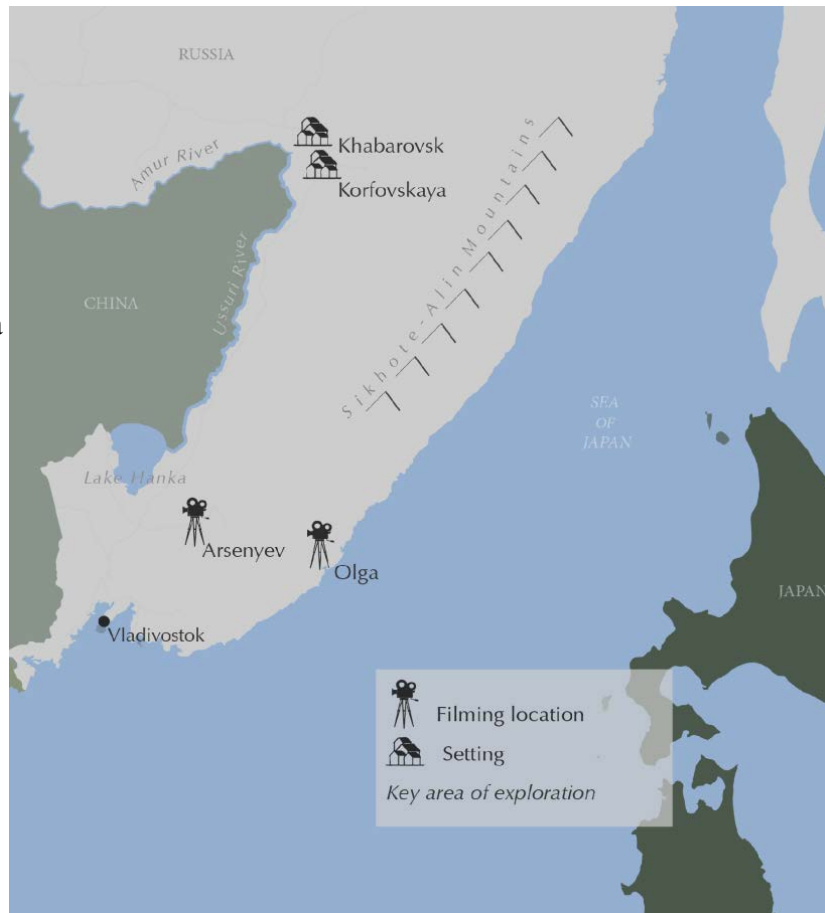
Upon arriving in the Soviet Union Kurosawa insisted that the film be made in the exact region of Arseniev's historical exploits, despite the producers' hopes that the director would acquiesce to shooting in the Mosfilm studio. No reason is given for why Kurosawa was set on filming in the exact region, except that "[t]he setting for the movie was chosen to be faithful to the historical record" (Nogami 2006, 132). In Chapters 4 and 5 I show the effect that this landscape selection has had on the film's geographic realism and thus how the film has subsequently been seen. Realism in cinema, geographic or otherwise, is complicated because no matter how reflexive a filmmaker is a film is always made with a particular intention that dictates what is included and excluded from the film's visual field and narrative. Thus, even though the geography of a film is as constructed as any other element of the film it is also one of the most "realistic," often aided by filmmakers' desire and ability to conceal the technological aspect of its production. As Harper and Rayner (2010, 22) explain,

[T]he critical concentration in discussions of cinematic realism on the film medium's technologies of reproduction ahead of what is *selected* for reproduction alerts us to the landscape's presence as a role, another performative element.

Thus, despite that nature and landscape in the film play a very decisive function in facilitating the film's narrative about the encroachment of civilization on nature and the loss of traditional culture, because it is set and filmed in the same place as the historical events, the landscape becomes the most naturalized and accepted facet of the movie.

Given Kurosawa's decision to shoot outdoors rather than in a studio we are cued into his interest in highlighting the

natural landscape. This is further supported by his choice to shoot in 70mm rather than the usual 35mm; 70mm is a high-resolution film gauge used for showing more fine-grained details, but which is also so large that most movie theatres cannot support it (Richie 1996, 197).



**Figure 3.1.** Map indicating locations where the film is set, where the film was shot, and where Arseniev's historical exploits as described in his book *Dersu the Trapper* took place.

Despite Kurosawa's assertion that he made *Dersu Uzala* out of an interest in making an environmental film, many film scholars have chosen to read other themes into the film.

### *Kurosawa Scholarship*

Before the crisis in the film industry Kurosawa was not only exceptionally prolific, but regarded as one of the most significant and influential directors of world cinema, among the ranks of Fellini, Tarkovsky, Bergman, or De Sica. Kurosawa began his career as a filmmaker in the late 1930s working as assistant director on the film *Sanshiro Sugata*. With the release of *Drunken Angel* (1948) he made a name for himself and was able to begin making his own films, from assistant director to director. In 1953 he made *Rashoman*, a film that, despite lukewarm reviews in Japan, made Kurosawa's name an international sensation, winning the director the Grand Prize at the Venice Film Festival, and his first Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (Richie 1996, 79–80).

Concomitant with Kurosawa's rise in international stature during the 1950s–1960s was the growing attention to cinema as a serious art form worthy of critical analysis at the University level (Yoshimoto 2000, 29). Seen as an art form the films that were most highly regarded were those that had a discernible artistic style or signature from the artist, bringing to the new field of film studies the theory of *auterism*, French for “authorship,” the idea of a “singular creative force, or vision” behind a given film (Corrigan, White, and Mazaj 2011, 342). “This standard of authorship was vitally important because it helped make film like other arts, not brute technology or a commodity, but an expression of culture fashioned by human design” (Prince 1999, 10).

For many online users that review *Dersu Uzala* Kurosawa's name alone is the single most important factor driving them to watch the movie in the first place, and many discuss the film in terms of how “Kurosawa-like” it is. It is typical for many of these reviews to discuss how the film is unique relative to Kurosawa's other films, for instance that it was filmed outside of Japan in another language and that it lacks traditional Japanese themes (i.e. samurai), along with consideration of how the film is more typical of the director's style, citing his near obsessive

attention to the film's formal elements and mise-en-scene and attention to humanistic or universal themes and subject matter. After reading both the online reviews and the scholarly literature on Kurosawa it is clear that many of the online users are well versed in Kurosawa facts and trivia and that their reading of *Dersu Uzala* is both guided by this knowledge and a means of showing it off. Like their readership film scholars have been prolific in attempting to dissect Kurosawa's unique visual style and social commentary, how his life impacted his work, who his biggest artistic influences were, the effect he has made on later generations of filmmakers, and how his work can be understood as representative of Japanese character. In her study *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* Yoshimoto has criticized Western approaches to the study of Japanese cinema, particular the *humanist* approach, according to which cinema is viewed as "a repository of universal values," and which has led to an essentialization of Japanese "national character" (2000, 10). Within this humanist approach to Japanese cinema it has been "the role of auteurs to mediate the specificity of cultural tradition and the universality of films' messages" (11). It is not surprising then that one of the reasons for the lavish praise of Kurosawa as an auteur has been his ability to transcend the "particular" (Japanese culture) to express the "universal" (humanity). "This then is the famed 'humanism' of Kurosawa," Anderson and Richie write. "He is concerned with the human lot above all else and he particularly insists upon the equality of human emotion. All of his films share this basic assumption" (1983, 380).

Agreeing that Kurosawa did maintain a commitment to social justice in his films, especially in adopting certain Western values to bring "therapeutic additions to Japanese culture" (Prince 1999, 9), Prince suggests that most critics of Kurosawa are excessive in defining the director's body of work as entirely humanistic. He notes that, in opposition to the key attributes of humanism – "restraint, decorum, balance and proper proportion" (10) – his films often emphasize "the excessive, the transgressive, the flamboyant" (11). Prince sees this same exaggeration in the oft-repeated comparison of Kurosawa's films to American "Westerns," a link especially made in regards to the films of John Ford, of whom Kurosawa was a known admirer. Although there are



structural, narrative, and formal similarities between Westerns and Samurai films – the presence of an almost exclusively masculine adventure in the countryside in which armed men must protect social values, for instance – Prince argues that “the characters and stories are embedded in networks of different social structures and values which firmly separate the two classes of film” (14–15). Furthermore, whereas “Westerns celebrate in the gunfighter the isolationist and individualist components of American culture [...] the samurai may be diminished or destroyed when attempting to escape the constraints of social obligation” (16–17).

Regardless of how much Kurosawa was influenced in particular by the Western genre of film, Prince does contend that there is a certain balancing act in Kurosawa’s work between Eastern and Western principles: “From his first film, Kurosawa had employed a particular mode of address for his Japanese audiences that preserved suspended in dialectical tension a mix of Eastern and Western values” (8). This he attributes to Kurosawa having grown up at the tail end of the Meiji Restoration period (1868–1912) of Japanese history, a time when Japan was rapidly modernizing in order to catch up with the West after the forced opening of Japan to trade by the gunboats of Admiral Perry (22). “Kurosawa would grapple with the fundamental challenge posed by this period: the relation between Japan and the West, specifically the tensions between Japanese cultural identity and economic and political modernization” (Prince 1999, 22).

The Meiji Restoration was the period in Japanese history when the Japanese government decided that in order to stay autonomous it needed to adopt Western technology, industry, and military, under the slogan “Western technology, Eastern ethics” (Standish 2006). In order to exert the Empire’s military might and expand its sphere of influence it was during this period that Japan engaged in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1905–1907). Despite that no mention is made of Japan or the Russo-Japanese War in Arseniev’s book or Kurosawa’s film, the correlation between the Russo-Japanese War and the temporal and spatial settings of the film and book has led Kopper (1995) to read into *Dersu Uzala* a sub-text of Japanese imperialism.

In his essay “Imperial Vision” Kopper claims that in *Dersu Uzala* Kurosawa “accurately grasps and conveys” the nostalgic and positive portrayal of Tsarist Russia to be found in the text of Arseniev. Kurosawa then chose to express this imperial mentality for three possible reasons. The first is that it is a response to the negative treatment by the Japanese film industry. The second is that it illustrates Kurosawa’s extreme adoption of Western humanism wherein individualism is revered so highly that, rather than show Dersu as dependent on the environment, he is shown as “one” with the environment. This has the effect of “upgrading the European mentality of individualism as a foreign but appealing object to be possessed” (Kopper 1995, 202). Finally, he suggests that because the Japanese once occupied the region in which the film takes place and also found the Chinese to be a hindrance to their own expansionist desires on the Asian mainland, the “imperial vision” of *Dersu Uzala* is a glimpse of Japanese aspirations and what could have been.

While I find that the failure to include even the barest details of biographical information about Kurosawa (such as his staunch opposition to Japanese militarization as described in his autobiography) keeps Kopper’s argument for an irredentist-inspired Kurosawa from being persuasive, he is not the only person to have considered the broader geopolitical implications of the movie. Richie, for one, has described the project as “part of the general courting of the Japanese by the Soviet leadership, which wished to share in the economic development of Siberia, a land rich in natural resources but still awaiting finance capital” (1996, 196). In slightly more polemical terms, Springer, in his 1976 article, reports that the Chinese government was not at all happy with the film for several reasons. First, the idea that Russia had need to survey the “uncharted” territory at the time the film takes place was preposterous given that Chinese patrols had always existed in the region, which rightfully belonged to the Chinese but was unfairly taken by the Russians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in coercive and unfair treaties. Second, the treatment by the Russians of the indigenous tribes, especially by Dersu, does not coincide with reality, according to the Chinese, asserting that the Russians have a long history of injustice towards these groups.

Finally, and not surprisingly if one has viewed the film, the Chinese were offended by the portrayal of themselves as women stealers and amoral brigands. In the view of the Chinese, Springer tells us, Kurosawa's presence behind the film is anything but benign, stating: "The People's Republic feels that the Russians' use of an internationally known Japanese director to make a film that contains so many subtle propaganda items is a masterful trick by the Soviets" (Springer 1976).

Contrary to Springer, critic Judy Stone (1976) maintains that the offending anti-Chinese material had nothing to do with then-contemporary Sino-Soviet relations, but was rather a historical reality of the period. Still others are more inclined to agree with Springer. Richie for one has implied that Kurosawa simply succumbed to pressure by the Soviets to include Soviet propaganda (1996, 201), while Eder of the *New York Times* contends in his review that was run in both 1976 following the Academy Awards and again in 1978 that Kurosawa completely left the second half of the film to the Soviets, citing as evidence the anti-Chinese scenes, the slow pace, and uncharacteristic formal elements. Though I recognize that there is clear anti-Chinese sentiment in the scenes described by Springer and others, I also recognize that these scenes were not only present in Arseniev's book, but were even more abundant, and I believe that this is reason enough for Kurosawa to have included them. Furthermore, a closer look at the Soviet film industry during the Stagnation and Kurosawa's interactions with it discredits a notion of direct Soviet intervention in content, although there is reason to think they may have attempted to manipulate the film's release to international markets.

### *The Soviet Film Industry during Stagnation*

The period in Soviet history when Kurosawa went to the Soviet Union to film, when the country was under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, was known as *the Stagnation*, referring to the general malaise that accompanied the return to repression in the cultural and political arenas

after the brief period of freer expression during the Thaw. As Soviet film scholar Birgit Beumers explains (2009, 146–49), throughout society at this time allegiances were divided into conformists and dissidents, a split that bubbled up in the film industry as producers of films for mass consumption and auteur directors. Auteur directors were viewed negatively in the Soviet Union during this time for being more concerned with individual expression than ideology, and considered either “difficult” or openly dissident. Repression of dissidents was pervasive at this time, characterized symbolically by the arrest and deportation of the former Thaw hero Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1974. Within the film industry this repression led to the emigration or prohibition of some of the best Soviet filmmakers, including Tarkovsky, Konchalovsky, Gherman, and Muratova. Despite this overarching distaste for auteur directors a system was devised whereby the profits of popular films could be used to fund unprofitable auteur films (Beumers 2009, 149).

In their 1986 book *Behind the Soviet Screen: The Motion Picture Industry in the USSR, 1972–1982* Golovskoy and Rimberg have documented the extensive administrative functioning behind the operation of Soviet film industry during this period. What Golovskoy and Rimberg describe is a highly centralized institution in which nearly every aspect of the filmmaking process, from script writing to advertising to film criticism, was housed under one roof, Goskino, the State Committee for Motion Pictures. According to Golovskoy and Rimberg, in many cases the heads of each Goskino department (advertising, art direction, script writing) were not trained in filmmaking or production, but rather were members of the Communist Party that had been installed either for strategic purposes or had simply been reduced in rank from more privileged positions within the party. In charge of the Administration for External Relations, the department responsible for overseeing international film distribution (Sovexportfilm), film festivals (Sovinterfest), and co-productions with foreign countries (Sovinfilm), was Pyotr Kostikov, who had worked for the Polish division of the Central Committee before being “demoted to Goskino for his errors in the CPSU” (Golovskoy and Rimberg 1986, 9). Under Kostikov were three

chairmen, one in charge of relations with socialist countries, one in charge of relations with capitalist countries, and one representing the KGB (Committee for State Security).

The presence of the KGB was not unique to the Administration for External Relations, but was also part of the Administration for Records, and most notably Glavlit, the official censorship office of the Central Committee. Scripts were sent to Glavlit before filming, where it would be determined whether a film project could begin, and once the films had been shot and edited they were sent to Repertory Control, where the film was slowed down and each frame checked (Golovskoy and Rimberg 1986, 29–30). Furthermore, “special interest” groups including “the USSR Ministry of Defense, national and republic officials of the Communist Union of Youth (Komsomol), national/republic officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and national/republic officials of the KGB” were allowed to screen and object to any part of a film at any stage in the production process, from script to distribution. Often members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) or KGB were more involved in the script and scenario writing and editing when content related to “policemen, prisoners, espionage, border patrols, etc.” because they were “especially qualified to write scenarios on these topics with a minimum of ideological error,” thus preventing involvement at later stages in the process (Golovskoy and Rimberg 1986, 34–35).

While *Dersu Uzala* does involve military and border issues, according to Nogami (2006), Kurosawa’s script assistant, Kurosawa ultimately had the final word as far as the script was concerned. Although the writer assigned to work with Kurosawa by Mosfilm, Yuri Nagibin, had provided a script for Kurosawa upon his arrival in Moscow, Kurosawa rejected this script on account of it having too many action scenes. Multiple versions were sent back and forth between Kurosawa and Nagibin, but ultimately Mosfilm conceded, keeping with the contractual stipulation that “the creative opinions of director Akira Kurosawa will be respected one hundred percent” (Nogami 2006, 128). Thus, although Nogami tells us that they were “under KGB surveillance” (156), there is no reason to think that the script was altered by anyone on behalf of the Central Committee or that Kurosawa was pressured to change it.

Instead, I find it likely that rather than intervene in the script and filmmaking process, the film was manipulated by Sovexportfilm upon distribution to foreign countries. According to a 1975 *Variety* report issued after the film's festival premieres, Sovexportfilm removed 20 minutes from the end of the movie before sending it to both France and Italy, prompting outrage on the part of the director, who was in the audience at these premieres. Although the Sovexportfilm authorities denied having deliberately edited the film, asserting that cutting a film down is standard procedure when exporting long films (the film runs two hours and forty minutes), this is somewhat questionable given the specific section of the film that was cut, its resolution. Among other things the film's resolution, a moment in any film where much of its ultimate meaning is made, is what separates *Dersu Uzala* from the 1961 Soviet film adaptation of the novel directed by Agasi Babayan. Unlike in Kurosawa's film where we see Dersu's inability to cope with city life and his subsequent death upon fleeing, in the 1961 Babayan version the film ends just after Arseniev's first foray into the wilderness, when Arseniev and Dersu depart happily waving to one another. By removing the death of Dersu or the negative implications of urban life in Russia (though I argue that this relationship is downplayed in the movie) it would seem that the Soviets may have been attempting to purge the film of any ideas that might raise questions over Soviet life or its policies toward indigenous people.

Rather than contribute to speculations about Kurosawa's true political motivations in collaborating with the Soviets, his secret anti-Chinese sentiment, his irredentist aspirations, or his attempts to get back at the Japanese film industry, I have chosen to (more or less) consider *Dersu Uzala* at face value – Kurosawa's version of an ecological parable.

## CHAPTER 5

### (DE)CONSTRUCTING THE NATURE/SOCIETY BINARY IN *DERSU UZALA*

By being aware of the different ways that the binary appears in *Dersu Uzala* we will be better able to contextualize and interpret the audience responses in the following chapter. Therefore, I begin this chapter by deconstructing the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala*, using as my “lever” Derrida’s notion of the supplement, the object within the text that “threatens to collapse” (Spivak 1997, lxxv) the system or foundation on which the structure of the text is built. I do this by showing how Dersu is never actually fully present in the film, but is instead a construction of Arseniev, brought into being by the external or supplementary devices of technology. Dersu, and the notion of a pristine wilderness that is “outside of history and human context” (Escobar 1999, 1), are therefore absent, empty signifieds that Arseniev must continually recreate in the form of his narrative, journal entries, photographs, and the map. The film itself, like Arseniev’s technologies, is part of the same system of supplementation, bringing Dersu and the pristine wilderness into existence through the visualization of the landscape and the ability to manipulate space and time. Therefore, after showing how the film “deconstructs itself,” or how the binary between nature and society, the pivot on which the film turns, is shown to be false within the film, I move on to illustrate the way these absences are supplemented, or made present, by the visuality of the landscape. Looking to Lukinbeal’s (2005) four functions of cinematic landscapes, we can interpret the way that the film’s landscapes naturalize the binary, making it appear self-evident despite the ways it has otherwise been undermined throughout the film.

*Dersu: The Missing Signified*

Standing in a dusty road amidst the construction of the new town of Korfovskaja in Russia's Far East, Captain Arseniev looks for the site where, two years prior, he had buried his good friend Dersu. The location, he tells a passerby, was just near the edge of the forest, next to two large trees. "Could it be those?" asks the man, gesturing to a pile of lumber. The trees are gone, probably used for the recently built houses dotting the new landscape, and with them have disappeared the grave and Arseniev's friend Dersu, erased by the new town's rapid construction. As Arseniev stands taking in this final loss, we notice for the first time the train tracks running in the near distance behind the captain, as he calls the name of his friend in anguish, "Dersu!"

In this two-minute prologue the film's core message has been laid out – loss in the face of progress. The issue of loss and the potential to recapture what has been lost informs the entire film and for this reason it has been strategically framed around an absence. In the opening sequence Dersu's physical presence has been erased, not only from life, but from the landscape; his grave markers, the trees as well as the walking staff, which he always carried, have been removed. As viewers, before we know who Dersu is or why he is significant, we are informed of his dramatic absence. Three acts comprise the remainder of the film, two separate exploratory missions, and an epilogue. In a cyclical manner the epilogue joins up with the prologue, as we are apprised of Dersu's death. It is in the two interior acts, between the bookends of Dersu's death, that the grist of the film takes place and we are introduced to the central character, and our implicit question – the significance of Dersu – is resolved.

It is in this interior portion of the film that we come to understand Dersu and the import he carries for the film's message of what is lost due to modern man's intervention. It is necessary to make the distinction, however, that we are coming to understand Arseniev's construction of Dersu, not Dersu himself. Within the film we are never actually introduced to an "objective" Dersu, but only Arseniev's memory of him. Impelled by his anguish upon learning that Dersu's grave is missing, the film turns back to Arseniev's memory of his time with Dersu, captured in his daily diary entries and told to the audience via voice-over narration. In this way, in place of a



sovereign entity, we have instead an alternative construction of Arseniev. We may think of Dersu in a Derridean sense as the signified that is always under erasure; because he is necessary to define Arseniev and his men as the forbearers of modern consumer culture he is left in, but because he cannot or does not actually exist in the modern world, he is crossed out (see Spivak 1997, xvi).

The absence around which the film structure revolves is ubiquitous throughout the film at the level of narrative. Thus, although we already know, in light of the film's structure, that it is Dersu who is lost and for whom Arseniev, and the audience vicariously through him, pines, it is also necessary to look at the way the character of Dersu has been established from the beginning as himself founded on an absence, as well as the various ways that Dersu's lack is made up for via cultural technologies of writing, mapping, and photography. Whereas these technologies are intended to show the many ways that modern man intervenes in the life of the ideal Other and the negative effect of this intervention, by looking closely at the deployment of these technologies we see that, despite Dersu's alleged purity (alleged by his position in the nature/culture binary), he is in constant need of supplementation and thus, as we have already seen, is never fully present or ideal.

### *Representing the Process of Representation*

In depicting a nature that is at odds with social development the film retains the literary trope on which Arseniev's memoir, *Dersu the Trapper*, is based. However, by also depicting Arseniev in the process of writing, the film moves beyond the level of representing the division between the "good native" and the "bad civilized man" and to the level of representing the "civilized man" in the process of representing the "good native Other." In other words, the film is not only a representation of a representation, but a representation of the *process* of representation. Turning our attention to this representational process in the form of the map, the diary, and

photography, not only do we further understand the many ways that Dersu's absence is supplemented and made present, but are able to see the way this process extends to the film itself.

The clearest example of this representational process has already been indicated, which is that the film is set up as a memory, a representation in Arseniev's mind of the events of the past. Moreover, these memories are prompted by Arseniev's journal writings about his time spent with Dersu during his expeditions. From the audience's perspective Dersu has always been a construction of Arseniev's. Dersu's presence has been written into existence, founded on the absence that Arseniev feels within himself. Within Arseniev's memory we are introduced to Dersu, just as Arseniev and his men are, after Arseniev begins to write in his diary one night next to the campfire when the men have turned in. After writing a few sentences, the camera cuts to Arseniev's point of view, looking at the trees above him eerily lit by the firelight. Through this framing device we understand that we are seeing through the eyes and mind of Arseniev, even as the camera subsequently shifts to incorporate Arseniev within the frame. Likewise we, along with Arseniev, are informed of Dersu's death via telegram.

The second instance of this representational process is portrayed in a scene occurring after Dersu and Arseniev's reunion. Here, through a montage sequence of photographic stills, "the happiest days" of Arseniev's time with Dersu are visualized. This scene is established by Arseniev taking a picture of Dersu and one of the men against a white backdrop hung up between the trees, and then insisting that the soldier take one of Arseniev and Dersu together. What follows are a handful of photographic shots of Dersu, Arseniev, and the men involved in various activities around camp, some heroic, some comical, some mundane. The images function in several ways. First, they document Dersu's increasing connection with Arseniev's tools, as many of the images are of Dersu standing with or looking through the surveyor's compass or investigating Arseniev's map. We will see later on that Dersu is "punished" for this association by losing his own vision. Second, they stand in support of Arseniev's claim: "The days in early autumn were the happiest of my time with Dersu." When we think of what might count as

“evidence,” visual or otherwise, we tend to think of something that can stand as objective fact, something not tinged by the inadequacies of the human mind. Visually, this objectivity has historically been associated with the map (Pickles 2004) and more recently with the photograph and its perceived ability to form “an image of the world [...] without the creative intervention of man” (Bazin 1960, 7). However, contrary to this conception of photography we know that technology will never be able to unite the signified with the signifier because there is always a space, or difference, that causes the two to differ, deferring what the signifier is actually meant to represent. In place of objective fact the photographs displace what they are meant to signify, the bond between Arseniev and Dersu, and substitute it with Arseniev’s idealized portrayal of their relationship, thus reiterating the notion of the missing signified.

As I have already hinted, a significant inversion of the visual follows Dersu’s interactions with the camera, map, and surveying equipment portrayed in the montage of photographs. After this sequence Dersu has a fateful encounter with a tiger, whom he calls Amba, a spirit of the forest. Here, vision becomes synonymous with wisdom. Instead of patiently compromising with the tiger verbally as he had done in the past Dersu shoots and kills the tiger, indicating Dersu’s transformation from one who is able to understand and communicate with nature peacefully to one at the level of the soldiers, relying on technology to dominate it. Following this event Dersu becomes ill-tempered and begins to physically lose his vision. Devastated by the loss and the implication that he will no longer be able to hunt and thus make a living on his own in the wild, Dersu succumbs to Arseniev’s wishes for him to return with Arseniev to his house in the city of Khabarovsk. Life in the city however, confined to Arseniev’s house, is more than Dersu can stand. Shocked that Arseniev’s wife is forced to pay for resources such as wood and water, Dersu is arrested when he attempts to chop down a tree in the park to bring home. Miserable, he spends his days watching the fire in the fireplace, the only thing that reminds him of his life in the woods.

Despite Dersu’s obvious misery in the city Arseniev first tries to keep Dersu in his home, relenting only when Dersu begs Arseniev to let him leave. At Dersu’s departure, rather than give

Dersu glasses to make up for his lost eyesight, he presents Dersu with a new rifle. He tells Dersu that it will be better than his old one because he will not need to be able to see well in order to hit his target. With the new rifle Dersu becomes like Arseniev, unable to see or understand his prey, the subject of his photographs, or the content of his maps, but able to appropriate them nonetheless. In the end it is because of the rifle that Dersu is killed, robbed by thieves in the night next to the train tracks on the outskirts of town. In the death of Dersu there is no attempt to ameliorate the alienating effects of modern society on the idealized pre-modern world, instead making clear how modern technology is at fault for this separation.

In critiquing technology the film itself is implicated in its own critique. The notion of the ideal Other and the pristine wilderness that the movie constructs do not exist, but like the photographs of Dersu and Arseniev, the movie gives them presence through supplementation in the form of the visual. In highlighting the way that Dersu is always already absent, the film effectively deconstructs its own binary logic, but what deconstructing the film in this way does not account for is the strong effect of the visual in supplementing and naturalizing what has otherwise been shown to be absent. Thus, by looking at the film's form and construction of nature as landscape we see how this false binary is naturalized and perpetuated.

#### *Landscape as Supplement in Dersu Uzala*

Characterized by a static camera and medium and long shots and takes, the film's cinematography utilizes some techniques common to "nature films" (the widescreen format) while rejecting others. In order to demonstrate the ideological message about the ill effects of modernization, the film keeps with the aesthetic idealization of pristine nature prevalent in landscape painting and photography, presenting nature free of human effects such as pollution or litter in order to juxtapose these with the human urban environment as a place of inherent nature despoliation. Unlike these traditional landscape arts of painting and photography however,

“landscape cinematography” is unique in that it “adds to the list of technical variables associated with still photography (lens size, film stock, natural or artificial lighting, filtration, colour balance, and focus) the specifically cinematic variable of camera movement, as well as contextual elements such as editing and soundtrack effects” (Ingram 2004, 26). Interestingly, it is this unique cinematic variable of camera movement that is almost entirely absent from the film. Moreover, many other stylistic elements that have now become widespread in landscape cinematography, “aerial tracking shots, widescreen formats, wide-angle lenses, sharp focus with a minimum of visible grain and slow motion” (26), have been elided. The only tool from this arsenal that we see deployed in *Dersu Uzala* is the widescreen format.

The widescreen format is a salient feature of *Dersu Uzala* because, when combined with the static camera and long shots, it has the effect to embed characters within nature, maintaining the focus on the relationship between characters and the landscape. By focusing on the prominent role that landscape plays in *Dersu Uzala* we are able to see how the film makes its binary logic seem natural and commonsensical, effectively countering the ways that the film otherwise shows that logic to be false. To see the work that landscape does in *Dersu Uzala* I rely on Lukinbeal’s (2005) four functions of cinematic landscapes. Drawing on Higson (1984), Lukinbeal suggests that landscape in cinema serves multiple functions within a film depending on the needs of the narrative; landscape is described as encompassing place, space, spectacle, or metaphor. Working with a particular sequence from *Dersu Uzala* we can see how these different landscape types appear in the movie and how landscape is used to naturalize the film’s binary logic.

The establishing shots (extreme-long shots) and long shots emphasized in *Dersu* create a sense of landscape as place, which helps the viewer understand the ties between narrative and location, as well as the different scales of geography at which the action is occurring (Lukinbeal 2005). Landscape as place further functions to establish geographic realism, an aesthetic practice which attempts to ground a film’s narrative to a regional or historical sense of place in order to make the film’s actions and characters more believable, thus encouraging the viewer to suspend

disbelief by “ontologically bridging the divide between the real and reel” (Lukinbeal 2005, 17). For this reason establishing shots are an important part of any film in order to ground action in a sense of reality. Oftentimes establishing shots appear as a montage sequence in the film’s opening title sequence, but continue to punctuate the movie intermittently in order to reorient the viewer to the film’s changing geography as the action unfolds. In *Dersu Uzala*, a movie where geography is in constant flux as the men travel across the wilderness, these shots are used frequently to continually reorient the viewer to the soldiers’ changing whereabouts. More than this however, by relying on these long shots that are able to include more of the surrounding landscape in the frame, these shots function beyond spatial organization, also serving to authenticate action and showcase the beauty of the Siberian wilderness.

One instance of landscape as place can be seen in a sequence occurring halfway through the movie, though to understand it fully I’ll take one step back to the scene just prior to this where Arseniev and two of his men walk together on the last leg of their first expedition in winter. In this scene Dersu has just taken leave of the soldiers to go his separate way. In silence the men march along the railroad tracks toward the city and at a 90-degree angle to the stationary camera, enabling us to see Arseniev’s distress at parting with Dersu written across his face. From here the scene cuts to the beginning of Arseniev’s next expedition the following spring. In order to alert viewers of this change in time and location and resituate them in the new landscape/scene an establishing shot (landscape as place) is used that juxtaposes the melting river with the soldiers as they make their way along. The river ice signals to the viewer that it is no longer winter, but spring, and Arseniev’s voice-over narration tells us, “That spring once again I set out to travel across the Ussurri area.”

However, rather than track the camera along with the soldiers, the camera again remains stationary, letting the viewer’s attention linger on the ice flowing to the left of the screen as the line of soldiers move toward the right. By eschewing the camera’s mechanical movement in this scene the natural movement of the ice is accentuated, both enhancing the scene’s realism and

showing the line of soldiers to be moving against the flow of the river, at odds with the forces of nature. In this instance we see how the combination of static camera, long shot and take, and widescreen work together to heighten the impression of the characters as situated within the nature that surrounds them. This combination is not unique to this scene, but rather is critical in defining the film's overall aesthetic. In framing each shot of the men amidst intricate layers of nature that sometimes even obscure our ability to see the characters, we as viewers, like the soldiers, must navigate the dense forest floor and icy terrain in order to make out what is just ahead of us.

The next several shots in this sequence are of the ice floes themselves, edited together to show the chaotic clashing and breaking of ice sheets against one another within the sludgy mixture. These shots that focus solely on the landscape are what Lukinbeal calls landscape as spectacle. On one hand these images of the ice show the viewer metaphorically the type of uncontrollable forces that the men are up against, while at the same time providing the viewer with "something fascinating in itself [...] satisfying a voyeuristic appeal" (Lukinbeal 2005, 11).

For anyone who has not been privy to a Siberian river melting in the spring these types of images are an exciting display of a world they likely will never experience firsthand. Furthermore, images such as these that highlight the idea of Siberia as frigid and unpleasant are precisely what many would expect from a movie set and filmed in Siberia, thus drawing on and reinforcing stereotypical ideas about the region to transform the film's setting into a real place in the viewer's mind. Finally, these images also serve as a transition between the different scales of the film's geography. Moving from the extreme-long shot of the soldiers that initially alerted the viewer of their latest whereabouts, the sequence cuts to the ice floes, and then to what Lukinbeal has called landscape as space.

Medium shots and close-ups characterize landscape as space (Lukinbeal 2005). It is in these shots which focus on character dialogue and facial expressions that landscape as place becomes significant because it is through narrative and character development occurring at the

more intimate scale that the social meaning of place is created (Fletcher, Lukinbeal, and McHugh 2012, 63). Landscape as space was already seen in the shot of Arseniev and his men walking along the railroad tracks, and here again in the shots that immediately follow the ice floes. In this scene we're introduced to a more intimate scale as the men struggle through the mud that comes with a newly thawed landscape. Although few words are spoken (the movie is notably absent of much dialogue) except for the distressed commands to the horses, this and the following scene of the men clumsily making their way through a stream as the only clear route in the dense forest undergrowth help us understand Arseniev's next words that the going was slow, and if only Dersu were with them now they could have been miles ahead of where they were. In other words, the civilized men from the city, with all of their expensive equipment and military expertise, are simply not equal to Dersu's knowledge and intuitive understanding of the landscape. It is at this scale that the original establishing shot of the men in the new spring landscape, and the subsequent image of Arseniev longing for Dersu's presence, are made socially significant.

In *Dersu Uzala* landscape as place and landscape as spectacle are the principal forms dominating the film's visual order, which both capitalizes on the on-location shooting and helps drive home the idea of a beautiful and pristine wilderness that is outside of and at odds with humanity's social world. This is made possible by the voice-over narration in place of dialogue. For instance, as Arseniev and Dersu stand on the frozen Lake Hanka just before they realize that they have lost their way in the endless, icy expanse, Arseniev's narration tells us, "Some menace to humans was lurking in this silence."

In order to adequately articulate this social relation of the men to the landscape through dialogue rather than narration the director would have needed to cut to landscape as space (that is, to medium, medium-close, and close-up shots), which would effectively remove the characters from the landscape and break the strong association between the statement and the landscape itself. At the same time however, by removing the voice from the speaker the narration becomes all-knowing, obscuring that the events on screen are merely Arseniev's memories rather than a



real-time event. The narrative therefore allows for the visual to remain fixed on the landscape while the social significance is overlain onto it.

On the other hand when social space does occur, it is often at the scale of medium-long shots rather than medium-close or close-up shots. For instance, in a dialogue between Arseniev and one of his men during Arseniev's second mission the soldier (unaware of Arseniev's relationship with Dersu) tells Arseniev that an indigenous hunter had been asking about Arseniev's whereabouts, but the soldier had refused to give away "military secrets." Here, even as this dialogue is taking place, rather than focus on the two men's faces and torsos emulating everyday conversation, both men are fully represented in a way that highlights their relation to their surroundings. This is again evident in Arseniev and Dersu's highly emotionally reunion. After hearing from the soldier that Dersu is nearby Arseniev dashes into the woods to look for him and the viewer is plunged into the dark undergrowth of the forest. At times Arseniev is difficult to make out, through the shadows and branches. Finally, Arseniev and Dersu spy one another and run together to embrace in a *Gone with the Wind* moment. All the while the camera keeps its distance, clearly positioning this embrace relative to the forest and suggesting that true bonding takes place outdoors, away from the city's contrived social institutions.

Given what we know about the locational specificity of *Dersu Uzala's* filming – that part of the appeal to Kurosawa to make the film was the ability to film it in the exact region where the historical events took place – it is significant that the sense of place which is created is not at the national level, as some scholarly and professional interpretations have suggested (see Chapter 3). Although we know that the captain and his men are Russians and that Dersu is a "Goldi" these details are rarely if ever addressed.

The country name "Russia" is actually never invoked. Further, unlike Babayan's 1961 film *Dersu Uzala* that uses a map of the Soviet Far East at the beginning of the film in order to situate the viewer at the regional level before becoming progressively more detailed in establishing location, in Kurosawa's version there are no visual clues notifying the viewer of

what part of Russia is being portrayed. Instead, Kurosawa's opening sequence is a series of still, impressionistic, autumn trees. Thus, while the film clearly critiques urbanization and expansion, it is not a political critique aimed in particular at Russian urbanization or Russian expansion, but merely at these processes as universals.

The emphasis on the relationship between humanity and nature in the film's cinematography and narrative facilitates the film's dichotomizing metaphor of nature as something that must be understood, respected, and used sparingly, in contrast to the man-made environment of the city where nature has been turned into a commodity in the form of resources and where the direct relationship between humans and the original source of these goods has been all but obliterated. It is at this large metaphorical level that we are to understand the difference between Dersu and Arseniev and thus their interactions with urban and natural landscapes. As the most sensitive of the military men, Arseniev is the first of the company to embrace Dersu's accompaniment on their mission and see immediately the utility of Dersu's knowledge. Nonetheless, he is inherently "of the city," and as his surveying equipment and camera remind us, the forerunner of a time to come when people like Dersu and the wilderness he is associated with will no longer exist. Dersu on the other hand does not directly gain anything by his interaction with the military men. Having lived in the forest all of his life he is attuned to the reciprocity of the natural world and rather than question the presence of the military men in the forest he simply agrees to help them out due to a sense of responsibility. In this way the landscape and the characters become symbiotically coded and naturalized, helping us understand how to read different situations that the men find themselves in. For instance, not only do we understand the wilderness to be a positive force because Dersu can survive in it with ease and the military men cannot, we see the city of Khabarovsk and Arseniev's house as negative, not because of some derelict or depraved condition, but because Dersu cannot survive there. This process of uniting characters and their social and cultural traits with the landscape is part of what Lukinbeal refers to as landscape as metaphor.

Landscape as metaphor is one way that “cinematic landscapes exceed the bounds of the image” (2005, 13) because it is by drawing on the deeper social and cultural meanings of the filmmaker and the intended audience that its ideological significance is expressed. The extent to which an audience is willing to suspend disbelief and accept these social and cultural meanings attributed to the landscape through metaphor depends on how well the movie makes these meanings appear natural and unassuming by using practices of geographic realism. In order to quickly and efficiently access these meanings in a way that is believable to the audience stereotypes are often relied on. In geography, stereotypes may be thought of as “highly simplified generalizations about people and places which carry within them explicit or implicit assumptions about their characteristics” (Burgess and Gold 1985, 9). For instance, in *Dersu Uzala* many images of gray skies, snow, and ice are shown, which are likely to cohere with most stereotypical understandings of Siberia. Beyond this however, we see images depicting the extreme heat of a Siberian summer that is equally characteristic of parts of Siberia, but less well known outside of the region (especially to American audiences). In this way, by relying on one image of Siberia that is generally accepted as coherent with most people’s understanding of Siberia – snow and ice – the purview of what constitutes “Siberia” is able to be expanded to include sun and warmth as well.

Similarly, in order for the message about the negative effects that modernization has on nature to be convincing it is necessary to access the cultural baggage that viewers already bring to the screen. By working with one of the most extensively used binaries in cinema (Gold 1985; Lukinbeal and Kennedy 1997; Ford 1994) – the difference between an ideal pastoral landscape and a depraved or unenlightened urban landscape – *Dersu Uzala* already draws on a long-held understanding about these types of places. However, to make sure that the binary appears believable and not banal it is localized in the unique context of Siberia and reiterated constantly in different ways throughout the film. Here we see Lukinbeal’s (2005) differentiation between large and small metaphors. Where the large metaphor between the city and the forest, Arseniev and

Dersu, structures the entire film, in order to support this large metaphor a series of small metaphors are used throughout. We have already seen examples of these when the military men walk in a straight line along the railroad tracks, symbolic of the unstoppable march of progress brought to the area by the modern technology of the train, or when the men walk against the current of the river as indicated by ice floes. And of course, the leitmotif running throughout *Dersu Uzala* is the metaphor of vision.

Vision in *Dersu Uzala* is a metaphor for wisdom, knowing, and understanding, as when Dersu scolds the soldiers for not understanding the ways of the forest, saying, “You all the same as children. You have eyes, how you no see?” or when Dersu loses his vision and is condemned to a life in the city with the rest of the spiritually blind. But it is also associated with technological appropriation, supplementing modern man’s inability to “see” in the sense of knowing and understanding, as in Arseniev’s enthusiasm to photograph Dersu, as well his responsibility for mapping the forest. This is well illustrated in the scene of Arseniev standing atop the bluff with his surveyor’s equipment, looking out across the landscape. Here, Arseniev should be master of the scene as he defines and bounds the territory with the modern man’s disembodied “cartographic gaze” (Pickles 2004, 75). But instead, Arseniev is uneasy, as he finds only an endless and insurmountable sea of green and the disempowering sense that somewhere out there Dersu is deftly navigating that vast expanse in a way that he and his men cannot. For Dersu the wilderness already exists as a coherent system of signs, while for Arseniev the wilderness is an unexplored terrain that needs to be translated into a language that is understandable to future generations who will come to the region to settle and develop it. As Pickles (2004) explains, such

map knowledge is never naively given. It has to be learned and the mapping codes and skills have to be culturally reproduced so that the map is able to present us with a reality that we recognize and know. This known reality is differentiated from the reality we see, hear and feel, and this is the magic and the power of the map. The map does not let us see anything as such. Instead, it lets us see the world how others have seen it and how they want us to see it. (61)

The power of the cartographer to produce new known realities can be described as similar to the filmmaker's, where the products of both endeavors "assume and position audiences, ideologically as well as geographically" (Harper and Rayner 2010, 15). In this sense Arseniev's cartographic gaze is no different from the cinematographic techniques that promote geographic realism where both naturalize a particular outlook on the land, making what is partial and constructed appear universal and transparent.

The filming techniques seen in *Dersu Uzala* bring the spectacular landscapes of Siberia to the forefront and ground the narrative and its metaphorical division between nature and society in a sense of place that makes what is stereotypical or cliché seem real, authentic, and inextricable. In this way, although the film itself shows that Dersu does not exist, may never have existed, and that the idea of him and of a pristine wilderness are entirely constructions of Arseniev, Kurosawa, and society as a whole, this absence is made up for through the power of the film's visuality. Employing the filmmaker's techniques – the widescreen format, long and extreme-long shots, disembodied narration, and the on-location filming of the spectacular landscape itself – Kurosawa, like Arseniev, is able to manipulate time and space and conjure ideas and images of Dersu and nature that appear as fact rather than fiction, passing off what is cultural as natural. In the following chapter we see how the audience responds.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE AUDIENCE RESPONDS

In the previous chapter I showed how, by highlighting the way that representational technology at the level of narrative undermines the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala*, nature is in need of constant supplementation and therefore never fully present or ideal. This is made possible by strategically constructing the film's formal elements to represent the landscape in such a way as to promote geographic realism, the effect of which is to obscure the binary's construction and instead make it appear natural and self-evident, a process similar to Arseniev's techniques as map-maker. Intrinsic to each of these representations – Arseniev's map and Kurosawa's film – is that each have been and will continue to be disseminated across the globe, a unique visioning of a particular part of the world that through this process of dissemination transcends geographic boundaries. While Arseniev's original story and Kurosawa's film have been highly situated in the Russian Far East, these representational mediums are thus resituated in ever-changing contexts. As today's viewers of *Dersu Uzala* interpret and rearticulate their understandings of the film and the meaning of its landscapes, new landscapes are brought into existence that depend as much on the source material that prompt these rearticulations as they do on the context of their own production and the medium through which they are produced (see Barnes and Duncan 1992). In this chapter I show the different ways that users of internet websites have interpreted and rearticulated the nature/society binary of the film and how we may see these articulations as indicative of its effect on the users' everyday lives and worldviews.

*Users Respond to Nature and Society*

In order to understand the film's effects I have used the online reviews from the Internet Movie Database and Amazon.com in order to find out how reviewers discuss the representation of nature and society in *Dersu Uzala*, and how if at all they relate this to their own lives. Although I approached these internet forums without knowing how exactly reviewers would interpret the film or use the forums as a way to do so, I soon found that the theme of nature versus modernization, which I took to be pre-eminent in the film, was also highly accepted as one of the film's core themes by the majority of reviewers. Within the category of nature and society I further categorized these reviews into comparative, subjective, and incorporative type responses. Here, comparative type responses are those that reinforce a distinction between the world of "real" events and the cinematic or "reel" world. Subjective responses are those that "exhibit a belief in the televisual world, but maintain a distinction between the mediated place and [the viewers'] own lives." Incorporative responses are those written by "respondents [who] fold televisual place into their own lived worlds" (Fletcher, Lukinbeal, and McHugh 2012, 96-97).

This organization yielded approximately 35% as comparative type, 45% as subjective type, and 20% as incorporative type. All of the reviewers who discuss nature and society (76 out of 151) tend to accept that in the movie the process of modernization in the form of technology and the spread of society through urbanization are meant to be negative phenomena and that these forces, along with Arseniev, are ultimately responsible for the loss of nature and humanity's ties with nature. However, perspectives vary on what these negative impacts mean for the users themselves and for contemporary society in general.

### *Comparative Responses*

Twenty-six reviews that I have categorized as providing comparative type responses do not engage with the film in a way that suggests a significant impact on their lives or thoughts. Often these responses stick to merely describing the film's plot or the context of production. In

these responses there is a clear differentiation between the fictional nature landscapes of Siberia and objective reality. For instance:

The cinematography was wonderful. The Siberian wilderness was shown as a beautiful and compelling Garden of Eden, soon to be destroyed by the evils of civilization. (Wings42, Amazon.com, 2004)

Another user states:

Kurosawa plays the familiar theme of the struggle of man against the implacability of nature beautifully. (Matthias Disney, Amazon.com, 1998)

This reviewer recognizes the trope, but still appreciates the style with which it was deployed. For many users offering comparative type responses, although they recognize the constructedness of the film's pristine wilderness, this does not necessarily detract from the movie's quality. In each of these statements the users recognize the binary, but also that it is a cultural product and effect of the director's intentions or techniques.

For other users it is not the constructedness of the wilderness that they highlight, but of the city. In particular the very few negative comments made about the film focus on the scenes that take place in the city as being boring and not believable:

Dersu is a local old man who offers to help a small exploration team from the Russian military, which at the time was continuing to forcefully occupy land belonging to others. In introducing and building up the character, Kurosawa employs simple and straightforward story-telling to make the audience bond instantly with the character. [...] But the second half felt like forced and melodramatic, esp. with the part where Dersu moves to the city with the captain. (Gadgester, Amazon.com, 2005)

In the first half of this review the user asserts a subjective interpretation of the movie's events by clearly overstating the role of the Russian military in the film, which was never actually shown doing anything forceful or violent. In this way the user combines the film's events with their own thoughts and ideas about the Russian military at the turn of the twentieth century, momentarily uniting the real and the reel to create new meanings for the film. By the end of the review however, the user states that the movie was not successful in allowing them to suspend disbelief by creating a realistic urban experience for Dersu. A similar issue is presented in the following:



First and foremost, one of the best nature films ever shot in 70mm and second, a refreshing handling of cosmotheism without grandstanding [...] That being said, one point of contention. For the wily Captain Vladimir Arseniev to lock Dersu down in the hell of a 20th century city simply because he needed glasses, bothered me when I saw this film fifteen years ago, and it still bothers me today. Oh sure, many would say chiding Kurosawa about that is like bringing up slaves and Jefferson but by God even Leo X used glasses to improve his hunting in the 16th Century! Surly [sic] there was one affordable pair of spectacles in Eastern Russia in 1907. (Charlietuna, IMDb, 2001)

Here the user situates the film within the genre of “nature films,” suggesting that they recognize the movie as containing generic conventions (cosmotheism and presumably the idealization of nature). Following this however, the user turns to a subjective interpretation of the “20th century city” as “hell.” While the city in *Dersu Uzala* is definitely depicted as negative in comparison to the forest, the user subjectively exaggerates the city; they seem to identify the metaphoric division between city and nature and add to this their own personal take, showing a level of engagement beyond the comparison between the real and reel. These two comments indicate a transition between comparative type responses and subjective type responses and are also among the rare few that describe the film or portions of it as not believable.

For the majority of users the distinction between nature and the city is believable. In the following statements we see the strong effect that the film’s techniques of geographic realism have on making the idealized portrayal of the wilderness seem self-evident:

I would say that you have not lived until you have seen what Kurosawa can do filming nature in its raw splendor and magnificence. (Colin Glassey, IMDb, 1998)

Rarely can such loving care have been lavished on ensuring that the natural beauty of a location comes through onto the celluloid. (Darren Burns, IMDb, 2000)

Just as the wilderness offers a majestic stillness, so too do the widescreen compositions. (Shirl Kennedy, Amazon.com, 2000)

It is one of the most beautiful movies ever made. Kurosawa takes you to the colorful and picturesque forests of Siberia; a treat to sore eyes. (Koundinya, IMDb, 2012)

For these users the descriptions “raw splendor,” “natural beauty,” “majestic stillness,” and “picturesque forests” capture qualities that are inherent to the real nature of Siberia, which

Kurosawa has been able to accurately transfer onto the reel. Thus, while these users maintain a distinction between the real and the reel they show a belief in the film's world as it is constructed.

### *Subjective Responses*

Thirty-three reviews fall into the subjective category, the largest portion of reviews (45%). As the statements will illustrate, many subjective type reviews highlight a belief in the film's idealized depiction of nature, whereas others emphasize the reverse side of the binary, the negative effects of society on nature. In general subjective users tend to see this relationship as representative of the way things "really are."

Many users writing these reviews are ambivalent regarding how to feel about this relationship. They see the film as a portrayal of a clash between nature and civilization that exists both on and off screen, but don't appear to have strong feelings towards either side, or are confused about how to feel. Statements such as "What you remember is Dersu, a symbol of humanity's lost connection to nature, and the smallness of humanity in the face of nature" (Graveyard\_Poet, Amazon.com, 2008) don't assign definitive value judgments. In addressing the incompatibility of Dersu with modern society this statement frames the separation as simply the way things are. Moreover, it resituates Dersu and the feelings carried over from the movie into the present, where Dersu the film character becomes a symbol for what exists off screen – humanity's lost connection with nature.

Other users, though not aggressively attacking modernity, refer to it more pejoratively, using rhetorical devices such as scare quotes. In the following review the author simultaneously uses scare quotes to put the desirability of modernity into question while also seeming to accept the separation between Dersu and Arseniev and their pre-industrial and industrial lifestyles as inevitable and symbolic of historical events:

I agree with the person who wrote that Dersu's death seems appropriate [...] To me, it symbolized the death of the old hunter-gatherer culture across the world, and the 'triumph' of industrialization. Even Arseniev, despite his respect for Dersu, makes no attempt to change his modern lifestyle to go live in the wild. He is content to be part of the 20th Century. (ShannonTriumphant, IMDb, 2010)

Again, the user sees the film as symbolic of a reality beyond the film. Yet while they hint that this reality may not be ideal they also explain that to them this is the way it has to be because people like Dersu, that is, people with a profound connection to nature, will never exist in modern society as long as people like Arseniev, who spend time learning to appreciate nature, won't actually do anything to change their lifestyle. This apathy or indifference to making necessary changes is then the "triumph' of industrialization." This sense of apathy or resignation is often repeated, as in the following statement:

I think this movie captures beautifully the world changing, and "Man" changing...or rather, changed and Dersu represents the last of a dying breed....a mankind that was once integrally part of the natural world. I understand the standard of living progress and civilization has brought to us all, that it's likely I would never have lived to my current age living without the advantages of modernity....but I love the depiction of a character who reads the landscape the way we today read papers and blogs on the internet. I prefer to live closer to wild landscapes than I do here in suburbs. Dersu Uzala reminds me of what is lost when we turn our back on The Wild, when we do not respect The Wild, when we remove ourself so far from The Wild. (Old55 2006, IMDb)

Here again the movie "captures" a reality that exists off screen, which is the transformation of humanity living closely with nature to humanity living outside of nature. Significantly, this user also transfers elements of the movie into their own life by drawing parallels between the daily actions of the character and their own everyday experiences of "reading papers and blogs on the internet." Clearly though, the user is uncertain about how to feel regarding how humanity's changing relation to nature affects their own life. On one hand they claim that without modernity they would not be alive, but on the other suggests that, although mankind is no longer "integrally part of the natural world," this might be remedied by moving further away from the suburbs. Again the user conflates the film's depiction of modernization with part of their own life, suburbanization. In other words, while this user makes a clear distinction between the real and

reel, they show a belief in the nature/society binary presented in the film, and use it to reflect on their own living situation.

While the end of the previous review is somewhat optimistic in that the user feels one can always move “closer to wild landscapes,” it also shifts the blame of society’s disconnect with nature to a contemporary artifact – suburbs. The review’s tone is mournful for a time in human history that is no longer retrievable. In different ways several users like this one attempt to juggle sentimental feelings for a time long gone with recognition that modern life has been beneficial for them. Furthermore, like the previous user, multiple other users relate the film to their own lives through ideas about (sub)urbanization and the internet. In the following review the user refers to the themes of the film as “reminders” of certain beliefs that the user holds about human relationships, contemporary society, and existence generally, while negotiating a practical attitude toward the film’s defamation of society:

The film depicts the breathtaking beauty of the soul as adeptly as that of nature. The story reminded me how profoundly any one person can effect another, even without realizing it: an important reminder in the midst of the information age, which seems to be desensitizing people to our relationships with nature and with our fellow man. [...] I don't believe Kurosawa is denouncing modern times entirely; I believe he's reminding us that true sophistication comes from the depths of the soul, not of the pocketbook. (Red “V”, IMDb, 1999)

The practical attitude that this and the previous review take toward the nature/society binary diminishes in tandem with waning cognition of the binary as a cultural construct. For instance, the following user, writing about the film’s ending, suggests that the reason we yearn for Dersu’s return to the wilderness is a desire to experience vicariously through Dersu something that is lost to people living in the city, and by implication civilization as a whole. Here, although the user writes about the nature/society binary, they do so without actually recognizing it as such:

Dersu is half-blind at that time and we all know that turning back to the forest could kill him but in spite of this we want him to turn back. Why? Because we, as urban yuppies!, wanna be happy in this big city lights and we don't. We have nowhere to run and hide but Dersu has. So we want him to go to forests and be happy. (linusbigpotato, IMDb, 2005)

This user makes a distinction between the film's world and their own by suggesting that there is something Dersu is able to do in the reel world, escape from the city, which in the real world the user is not able to do. However, by identifying their own desire and inability to escape urban life with Dersu's desire and (ultimate) inability to escape, the user merges the two worlds by projecting themselves into the movie's reality. This review shares the increasingly pessimistic or hopeless attitude exhibited by the following reviews which I have categorized as incorporative.

### *Incorporative Responses*

Incorporative reviews (15 reviews or 20%) are those that move beyond the real/reel binary to fully engage with the nature/society binary by using it as more than paradigmatic of their own worldviews, but as coterminous with or even more real than their own world. For instance, in the following review the user describes Dersu's conservationist approach to resources. In describing Dersu's actions however, the user transfers Dersu and his approach to life not in terms of the film, but in relation to "the whole world," and similarly, like many other users, describes modern society not in terms of the soldiers, Arseniev's society, or the city of Khabarovsk, but as "we."

[Dersu] always knew what to do and what was best in the woods. Which is actually a great deal like what the rest of the world really is, and what is best for the whole world. However, modern society, as we all know, will not embrace Dersu's beliefs. We will not give even though we have no use for the item, Dersu did. And, Dersu gave often when he could have used the item, remember the leaving of food in the shelter for others who might be in need. (Chukar, IMDb, 2003)

As mentioned previously, incorporative type reviews are often darker than the rest of the reviews, moving from ambivalence to outright accusations that modern culture is the cause of the extant destruction of nature and "our" relationship to it:

One of the things I loved most about this film was the cinematography – there are long, lingering shots of the landscape, the endless steppe, the forest, the rivers, the mountains. We believe ourselves to be powerful because we have been moderately successful in our attempts to harness nature for our own uses, but the film shows us that we are deluding

ourselves, that nature cannot be controlled or resisted, and the truly powerful are those, like Dersu, who co-exist in harmony with nature and learn what the wilderness teaches. (hartj-1, IMDb, 2005)

Along with others this user seems to make a connection between the film's cinematography and their thoughts and feelings derived from it, but at the same time appears to be less cognizant of making this connection. Rather, it seems to be a "stream of consciousness," where the user, prompted by reflecting on the landscape, launches into a condemnation of "us," in the contemporary off-screen world. By suggesting that the movie "shows" us the truth of our own destructive behavior the movie becomes more than merely symbolic of what takes place off screen, but is elevated to a higher truth, a reality in itself against which our own delusional lives can be measured.

I take the previous comment to be representative of a set of responses that use the film's binary as a means to attack some of the most basic elements of society and are indicative of why binary logic toward environmentalism is problematic in the first place. Whereas here the person refers to a generalized "we," implicating themselves but apparently everyone else who attempts to use nature for their own ends (a group that includes nearly everyone on earth, not to mention Dersu himself), in the following review "warm houses" and "shared responsibility" are the alienating factors:

What senses have we lost or have been dulled by living in cocoons of civilization, warm houses and shared responsibility for warding off cruel nature and the creatures who inhabit the shadows outside the firelight. [...] And I laugh at many of us—the most modern and out-of-touch with nature: nature as beauty and as cruel harvester of our bodies when we can no longer push headlong into the dark blizzard. (stephenksmith@hotmail.com 2010, IMDb)

Similarly, the following comment attacks a very large though slightly less generalized portion of modern society (internet users and social institutions), but whereas the previous two users saw Dersu as the winner against modernization, this person describes Dersu, nature, and people who "cannot live without the internet" as being the "losers" of the equation:

A person who feels he cannot live without the internet probably has lost a lot of the basic skills and appreciation of nature that Uzala has. The ultimate irony is that the

explorations of Arsenyev to document and map the areas pave the way for the development of interdependent social institutions that lead to the extinction of people like Uzala. (bandw, IMDb, 2010)

Like the previous review, this user also attacks “interdependent social institutions,” but also names the specific tools of society through which such interdependency spreads and which are responsible for the loss of appreciation for nature and people like Dersu – the map and the internet. The user in this case does not address themselves as one of the hypothetical people that “cannot live without the internet,” but are nonetheless implicated in light of their own extensive complicity in using the internet to write this review and 505 others on the Internet Movie Database. In a sense, this review underscores the conundrum that is presented by the film and reiterated in the entire online reviewing culture surrounding *Dersu Uzala* (especially those reviews that posit a belief in the nature/society binary): that in order to express the significance of a “natural” world devoid of human interference by critiquing technology, one must also use technology to disseminate that message. In other words, the reviews, the movie itself, and the techniques through which the movie delivers its message are all part of the “infinite chain” of supplementation (see Derrida 1997, 157), constantly deferring what they are meant to stand in place of – a nature outside of human history or interference, which in the end has never been more than a human construct. Indeed, as William Cronon (1996, 83) explains, if we are actually interested in doing something about environmental problems, then

we are unlikely to make much progress solving [them] if we hold up to ourselves as the mirror of nature a wilderness we ourselves cannot inhabit. To do so is merely to take to a logical extreme the paradox that was built into wilderness from the beginning: if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves.

However, it is exactly this type of extreme and self-defeating environmentalist logic that the film appears to invoke in some users.

The choice to criticize the internet in particular for its desensitizing effects, which is repeated by several users, is likely prompted by the fact that it is the context in which they are writing and seemingly an activity they regularly engage in. Something I did not find however was

anyone that included the act of movie watching in his or her criticism of technology. Just as the effects of modernization on nature in the movie are frequently accepted as representative of real-life events, the film itself is one aspect of the experience that users are least critical of.

### *Lasting Impact and Repetitive Viewing*

Just as reviewers often transfer the film's events to their own time period, using phrases such as "now," "in today's world," or by referring to a contemporary "we," many viewers discuss time as a factor in their experience of the film in a different sense, not in reference to the film's diegesis, but in reference to the viewers' experiences of the viewing process. In the previous section we saw how some viewers are critical of particular types of technology and social interaction, something not found in relation to the film itself. Rather, with many reviewers purporting to have seen the movie as many as 50 times, the film as a type of technology that can be enjoyed over and over also becomes an issue regarding how individuals experience the film and the lasting effects the film has.

The issue of time taken to view the film appears at the most mundane level when reviewers recommend the film to their readers by telling them it is worth the two hours and forty minutes it will take to sit through it. Often reviewers tell their readers that if they are patient then they will be rewarded with an experience they will never forget. Besides drawing attention to a general lack of interest/ability to sit through a movie that is over two hours long, this last observation points to two other factors. The first is that the word "experience" is not a random choice on my part, but rather one I have chosen specifically to portray the terminology and sentiment repeatedly used to describe watching *Dersu Uzala*. For example it's "not just a movie, but is an experience of a lifetime" (Murtaza Ali, IMDb, 2011) "that can have a lasting impact on one's personality" (Venkatraman, IMDb, 2012), and that "once seen [will] stay with you forever"



(Restatolon, IMDb, 2005). In all of these statements about the film users describe it as having a lifelong impact.

Whereas these users (presumably) describe the effect of seeing the film once, other users explain that the movie has such a profound effect they feel compelled to watch it regularly, and in some cases have done so since it first came out. One user explains his purchase thus:

When the film premiered in United States, I went to the theater at least five times. Thereafter, I purchased VHS tape version and I watched over and over to the point the tape was no longer watchable [...] This DVD is definitely one of my treasured one. (A. Kim, Amazon.com, 2012)

Another describes repeat watching in more intimate terms:

When I feel lost I know that the only that I have to do is put The Dersu's cassette in my video and wait two hours. After this story I feel in a different way my stupid loneliness, I become a man in a big space. (Giangino, IMDb, 1999)

While this person's repetitive viewing is almost medicinal, such that putting one's world in perspective is nothing a prescriptive watching of *Dersu Uzala* cannot handle, for others repetitive watching of the film is another type of remedy – a reminder:

If there is one movie that should be seen over every year, this is it! It reminds us of the tenuous relationship between cultures based on survival in the natural world and those based on mankind's invented structures, and how easily respect for the former can be lost by the later. (M. Angelo, Amazon.com, 2000)

This last subjective type response then brings us back to one of my first points, which is that users see the film's portrayal of the division between society and nature as representative of reality. These two categories however – those that highlight the nature/society division and a current role within it, and those that highlight repeat viewing – are not mutually inclusive; not all reviewers who discuss repeat watching also discuss their thoughts about nature and their lives, and not everyone who discusses their ideas about nature also mentions repeat watching or lasting impressions.

However, the process of repetitive watching is of interest for film and media geographers because, as Kennedy (2008, 189) explains, “the emotions aroused in our experiences in viewing

movies have a significant role in the creation of our life-worlds and inform life decisions – not always at a conscious level.” He goes on to explain, “Emotions as basis for preferences, combined with the probability of repeated exposure to specific landscapes/places and stories may help explain preferences for specific images or places, and, if negative emotions were aroused, aversions to others” (2008, 195). Similarly, Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh (2012, 16–17) posit that

[w]hile movies are better conveyors of sense of place, owing to a superior aspect ratio for depicting landscapes, television’s episodic nature strengthens its place-making power. As opposed to a singular movie seen once or perhaps a few times at most, viewers make weekly visits to the world of the TV show.

At two hours and forty minutes *Dersu Uzala* is clearly not as long as many television series that last for many seasons. It does, however, have a highly developed sense of place created using techniques of geographic realism, which, when combined with repeated exposure, raises the question of what it means for viewers to watch *Dersu Uzala* as many as a dozen or more times. As Butler (1990, 1997) explains, it is through repetitive acts that identity formation, but also resistance to normalization, takes place, stating: “It is precisely the process of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization” (1997, 3). Thus, while it is difficult to completely understand the users’ comments and to what extent they actively incorporate the nature/society binary into their own worldviews, it is plausible that these acts of repetitive, even obsessive viewing, along with the act of articulating their attachment to the film and its meanings through online communities, may be seen as a type of place-identity performance. In particular, they can be seen as a type of identity performance that becomes a willing subject of one discourse – nature veneration – in order to resist the normalizing forces of the predominant discourse surrounding them – modern, consumer, techno society. This occurs even while the user is forced to operate within the parameters of modern society, using the very technology of dissemination that the film and the users critique as separating society from nature in the first place. This is one avenue of

future research that would give insight into how users assimilate *Dersu Uzala*'s nature/society binary, as well as something that film and media geographers, especially those working within the convergence of the culture of cinema and the internet, will need to explore.

By examining what the users on these websites have said regarding nature and the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala* I have found that roughly 65% (all subjective and incorporative reviews combined) of users who discuss these topics do so in such a way that indicates an acceptance or belief in the idealized nature presented in the film and also that this nature is fundamentally at odds with processes of urbanization, industrialization, and modern social life, such as communal living and communication. Moreover, while users often identify the notion of untouched wilderness and humanity's connection to it as inherently "of the past," these negative processes of modern social life as depicted in the film are often resituated into the users' own lives, either in terms of a generalized "us here in the modern world," or by drawing parallels between concepts in the film such as reading the landscape or making a map to contemporary phenomena such as reading blogs or using the internet.

While users providing comparative type responses tended to see the binary for what it was, a cultural trope, those that gave subjective type responses appeared to more readily suspend disbelief, continuing to compare the film's reality to an off-screen reality, but finding the former to be representative of the latter. Many of these users expressed their enjoyment of the film as simply a chance to see the beautiful Siberian wilderness, lauding Kurosawa's skill at accurately capturing it and bringing it to life on the screen. While these users recognize that this is done by certain techniques of the filmmaker, they do so uncritically, accepting the film's binary logic without questioning the filmmaker's motivations. Other users providing subjective responses wrote less about the landscape and cinematography than they did about the implications of these things. Here we begin to see a deeper connection with the social significance of the film's landscapes and their binary depiction. These users express concern over humanity's contemporary relationship to nature, symbolically represented in the film, but also ambivalence

and apathy toward changing what they perceive to be a currently existing and undesirable relationship between contemporary society and nature. The sense of uncertainty or mourning expressed by these users was dramatically shifted to a level of intense disdain for contemporary social artifacts perceived in relation to the film's depiction of society and modernization by users providing incorporative type responses. These users often use combative language to attack basic social institutions, promoting the type of self-defeating environmental extremism that makes the nature/society binary problematic.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

‘Wilderness,’ Aldo Leopold wrote, ‘is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization.’ Longing for the authentic, nostalgic for an innocent past, we are drawn to the spectacle of wildlife untainted by human intervention and will. Yet, we cannot observe this world of nature without such intervention. The camera lens must impose itself, select its subject, and frame its vision. The history of nature film reverses Leopold’s claim. Cultural values, technology, and nature itself have supplied the raw material from which wilderness as artifact has been forged. (Mitman 1999, 3)

The purpose of this thesis has been twofold. First, I set out to find how or whether social and geographic constructs such as the nature/society binary presented and naturalized in a film are accepted by viewers of the film, in this case *Dersu Uzala*, and if so, what effect if any this has on viewers’ understanding of their everyday lives and worldviews. The second endeavor of this project, directly related to the first, was to explore the method of online ethnography and its potential to expand film geographers’ currently limited attempts to understand audience responses regarding how issues of cultural politics are presented in movies. To accomplish this I drew from three sets of geographic literature – film geography, political ecology, and the geoweb – that together helped position this study as an investigation into the discursive construction of nature in film and the internet. Key to my readings of these literatures is an emphasis on those writers in each area who have moved beyond the binary division of the world into material and representational division. Blurring the lines between epistemology and ontology in this way means that how we understand reality, or in this case real nature, is inseparable from how we are able to know and communicate about it. As Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2008, 19) explain, “[T]he world is not imaged, imagined or re-presented by cinema, but rather the world becomes its own images, ‘a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal’ (Baudrillard 1983, 2).” Approaching the cinematic in this way we see that the landscapes of nature in *Dersu Uzala* are not re-

presentations of nature, but are constitutive of nature and as such how viewers interact with these landscapes and rearticulate them on the internet has the potential to bring new understandings, and hence new worlds, into existence.

In order to understand these rearticulations I organized my research methodologically around the cinematic text's three sites of meaning: the author, the text itself, and the audience. Organizing my research in this way allowed me to see not only how viewers interpreted the film, but also how aspects of the filmmaking process and the status and idiosyncrasies of the director influenced that which the viewers saw. In Chapter 3 I looked at the operation of the Soviet film industry during the years of *Dersu Uzala*'s production and, triangulating between different sources such as Kurosawa's script assistant Nogami's account of filming in Siberia, newspaper articles published at the time of production, and secondary literature, found that it was unlikely that the Soviets had any significant impact on the film's content as it is seen today. This claim is in opposition to several other scholarly and professional readings of the movie, which have attempted to root out the reasons behind the director's perceived collusion with the Soviets in creating anti-Chinese propaganda, among other political critiques.

If we are interested in how the movie has been received, as I have been, then based on this information and the material I use to understand audience response there is little reason to try to uncover what the film is "really about" beyond the role it continues to play. I have noted that one facet of the film's production process which has significantly impacted how the film has been received is not Soviet interference or Soviet-Chinese relations, but Kurosawa's choice to film on location in the exact region of the film's protagonist's historical exploits. By choosing a location that is both historically accurate and able to "play the part" of pristine wilderness we are alerted to the significance of geographic realism to the film's plot, which has significantly influenced how online users have reviewed the film. These users often claim that the landscapes of Siberia are one of, if not the most, compelling aspects of the film.

Geographic realism, the aesthetic practice of creating a believable setting by tying action to a region's sense of place, is used in cinema and television to encourage viewers to suspend disbelief. If the audience successfully suspends disbelief then they temporarily accept the film's constructed world and the social and cultural meanings that have been created within it. In *Dersu Uzala* naturalization of the nature/society binary is made possible by the use of particular film techniques that enhance the film's sense of place and geographic realism. Techniques such as long takes, extensive use of medium-long, long, and extreme-long shots, unpronounced editing, voice-over narration, 70mm film, and widescreen format all enhance the film's sense of geographic realism by allowing the landscape and the relationship between the characters and the landscape to remain central to any scene. Drawing out these techniques reminds us that the landscapes of *Dersu Uzala* are not a mimetic re-presentation, but rather have been constructed in order to express a particular message. By manipulating space and time the film ceases to be "a referential medium, bound to the Real," and instead creates a *reality-effect* (Doel 2008, 96). It is this reality-effect developed through the film's landscapes that obscures the fact that the pivot on which the film's message rests, the nature/society binary and the alienating effects of technology on nature and humanity's connection to it, is built on a false reality.

The pristine wilderness and the ideal Other that the film constructs are part of the Romantic tradition which has become entrenched in much of environmentalist thought, and which is problematic because by defining nature as that which exists outside of human history, it precludes any possibility for humans to coexist with nature in an ethical and sustainable way (Cronon 1996). By focusing on the definition of nature and its discursive production before jumping to the effects that human society has on nature we see that the division between a human and non-human world has always been a human construct, one that significantly impacts the decisions we make and how we choose to act in regards to this perceived division. Inspired by Braun and Wainwright's (2001) Derridian analysis of the effects that a definition of nature built on a constitutive absence can have, in this project I have sought to show how the perpetuation of

the nature/society binary through films such as *Dersu Uzala* has impacts on how consumers of these cultural products think about their own lives and places in the world. How viewers feel about the environment and their place in it in turn has significant impacts on the everyday decisions that they make, such as what they do in their leisure time, where they shop, or who they vote for, actions that in turn shape society and the environment.

To understand how viewers of *Dersu Uzala* have engaged with the nature/society binary I have used the method of observational online ethnography. This method has many benefits, including its status as a relatively fast and simple way to gauge the way some viewers have interpreted a film. Further, the unobtrusive nature of the method when practiced as observational rather than engaged allows the researcher to garner the thoughts and opinions of users of select websites in such a way that the users' interpretations of the product are not biased by the researcher's agenda. Put into practice I found that while about 35% of users of the Internet Movie Database and Amazon.com websites who discuss the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala* identify the binary as a construct used for storytelling and do not engage with it beyond that, as many as 65% find the binary to go beyond mere generic convention. Within this group of users roughly 45% responded with what I have called subjective type responses. These users indicated that they take the binary in the film to be paradigmatic of a reality outside of the film, but also that they are ambivalent about how to feel towards it. This is seen by users' attempts to negotiate the implications that such an outlook has on their own everyday lives. Approximately 20% of users responded with incorporative type responses, those that transcend the real/reel binary by fully engaging with the film's social meanings, using the nature/society binary as more than paradigmatic of their own worldviews but as coterminous with, or even more real than, their own world. This type of engagement brings to mind questions raised by Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006, 322) about the potential effects of cinema in our lives: "What happens when the copy is better than the original? What if the original never existed but is a myth?" Attempting to "get



back to” a nature that never existed outside of our imagination of it is not only futile, but prevents environmental politics and civic engagement from progressing.

Finally, I found reason to believe that how the film was interpreted by these users was influenced by the particular medium, the internet, through which they were expressing themselves. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the users of these two websites are a very particular subset of all those who have ever seen the movie. In particular they are those who are compelled to not only watch the film and think about it, but also have the resources and desire to go to the internet to explain why or why not (mostly why) it is a good film, and also, as I have highlighted, to work out some of the ways that the movie, and sometimes specifically the nature/society binary, has affected them. This facet of the project brings up two interesting points. The first is that by focusing solely on internet users the project unknowingly became an investigation of what Jenkins (2006) has termed *convergence culture*, the result of two mediums (here, cinema and the internet) colliding in such a way that the meaning of the original content (the film) is altered by the process of consolidation. According to Jenkins (2006, 3) convergence is the most recent paradigm shift in the way society approaches media, and “represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and makes connections among dispersed media content.” What this means is that increasingly movies will not be limited events that are seen once and forgotten. This change already occurred with the development of home viewing equipment which extended the life of movies beyond the theatre. Now movies are able to be experienced endlessly in an online pastiche of discussions, reviews, screen captures, and Youtube clips that have the potential to affect how content is understood. In other words, the interpretations of the nature/society binary that I have worked with are highly situated in a changing media landscape, a fundamental shift in social attitudes and interactions with media content in their everyday lives that in this project I was not able to account for. This missing context of reception further extends to the contemporary state of popular environmental discourse that will have undoubtedly influenced how the users approached the film’s content to begin with.

This brings me to my second point however, which is that it is not necessarily surprising that those people on the “right” side of the digital divide, with constant access to internet and other technological resources, would also be willing to propose that increasingly technologized modes of living could be or are having a negative effect on them. Writing about America in particular, Cronon (1996, 78) has suggested it is often the most privileged in society who have historically been the ones most inclined to lament society’s destructive effects, saying:

[F]rontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism. The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects.

Taken together, it is clear that as society becomes increasingly mediated, this mediation will have profound effects on how people experience the world around them, which is made clear when we see how a deeply held cultural division such as the nature/society binary takes on new significance in a new era expressed through the phenomenon of convergence culture. Furthermore, the internet, as one essential vehicle of this process and where many inhabitants of the highly developed world go to express these new understandings, provides content-rich qualitative data that will be key to how geographers understand this change. These questions, which involve more in-depth probing of user identities, their interactions with technology and the internet, and previously held attitudes toward nature and society, were beyond the compass of this project, hinting at its limitations.

### *Assessing the Limitations and Questions for Future Research*

Certain aspects of the methodology and techniques used in this project became cumbersome and difficult to work with as the research progressed, which I believe point to ways that reception research generally, and this project in particular, can be improved upon in the future. To begin, I chose to use Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh’s categories because I believe

that they have the potential to help media geographers conceptualize the site of the audience. The utility of the categories is in helping the researcher better understand how film and television viewers transcend the real/reel binary and emotionally engage with mediated geographies as a type of thirdspace. However, like these authors I also found that the user reviews defied being swept neatly into the tidy categories provided. As I explained in Chapter 2 there were multiple reviews that simply did not fit into any of the three, while others fit into more than one. Rather than force user expressions to be either/or as I have done, future research using this system can be improved by taking a neither/and approach, embracing the inherent messiness and often contradictory nature of how people relate to the complex aggregation of ideas presented in media. By not attempting to fix user responses to only one type of engagement these descriptive terms can still be useful, but in such a way that remains truer to the spirit behind them. Gaining this type of nuanced understanding is beyond the scope of the survey method used by Fletchall, Lukinbeal, and McHugh (2012) or the online ethnography used in this project, especially if either method is used alone. Instead, this task will require more direct interaction with research subjects through techniques of in-depth interviews and focus groups. This is not to say that online ethnography should be abandoned however, just used differently.

I found the use of online ethnography as a method of approaching audience disposition to be successful overall in a preliminary sort of way, but I also found the observational aspect of it to be severely restricting. By choosing to conduct an observational ethnography I may have significantly forfeited some of the richest possible data, which might have been accessed were I to directly engage with the online communities that I was studying. This engagement may have helped answer some of the questions that developed from the research relating to the identities of the users as well as the question raised in Chapter 5 on how the viewing and reviewing process may be thought of as a type of performance, a willing subjection to one discourse and resistance to another. Were I to continue this project I would use the websites and the information gathered and presented in this project as a starting point for finding research subjects that exhibit an

interest in engaging with the film. After categorizing and interpreting reviews I would contact via e-mail (since e-mail addresses for users are provided) individuals who wrote about the nature/society binary and whose reviews suggest that the user may have more ideas that I would like them to elaborate. Were I able to successfully contact them I would be able to set up interviews, which would give a deeper understanding of the individual identities of those reviewing *Dersu Uzala* and how they understood the movie to be impacting their lives. This approach would be particularly helpful in elucidating not only the insights developed about the nature/society binary in the reviews, but also the assumptions and understandings about the nature/society binary that viewers brought to the film to begin with, as well as whether these users agree with my interpretations of their statements and my tripartite categorization. Doing this would also produce more information by the users who stated that the movie had a profound impact on them, but who I was not directly able to include because they did not relate it to the nature/society binary.

Limitations aside, I consider the project to have been an overall success in identifying how some users of the internet use these online communities to articulate their understandings of the nature/society binary in *Dersu Uzala*. With the project complete I am brought back to Stephen Prince's assertion that *Dersu Uzala* is essentially a "failed social protest" because it draws on a cultural trope at the same time that it criticizes culture, a critique which I have extended to include the film apparatus itself. Clearly such a critique is problematic for multiple reasons, not the least of which includes that it is not up to one authoritative critic to decide whether a film's message does or does not produce the filmmaker's desired effects and because it is difficult to really know what the filmmaker's desired effects were. Most of all Prince's critique of *Dersu Uzala* is problematic because it does not take into account how the message was received and acted upon by the audience. By shifting authority to the audience I have suggested that ultimately the film's meaning and its ability to produce social effects rests on the extent to which it resonates with the audience.

The ultimate effect that the film has on viewers, whether it motivates them to act on or choose not to act on their perceived alienation from nature, is difficult to discern based on the reviews, which are mostly one-time events. However, the reviews themselves may be regarded as a type of action where, by endorsing one interpretation of the film over another, the users influence future interpretations of the film, and thus subsequent ideas about nature and society (see Dittmer and Dodds 2008). Moreover, the notion of requiring the film to serve as a “reminder” to either think about the world or to behave in a certain way, which multiple users suggested, is indicative of the power that film enthusiasts themselves attribute to cinema in framing their orientation to the world. And while users criticize the internet as a form of the modern technology that has suppressed their connection to nature, some vaguely aware that this is a self-defeating argument, no one criticizes film itself for being the same type of technology any more than they criticize the culturally produced nature/society binary. If the purpose of the film was to encourage viewers to re-examine their relations to nature and society, then, for some viewers at least, this was a success. If the purpose was to re-examine society’s binary thinking, then it was less successful.

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SCHOLARSHIPS and RECOGNITIONS

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Multi-year Graduate Assistantship, University of Kentucky, 2011-2013

German Studies Book Award, Most Outstanding Student, GER 616: The Cinema of  
Germany, University of Kentucky

PUBLICATIONS

Crampton, Jeremy W., Jay Bowen, Daniel Cockayne, Brittany Cook, Eric Nost, Lindsay  
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