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## “Drawing Is Where The Joy Is”: Cultural Anxiety, the Monstrous Fantastic, and the Artist as Mediator in Katsuhito Ishii’s *The Taste Of Tea*

### Abstract

This article applies George Canguilhem’s notion of monster theory as a method for cultural analysis to the analysis of literature. It argues that monster theory provides one accurate view of Japanese contemporary culture as it is depicted in literature, and that observing the relationship of artists and writers to the monsters they depict can lead to a valid hypothesis about the artist’s view of culture. Using this hypothesis as a theoretical framework, the article then analyzes *The Taste of Tea*, a contemporary film by Japanese director Katsuhito Ishii, in terms of monster theory. It concludes that monster theory vindicates the role of the artist as a cultural contributor because the artist is in a perfect position to interpret or mediate cultural anxiety and the perception of contemporary society by controlling the depiction of the monstrous.

### Keywords

Japan, Japanese literature, East Asian literature, contemporary film, foreign film, Katsuhito Ishii, Monster Theory, George Canguilhem, Japanese aesthetics, Japanese art, popular culture, monsters, monster fandoms, manga, anime, monstrous fantastic, magic realism

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# “Drawing Is Where the Joy Is”: Cultural Anxiety, the Monstrous Fantastic, and the Artist as Mediator in Katsuhito Ishii’s *The Taste of Tea*

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## Introduction

In his 1962 paper *Monstrosity and the Monstrous*, George Canguilhem suggested that images of the monstrous in art and literature offer a lens which identifies the objects of fear and uncertainty in culture, because images of the monstrous suggest an underlying concern that the world may not actually be as we perceive and rationalize it. As he put it, “the existence of monsters throws doubt on the ability of life to teach us order” (1). By questioning the rationality or comprehensibility of life, monsters betray the underlying fear of the uncontrollable unknown. Jeffery Jerome Cohen explains that images of the monstrous are a crystallized form of cultural anxiety portrayed back to culture by its artists and writers. “The monstrous body is pure culture,” he explains, “the monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (4). According to Cohen, the monstrous exists as a placeholder to fill an epistemological gap between our knowledge of the present and uncertainty of the future. It embodies a shared sense of unease at something we know we do not know.

This makes monster theory a powerful tool for discussing the collective unease of a particular culture at a particular time and has made it, as Lisa Grumbach points out, an increasingly popular method of analysis among sociologists in the last decade. Grumbach identifies the monstrous as a hybrid “other” who delivers criticism of culture by threatening both society and the individual. Further, the monstrous is always associated with unhealthy exaggeration, perversion, deformity, and cruelty (95). In *The Taste of Tea*, Katsuhito Ishii combines the sinister connotations of the monstrous with the lively tradition of the fantastic in Japanese popular culture to create a broad and varied category of exaggerated and improbable events that both reference past images of the monstrous and threaten contemporary society in new ways. In this paper, I refer to the cross section of events and characters that exaggerate, hybridize, or defy realistic depiction and pose some threat to the individual or the society as the “monstrous fantastic” and seek to demonstrate that understanding the role of the monstrous fantastic is key to understanding the social message of the film. Unlike the work of contemporary dystopian and pulp writers, however, Ishii defies explanation purely through an understanding of his perception of culture. Instead, his work demands that the reader understand culture as he sees it in order to grasp his view of the responsibility and impact of the individual. In *The Taste of Tea*, Ishii

places his characters in conflict with the monstrous fantastic in reality, imagination, and art in order to expose the deep-seated anxieties of postmodern Japanese society and to suggest that aesthetic sensibility and artistic cultural contribution may be the means of mediating between the self and the tensions of cultural uncertainty.

## Monster Folktales in Japanese History

Ishii's film reflects a broader tendency of Japanese artists and storytellers to explore and explain culture through horror and the fantastic. Scholars of folk art and illustration like Zilia Papp and Michael Dylan Foster approach the subject of traditional monster imagery by categorizing the thousands of different monsters, demons, and minor deities that appear in manuscripts from the Heian period onward, based on their relationship to aspects of social custom. Foster organizes his "*Yōkai Codex*" into lists of monsters that personify and were said to cause the typical events of the wilderness, the water, the countryside, the village or city, and the home (115-242). In recounting monster superstitions from the Edo period forward, he traces the specific connection between superstitious fears and cultural anxiety. For example, the *kamikiri* or hair-cutting demon, listed under village and city *yōkai*, has no impact beyond unexpectedly cutting off its victims' hair at the point where it is tied or pinned. It is rarely seen and never threatening, but its actions constitute a threat to Edo-period society because at the time, women's long hair symbolized both sensuality and privilege, while men's topknots were arranged in order to communicate their status and vocation. As Foster puts it, "the *kamikiri* resonated meaningfully in Edo society: having your hair cut suddenly and without your knowledge would have been a violent physical and symbolic experience" (211). Similarly, Foster assumes some relevance to popular culture in the sudden appearance *tōfu-kozō* or tofu boy story during the An'ei period, although the exact origin is unexplained (212). Grumbach brings the connection between monster superstition and the construction of Japanese culture into the present day, explaining that "monsters ultimately represent the criticism of society, and it is their hybridity that enables them to do so" (97). In his discussion of the modern depiction of the Amida Buddha, he discusses the role of monster folklore in "defining the Japanese 'folk' and ultimately Japaneseness" even as it created a backlash against this traditional identity and inspired the efforts of reformers like the Meiji emperor and Buddhist theologian Inoue Enryō, who sought to eradicate the influence of the non-rational in Japanese society and the Japanese identity. The influence and prevalence of culturally inspired monster narratives connected to Japanese cultural history justifies the use of monster theory not just as a sociological tool but also as a method of understanding the symbolism of the monstrous fantastic as it is depicted in literature.

## Modernization of the Monstrous

The secularizing influence of Meiji-era (1868-1912) idealists failed to remove the cultural prevalence of monster stories. Instead, modernization and secularization simply adapted the cultural awareness of the monstrous fantastic to fit contemporary concerns. Japanese depictions of monsters and the supernatural still correspond with the specific unease present in Japanese culture today. In his novel, *Kokoro*, Natsumi Sōseki reflects on a shift in

the subjects of cultural unease, saying, “loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in the modern era, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves (qtd. Napier 113). Sōseki and other contemporary authors have helped to develop a subtle language of the monstrous fantastic as a reflection of postmodern unease in Japanese society. Distorted references to traditional monster characters reflect a loss of clear continuity in the Japanese identity and unease about change, isolation, and the passage of time. As anthropologist Marilyn Ivy explains, the popular media that has come to symbolize modern Japan continues to erode society’s confidence in its own identity. She argues that “[a]s culture industries seek to reassure Japanese that everything is in place and all is not lost, the concomitant understanding arises...that such reassurance would not be necessary if loss, indeed, were not at stake” (10). In her opinion, story and fabrication help to compensate for this modern loss of identity by creating a new sense of idealized nationalism: “Through the loss of urban Japan’s rural roots...the ideal of native place has expanded to become a more capacious metaphor, one both multiple and generic.” (104). In some sense then, being Japanese involves loyalty to this new homeland of the mind, peopled as it is with monsters.

New depictions of the monstrous in Japanese art, aesthetics, and life have developed in connection with new, popular, or consumer-oriented experiences or media. In her study of global acceptance of the *kawaii* (cute) aesthetic, Janice Brown explains that the upbeat appearance and pessimistic undertones in new Japanese cultural production highlights the darkness and unease present in the work of the most celebrated popular artists. Takashi Murakami, for example, accounts for the mixture of horror and cuteness in his work by explaining that “the Japanese have refused—or rather, have been refused—the chance to grow up (qtd. Brown 4). Brown concludes that the ambiguous role of the monstrous within the cute may be the central element of the contemporary Japanese fantastic, arguing that the combination of the “violently sinister” and the cute or infantile has become the central symbol of Japan’s defiance toward redefinition by contemporary global pressures despite being itself a “small and vulnerable” cultural force (5).

The concept of rendering international cultural pressures as monstrous or supernatural challenges to identity has precedent in postmodern Japanese literature. Authors like Hayao Miyazaki and Haruki Murakami have used the monstrous fantastic as a means to comment on postmodern Japan. Perhaps the master of the sinister *kawaii*, director Miyazaki often uses morally ambiguous characters within a context of the monstrous fantastic to symbolize modern influences on Japan. In *Spirited Away*, for example, Miyazaki initially associates the character of No-Face with pitiful loneliness and gratitude toward the protagonist, Chihiro, but as the movie progresses, No-Face grows into a monstrous symbol of consumerism and mass culture, inspiring incontinent greed in the bathhouse workers and ultimately eating them alive. With Chihiro’s heroic and sacrificial effort to resist his destruction and remove him to a wholesome environment, he becomes a useful yet still pitiful figure (*Spirited Away*). Both Alistair Swale and Shiro Yoshika explain that Miyazaki’s fantastic characters and places are explicitly nostalgic, in that they combine elements of the idealized past with elements of contemporary Japan and explore the ways in which the past has contributed to the present state of culture. As Hiroshi Yamanaka puts it, Miyazaki’s treatment of Japanese culture through the lens of the fantastic “offers a new form of pop-

cultural spirituality, one that is based on his own revision of the Japanese folk-religious tradition” (237). Most of Miyazaki’s work provides an optimistic sense of resolution for its monstrous elements, focusing on the moral solutions discovered by his characters. For other artists, however, the monstrous fantastic necessarily prevents satisfactory resolution of tension. Hyao Murakami illustrates this view through his fragmentary, unsettling juxtaposition of the fantastic with the mundane. According to Fuminobu Murakami, “the writer’s stories are full of the hero’s favorite things: foods, places, and consumer goods which are easily consumed and just as easily forgotten” (128). In the malaise, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the “real” world of the story and the alternate realities Hyao Murakami often places parallel to the “real” storyline. By switching the narrative between the uncompromising underworld of a sci-fi Tokyo and a tiny, magical outpost in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, Murakami creates an unsettling dichotomy in which elements of the same story cannot understand or communicate to each other. In Fuminobu Murakami’s words, Hyao Murakami’s multiple realities “shatter ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things...to ‘hold together’” (137). Murakami’s use of the fantastic, then, demonstrates the inevitable dissolution of society.

## **The Monstrous in *The Taste of Tea***

Like Miyazaki, Murakami, and other postmodern writers, Ishii obscures divisions between the past and the present, the real and the fantastic and confronts his characters with elements of the fantastic at every level of life. Unlike Murakami or Miyazaki, Ishii uses individual, often intensely personal encounters with the monstrous fantastic to highlight the contemporary challenge of coping with cultural unease in everyday life. In *The Taste of Tea*, he depicts the monstrous fantastic at four levels of the movie’s structure: his characters’ literal reality, their individual perceptions and imaginations of the real, their fictional artistic pursuits, and the overarching visual metaphor of the film itself. At the level of literal reality, monstrous people and things are most often marked by their tendency to destroy or disconnect things that come into contact with them. The *yakuza* or gangsters, who disrupt the serenity of life in the film with noisy and ostentatious motorcycle displays and who ultimately hunt down and attempt to murder one of their own companions, are the most complete expression of the monstrous in reality (indeed, Ishii’s earlier movie *Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl* deals exclusively with *yakuza* as an expression of the monstrous in contemporary Japanese society). The brutality of Ikki’s assistant when he calls her husband to expose her adultery, the capacity of the commuter train to disconnect and alienate the people inside it, and even the macabre interest generated by the jungle-girl-turned-comedian that Hajime happens across on TV also demonstrate elements of the monstrous in the context of literal reality. In the case of such real-life monsters—those that represent a frightening perversion of the natural—it can be difficult to identify a component of the supernatural. Nevertheless, Ishii associates them with the supernatural through his use of exaggerated filming techniques, which create a dreamlike, surreal visual effect that bridges the gap between pure realism and magical realism. Napier suggests that an obscure division between the strictly literal and strictly fantastic is itself a uniquely Japanese trait, arguing that “perhaps Japanese writers are more comfortable with this

playful attitude toward the real than Western writers who come from a tradition of Judeo-Christian absolutes...It is possible to suggest that the Japanese have a longer tradition of this sort of subversion of absolutes" (226).

By contrast, instances like Ayano's *yakuza* ghost and Sachiko's gigantic double are easy to associate with the realm of the fantastic but perhaps less easy to associate with the monstrous. Both fall in the category of monsters of the personal imagination, so their existence and behavior in the film take shape through individual perception. This alone gives them a frightening inconsistency, because within the film, they appear and disappear without warning. When the narrator introduces Sachiko, the camera observes the schoolyard from Sachiko's point of view and necessarily reveals her giant doppelgänger. The giant Sachiko remains until the film moves to a different point of view and then vanishes. Akira observes the real Sachiko from his window but does not see the giant apparition. This exclusivity of her perception suggests that even the omniscient narrator is telling the story the way Sachiko sees it. Reminiscing about his own experience with supernatural apparitions, Ayano shifts between views of his ghost as "really freaky" and as an ambivalent presence that he has "sort of gotten used to" (*The Taste of Tea*). However, it is Ayano's own description that renders the ghost as a large, muscular, blood-soaked, and tattooed underworld figure, and these details associate his apparition with the monstrous.

Monsters in artistic pursuit, like Yoshiko's giant, animated ogre-baby and the garish superhero duo in the cosplayers' fan art, are creations of the imagination as well, but unlike Sachiko's double, they do not exist solely in the realm of individual perception. Rather, they blur the line between individual perception and social communication, because they exist to be shared with the viewer. As Yoshiko's demo reel begins to play, one of the viewers exclaims, "This is Yoshiko's world, full on!" and his excitement sparks a murmur of anticipation throughout the room (*The Taste of Tea*). The comment matters because it acknowledges the uniqueness of the artist's vision while demonstrating that it has value as a piece of communication. Because of the artist's capacity to build a shared notion of the fantastic, Ishii's use of monsters as a focus of artistic creativity may be the most significant to his commentary on the monstrous in Japanese society.

The last category, the overall visual metaphor of the film itself, is by far the most obvious and jarring. It is the element of the film that is primarily responsible for the impression of inscrutable weirdness. In the first scene, Hajime's disappointment at the sudden departure of a girl he loved but never talked to takes the visible form of a miniature commuter train swelling and then bursting out of his forehead, carrying a tiny, waving figure of the girl off into the sky. Similarly, Ishii chooses to illustrate the disconnectedness of Ayano and his sound crew or the lack of meaning in the song being recorded by replacing the recording studio with a scene of mountains and sky in which both the sound crew and the performers float aimlessly, apparently in thin air. At the very end of the film, Sachiko's successful backflip triggers the expansion of a magical sunflower that quickly swallows her, the abandoned lot, Japan, and finally the entire world. Of the three, two have negative or threatening connotations: the apparition of the train creates a grotesque if temporary hole in Hajime's head, and the apparition of the mountains symbolizes Ayano's belief that Ikki and his Birthday Song are actively persecuting him. This type of encounter with the

monstrous fantastic is unexplained within the characters' world, and yet the fantastic elements appear exactly as real as the characters themselves and often interact physically with them. In these instances, the fantastic is too far-fetched to be understood as an aspect of literal reality but is not explicitly attributed either to the characters' subconscious imaginations or to their artistic creations.

## Loss of Community and Identity

Ishii's use of the monstrous fantastic at the literal, individual, artistic, and structural levels of the film shows clear continuity with Japanese tradition. The quantity and pervasiveness of fantastic elements in the plot resonates with the traditional Japanese focus on the supernatural in literature, while the juxtaposition of the monstrous with contemporary Japanese life identifies *The Taste of Tea* with other contemporary stories that comment on Japanese culture through the lens of the fantastic. Further, Ishii's monstrous fantastic matches sociologists' descriptions of contemporary Japanese anxiety over the loss of community and identity. Marilyn Ivy defines "modernity" in the context of Japanese sociological studies as a state of lost or vanishing identity. She says, "What I mean by 'modern' ...indicates the problem of the nation-state and its correlation with a capitalist colonialism that ensured Japan would be pulled into a global geopolitical matrix from the mid-nineteenth-century on." Further, she argues that this implies the rise of emphasis on the individual and "new modes of interiority" (11). Ivy identifies the center of this shift in the representation of Japan in art and literature, pointing out the tendency of postmodern stories to reinvent traditional narratives of home and country with "paradoxical inversions" (99). The appearance of an inverted, nostalgic, or otherwise creatively modified notion of nationality or home in art suggests a new shift in the concept of *furusato*, which spans a range of meanings including "home," "historic ruins" and "ancient capital" and encompasses both personal memories of place and shared notions of origin that have historically defined Japanese culture. (Ivy 103, Jisho). The idea that contemporary literature about Japan both seeks to recover and attempts to reinvent the homeland resonates with the ideas behind Napier and Yamanaka. By connecting the idea of a lost or changing home with the urge to represent elements of past eras in art and literature, Ivy offers a sociological basis for nostalgic reinventions of Japanese culture in art and predicts the isolation and loss of identity described by Napier and Foster.

According to monster theory, the monstrous fantastic in *The Taste of Tea* ought to reflect and comment on this anxiety over the loss of place and origin. In fact, several of Ishii's monsters do directly accompany the characters' individual struggles with uncertainty, change, and the passage of time. Sachiko's giant double appears in moments of solitude and confronts her with herself, a perfect image for self-doubt. It vanishes only after Sachiko has grown more at peace with herself through hours of practice and finally a successful backflip. The backflip itself cannot simply have been the magical incantation to dispel a haunting apparition because Sachiko chose it after hearing the story of Ayano's ghost. In Ayano's case, however, the narrator steps in to inform viewers that the backflip itself simply coincided with the final investigation and interment of the yakuza's bones. This indicates that the backflip itself has no inherent power except as an activity through which

Sachiko comes to understand and prove herself. Hajime's train (both its literal form and the tiny apparition that erupts from his head) symbolizes his helplessness and isolation in the face of change. The departure of his old crush changes his society without warning just as the train itself changes the scene by changing Hajime's location. In both instances, Hajime has no choice but to accept where the train takes him. The symbolism of unease and changing identity forms a consistent theme, but the form of the monstrous and the way in which characters choose to face it are individual. In *The Taste of Tea*, characters usually must face the monsters of contemporary society alone, either in a real, solitary encounter or within their own imaginations, which further isolates them as they come to terms with the monstrous fantastic. Napier refers to such personal monsters in contemporary Japanese literature as "internal aliens" and emphasizes their relationship to the isolation and vanishing identity in contemporary Japanese society (113).

## Responding to the Monstrous

By forcing each of his characters to confront a personal vision of the monstrous fantastic through a personal effort, Ishii creates space within the film to compare the methods characters use to come to terms with their monsters and, through them, with culture. Everyone in the film becomes obsessed with a different pursuit—Yoshiko barely leaves her kitchen-turned-studio as she works to recover her skills and her profession as a television animator, Akira isolates himself in his small apartment to work on a secret project, Hajime spends all his free time playing Go to impress his new crush Aoi, and Ayano simply observes the world around him. Yet in their own ways, the members of the Haruno family all gravitate toward the creation and appreciation of the beautiful in a series of more or less deliberate responses to the monstrous in their lives. Ishii's characters create their monsters and cope with the monstrous through art and aesthetics.

As a result, the film becomes cluttered to the point of confusion with art and the artifacts of the artistic process. Artistic production plays such a prominent role in the life of the Haruno family that Western viewers may find it difficult or impossible to approach the film without becoming bogged down in scenes that appear tangential to the progress of the plot; they may instead focus completely on the appreciation of art. Rather than simply portraying the actions of artists and thereby making the finished artistic production merely incidental to the forward motion of a film about family interactions, Ishii makes time within the film for the characters to appreciate the art itself. When the vice-principle of Sachiko's elementary school gives a lengthy poetry recitation at a school assembly, the performance furthers the immediate aesthetic purposes of Ishii's scene by creating an environment that showcases Sachiko's penchant for observation, her passive position relative to most of the elements of modern life around her, and her introspective preoccupation with the giant apparition of herself. It also furthers Ishii's ongoing development of the themes of obligation to family, connection to the transcendent, and receptivity to growth and change. However, the context of the recitation makes it unlikely that the views stated in the poem are the primary reason for its position in the film. Given the subtle hinting and veiled approaches to knowledge through the rest of the film, it seems unlikely that Ishii would choose such a clumsy outlet as the key to his own artistic expression. Similarly, if the main

purpose of the recitation were to elaborate on Sachiko's character, he would have no reason to include the entirety of the poem. However, Sachiko experiences the poem in full while standing in a uniform group of children in a bare school yard. Even the intrusion of her giant doppelgänger and the interjection of the narrator do not entirely overpower the voice of the vice-principle. In this way, Ishii forces his viewers to encounter the poem as poetry and judge it as a piece of art. The fact that the poem is poorly composed, completely derivative, and tastelessly didactic seems to conflict with its prominent position in the scene, but the tension between its value as good poetry and its implied value to the film leads directly to the point Ishii is making. By treating it as though it has inherent value, Ishii forces the viewer to recognize that the performance, however deficient as art, is valuable as a personal attempt to interpret and organize the vice-principal's relationship to the world around him. Ishii treats the viewing of Yoshiko's demo reel with similar respect. The director arranges to minimize the distraction by demanding that the studio be "pitch black" before beginning the video projection. Somebody's desire for sounds and effects results in Yoshiko's permission to improvise the sound track, making the babble of engaged and excited voices in the darkened room both an authorized element of the artwork itself and a method of completing the experience and guiding the viewer through the animé demo as a piece of art in its own right.

The film's single-minded attention to art whenever it appears holds true at significant turning points, such as the recording of the Birthday Song (an artistic fiasco to which both the characters and the viewer are subjected at length), the viewing of Yoshiko's demo, and the opening of Akira's parting gift of animated flip-books, but also at less significant moments that the Western viewer would perhaps struggle to classify as artistic. When two strangers dressed as a giant cyborg and a gaudily-dressed superhero sidekick interrupt Hajime and Nobuo on their evening commute, Nobuo urges Hajime to politely disregard their presence, but Ishii forces the viewer to stop and focus on the strangers and their peculiar hobby. At the request of a photographer who apparently boarded the train independently, the cosplayers turn on the theme song of the "Meteor Power Force" and begin to pose for pictures. The interaction between the two cosplayers and the photographer (himself an artist) and the use of music to complete the scene legitimizes a chance encounter on a commuter train and transforms it into an ephemeral moment of performance art. Similarly, when Ayano happens upon a street performer practicing next to the lake, Ayano's focused observation and the contrast between the dancer's orange body suit and the drab wilderness landscape turn the moment into an acknowledged piece of art.

Following this logic, one could discover instances of art or at least scenes that seem filmed as deliberate artistic moments all the way down to the level of casual Go games, meditation sessions, and practice on the horizontal bar. In fact, the structure of Japanese aesthetics and cultural conception of the beautiful makes it difficult to find a clear distinction between the creation and experience of art and situations in which recognition and respect for the beautiful simply combine to create an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences are significant to each character's private method of coping with the monstrous, but it is still necessary to establish a distinction between art and aesthetics in order to explain the full

influence Ishii assigns to art. Ishii gives artists a special responsibility for mediating between individuals and the monstrous fantastic.

## Categories of Beauty

Donald Richie describes the role of aesthetics in Japanese culture and worldview by saying, “If there is no term for something, it might be thought that the commodity is of small importance. But it is just as likely that this something is of such importance that it is taken for granted, and thus any conveniences, like words, for discussing it are unnecessary” (22). Although Japanese aesthetic categories and terminology cannot be compared one-to-one with the elements of Western aesthetic philosophy, the practice of thinking and writing about the elements of the beautiful has a long history within Japanese traditional culture. One may examine the individual qualities valued in Japanese aesthetic thought without ever arriving at a comprehensive delineation of aesthetics as a science or of the objects and experiences to which it applies. The cultivation of taste and elegance, as opposed to simply art, in traditional Japanese society sufficiently obscures the line between art and life that Sen no Rikyū, one of the tea masters responsible for the current form of the tea ceremony, could insist to his disciples that the beloved art form consisted of “nothing more than boiling water, steeping tea, and drinking it” as though its goals were really no more ambitious than those of an afternoon snack (Richie 30). It is this unspoken fluidity of art and life that complicates attempts to draw a distinction between art and life in Japanese culture: the characteristics of aesthetics can be found in experiences that have little to do with the quest for beauty, and the methods of observing good taste can be applied to situations in which the end goal is not to produce art. Richie both clarifies and complicates the attempt to separate life, aesthetics, and art when he explains that, as in so many other aesthetic traditions, nature is considered the ultimate guide to aesthetic production, but unlike any other system of aesthetics, simply mimicking nature was not enough to create aesthetic beauty. “It was as though there was an agreement that the nature of Nature could not be presented through literal description,” he writes. “It could only be suggested, and the more subtle the suggestion...the more tasteful the work of art” (19).

Fortunately for the Western reader of Japanese literature, such subtle suggestions come in several categories that are far more easily recognized than the overall concept of naturalistic intuitions. Richie explains that the oldest and most familiar categories are *sabi*, which describes the elegance of simplicity or austerity; *wabi*, contentment and self-sufficiency in the context of evoked or literal loneliness; *aware*, a sense of sympathy that prompts wistfulness or melancholy; and *yūgen*, a term for mystery, depth, or the impression of meaningful obscurity (34-59). Applying these criteria creates a category of experiences portrayed in the film that cannot be considered art and yet share characteristics of beauty and taste that play a significant role in individual characters’ attempts to cope with the monstrous fantastic. Nobuo’s occupation as a therapeutic hypnotist proves to be an aesthetic experience for him and for his patients due to the elements of *aware* and *yūgen* present in the visions of his hypnotized patients. The real importance of Yoshiko’s experience while hypnotized lies in the aesthetic of *yūgen*, the sense that the obscured meaning behind her vision is more central to the truth of her

experience than the visible swirls of color or the tangible emotions they evoke. Some elements of *aware* seem to be present as well, especially in Nobuo's interactions with hypnotized patients. His conversation with one young woman in his office seems almost condescending to her childish giggling and unconnected babble about floating in a white world and wearing bunny ears, but it ends with an attempt to identify with her. By displaying both sympathy and pity, Nobuo experiences two of the significant facets of *aware*.

In fact, it seems to be the aesthetic influence of *aware* and its focus on the vanishing, impermanent, and helpless that helps Nobuo avoid or navigate the potential monsters in his life. Ishii offers the viewer two parallel instances of day-to-day professional life in the film, and both center on the relationship of a man and one of his female professional acquaintances. The glimpse he offers into Ikki's studio focuses on the female assistant's sexuality, her ongoing infidelity to her husband, and her resulting transformation into an embodiment of the monstrous for Ikki. The scene in which Nobuo is shown in his consulting room certainly has the potential to become equally surreal and equally fixated on the sensual, but the beauty of the scene and much of the attractiveness of Nobuo's female patient lie in the aesthetic of the impermanent. The woman's pleasant, childish happiness and vulnerability belong entirely to a temporary dreamlike state from which Nobuo must ultimately wake her. This adds a sense of pathos to her attractiveness and keeps Nobuo in touch with the right values or natural order of a world in which everything beautiful is pitiful because it must end. This resignation to ending and change also seems to help him cope with the more pragmatic news that Yoshiko has accepted her new job and that their relationship will change, however slightly, when she becomes a working and providing member of the family.

In a similar way, the habitual activities of Ayano and Hajime are best described in terms of traditional aesthetic characteristics. Ayano spends a great deal of his free time wandering the in-between spaces of his neighborhood alone. His solitude doesn't necessarily give his ramblings the characteristic of *wabi*, but the way in which he allows intuition and spontaneity to guide his ramblings gives them elements of both choice and naturalism that add to its aesthetic character. Further, the oddness and poignancy of the incidents he witnesses and participates in over the course of his solitary walks lend memorable touches of *aware*, as in his encounter with an old crush; *yūgen*, as in his surprise encounter with a mysterious baseball-batter; and *sabi*, as in the protracted periods he spends simply observing the back yard alongside Sachiko. For Ayano, the solitude is permeated with the vanishing, which helps to connect him both with himself and with the transience of natural things. Ishii symbolizes Ayano's self-sufficiency through the composition of the wandering scenes. Ayano is almost always placed alone in a wilderness scene and is often viewed in deferential perspective, from below the bridge while he watches the baseball player, or from the edge of the water while he sits on the bank to watch the traveling dancer, or even from the perspective of his shorter ex-girlfriend. By contrast, Ayano is always viewed from above while at work in his recording studio. This perspective seems to correspond with a loss of self. When a coworker asks Ayano why he became a sound mixer, Ayano replies, "It was more like why shouldn't I, you know," which seems to imply a lack of personal

investment or fulfillment in his vocation. It comes as no surprise, then, that the unnatural environment quickly morphs into an encounter with the monstrous fantastic. The videographer describes Ikki and the other performers of the Birthday Song as “aliens from another planet” and shortly afterwards the room itself suddenly transforms into a mountain, and the sound mixers begin to float up the slope and out of sight. Ayano’s contact with the aesthetic elements of wilderness and solitude therefore serves as a contrast to his encounters while at work, grounding and refreshing his sense of self.

It seems unusual to look for aesthetic principles in Hajime’s obsession with the game of Go, but Go itself is organized around values similar to those expressed in traditional aesthetics. The goal of Go is simply to surround more squares with occupied squares than one’s opponent, which means that the perfect Go move involves many of the same attributes as an aesthetic production said to be *sabi*: it has disproportionately significant impact because it is minimalistic. The elegance of one stone impacting several, different, growing enclosures while simultaneously blocking or rearranging an opponent’s strategic options demonstrates a *sabi*-like priority on simplicity, and the nuance of the game requires sound intuition in addition to sound reasoning. The United States Go Association sums up the aesthetic component of Go by describing a well-played game as “a beautiful art in which black and white dance in delicate balance across the board” (Welcome to the American Go Association).

The elegance, simplicity, and purpose inherent in the game of Go represent the antithesis of the monstrous in Hajime’s life. Hajime’s connection to the monstrous fantastic correlates more obviously to the chaos and isolation he experiences every day. In the first scene of the film, a flying commuter train erupts from his forehead as the narrator explains that his crush had suddenly moved away. He had never spoken to the girl, and he is reluctant to speak to Aoi when he suddenly falls in love with her. A scene in which four older boys write him a love letter asking for a meeting in a nearby noodle shop and then wait in the shop to humiliate him demonstrates his isolation. The train remains a symbol of isolation and randomness, as Hajime is repeatedly seen sitting alone in a nearly empty carriage while strange encounters, like that of the two cosplayers and later the *yakuza* with the baseball bat, take place around him. The *sabi* aesthetic of controlled simplicity present in the game of Go serves to ground Hajime in order and intentionality. Games of Go provide him with companionship, first in his father, later in the school Go club, and finally with Aoi. By contrast to the crude practical joking and outlandish fandoms of other characters near Hajime’s own age, members of the Go club watch each other play in respectful silence and honor their opponents by bowing at the beginning of each game and reciting the centuries-old formula, “to a good game” (*The Taste of Tea*). In this way, both the beauty of the game and the stability of tradition help to reestablish Hajime’s place in the natural order of things, connected both to his contemporaries and to the passage of time.

Such a detailed analysis of the aesthetic qualities in everyday occurrences in the film runs the risk of forcing a subtle and intuitive discipline too sharply into rigid academic categories. However, the exercise of dissecting specific elements of the beautiful serves to uncover a correlation between the characters’ appreciation of traditional aesthetic elements and their connection or re-connection to themselves and the natural world

around them. In one sense, the correlation seems unnecessary, since the qualities of solitude, sympathy, and naturalism are among the characteristics valued by traditional aesthetics. In the context of monster theory, however, the correlation becomes significant, since awareness of self, personal sympathy, and connection to nature are antithetical to our understanding of the monstrous. Aesthetics seem to provide the characters with one influence against the effect of the monstrous. By stressing the connection between aesthetic experience and connection to the self and nature, Ishii points out that such experiences are highly individual and cannot necessarily be shared with others. The usefulness of aesthetics to mediate between the self and the monstrous is limited to the individuals directly involved in the experience and their personal monsters.

## Aesthetics and the Monstrous in Contemporary Culture

Since Ishii associates traditional aesthetics with relief from the influence of the monstrous in his characters' personal lives, it seems surprising that all the professional artists in the film practice contemporary, popular disciplines. Yoshiko, Akira, and Ikki embody the louder aesthetic of contemporary popular culture, creating a strong distinction between professional artists, who must create new art within a new culture, and those who simply recognize beauty and often look for it in older forms of aesthetic experience. This apparent discrepancy between Ishii's value for traditional aesthetics as a source of stability and his focus on contemporary popular artists points toward the difference in function between aesthetic experiences and true art forms in the film. By situating the professional artists in the film firmly in the context of contemporary art, Ishii acknowledges that the artist's purpose is to produce items of aesthetic culture that cannot avoid belonging to the society in which they were made. In describing the artistic processes of Akira and Yoshiko, he demonstrates that even artists of contemporary culture must find their own ways to cope with cultural isolation and anxiety and must still ground themselves in the past in order to reinterpret it in contemporary expression.

The art forms portrayed in the movie are unapologetically contemporary in form and popular in focus. Yoshiko spends the entire film working on a three-minute anime that turns out to be a variation on the sort of superhero-team seen in popular anime series like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* or *Dragonball Z*. The viewer never sees the professional work of Yoshiko's mentor and father-in-law Akira, but when two animators come over to review Yoshiko's work prior to an interview, they ask after him. Ikki Todoroshi, Yoshiko's brother-in-law, draws manga in a Tokyo studio. By depicting artists engaged in popular contemporary work, Ishii breaks the continuity between traditional culture and the artwork in the film. As Richie aptly notes, such outlets of popular culture have all but overpowered any traditional influence on Japanese art. Anime and manga artists are instead associated with the new, louder culture of the *otaku*. Rea Amit describes *otaku* as devotees of a certain genre of popular art such as anime or manga. Amit concludes that the structure of Japanese aesthetics and even the terms used to describe it have changed as a result of the *otaku*'s influence, but notes that "otaku-related terms such as *moe*, *kawaii*, *puni*, *hatare*, and *yaoi* are a perpetuation of previous aesthetic terms, such as *wabi* and *sabi*" (176).

Nevertheless, Ishii does not allow his artists the comfort of belonging in the world of popular ideology and fandom. Artists in the film tend instead to have an uneasy or non-traditional relationship to the mainstream culture around them. At the beginning of the film, Yoshiko holds an unusual in-between position in contemporary society. With both her children in school, she hopes to regain her job and her independence as an animator, but she has not yet made the transition to full-time employment. She apparently neglects both the role of a professional artist and the role of a mother as she spends the majority of the film drawing in her kitchen. This position lacks the legitimacy of either a paid occupation of drawing and of the typical tasks of a stay-at-home mother, but it is a necessary area of tension in Yoshiko's life, and she copes with it as a necessary step toward her artistic goals. Even after she has achieved her goal, her statement to the director who hires her, "With the help of my Master/Grandfather...I was able to get my skills back...I think I can be a mom and an animator" implies both that the period of practice was essential to the achievement of her goals and that the position she has reached, that of a mother and a professional artist, requires an unusual degree of confidence and commitment.

Akkira's lifestyle generates different problems, but he also spends the film coping with tension between his vision of the world and the expectations of contemporary culture. His vision of the beautiful and his sense of the grotesque or absurd seem to impact every aspect of his life. The juxtaposition of his appreciation for the people and objects that surround him against the social expectations implied by his surroundings create the sense of his good-natured eccentricity. He finds enough inspiration in an ordinary bath to compose an ode to hot water and sing it loudly while the rest of the family is at supper. When no one else can be persuaded to help Ikki record his Birthday Song, Akira finds himself practicing a poorly composed choreography routine on a commuter train while the music plays through his headphones. When confronted with questions or crises, he often responds by sounding a tuning fork and holding it to his head, as though trying to tune his mind to the truth with the same tool a musician would use to tune an instrument. Perhaps his penchant for tuning his perception is the clearest metaphor for his life spent in pursuit of a different vision. His eccentricity is an indication that his life contains the same unease and in his case, often ludicrous tension between his own perception of the world and the expectations of his contemporary society.

Sometimes the artist's deviance from socially expected norms can itself be a factor in the creation of the monstrous fantastic within the film. The brief glimpses Ishii offers of Ikki's studio indicate that his life, more than either of the others', closely conforms to the stereotype of the anime artist and the *otaku*. His studio in Tokyo is apparently situated several floors up a modern, high-rise office complex and contains a selection of colorful, modern plastic furniture separated by opulent distances that emphasize the size of the room. He wears an impractical white suit and pastel shirt, along with startlingly large, round plastic eyeglass frames. His unusually smooth, geometric haircut reinforces the idea that Ikki's concern is less about good taste than about trendiness, and the collection of his own drawings hung on the wall and his tendency to hum his own birthday song hint at his irrepressible narcissism. To complete the picture of fashionable artificiality, a life-sized stuffed dog sits on the sofa. The young assistant's real dog, by contrast, is not permitted in the building and meets Ikki's unsympathetic annoyance. By all appearances then, Ikki has

absorbed, rather than defied, the elements of consumer culture that Ishii associates with the monstrous. However, Ikki also encounters moments of tension between his own judgement and the accepted values of culture. It would be difficult to tell whether his desire for control or his sense of responsibility leads him to reveal his assistant's affair to her husband, but, in this case, his vision of the appropriate or right cuts directly across the grain of contemporary cultural tolerance. When the assistant asks Ikki not to call her house on her day off "like last time," because her husband believes she will be "working here with you all night," her request might fool a child, but she is clearly not attempting to hide the truth from her adult employer. She clearly trusts in a cultural taboo against noticing or revealing adultery with which Ikki chooses not to comply. This single decision to deviate from his society's normal mindset abruptly brings Ikki into contact with the most tangible category of the monstrous fantastic in the film, that of modern reality grown surreal and sinister through Ishii's direction. While the assistant's desire for immediate, physical revenge is understandable in completely naturalistic terms, her unexpected strength and surprising brutality toward Ikki, as well as her abrupt return to the studio before she could possibly have discovered his conversation with her husband, make her into a fantastic figure. Despite her fragile build, unstable stance, and the hindrance of a pencil skirt and high heels, she has the strength to lift Ikki from his seat and the agility and force to beat him to the ground repeatedly with sharp, aerial kicks. Her revenge is also surprisingly bloodthirsty. She continues to beat Ikki for nearly a minute on screen, and the film cuts the scene short before she has actually finished inflicting pain on the helpless and whimpering artist.

The sudden transformation of the assistant from a fashionably delicate woman to a surreal, vengeful figure draws its precedent from some of the most ancient traditional Japanese monsters, the *yōkai*. Michael Dylan Foster explains that in its most inclusive definitions, "*yōkai*" can be a general term for anything inexplicable in folklore studies, including anything that would otherwise be defined as a "monster, spirit, goblin, demon, phantom, specter [sic], fantastic being, lower-order deity, or unexplainable occurrence" (19). Historically, however, the term *yōkai* was most closely associated with the edo-period category of *bakemono*, which Foster translates as "'changing thing' or 'thing that changes,'" and which consists primarily of changelings and shape-shifters. According to Foster, the stereotype of the changeling woman begins to appear in Buddhist texts around 1222 A.D and continues to develop in Edo-period (1603-1868) stories like the fourteenth-century manuscript of *The Tale of Heike* and in later Noh plays. In such stories, a woman's unrestrained anger or jealousy transforms her into a monster. "Her internal state of mind, one of anger and resentment, causes her body to change—often through purposeful and sustained effort—into the body of a demon" (123-124). The theme appears in different forms, but it retains a surprising amount of consistency. In *The Tale of Genji*, the neglected female antagonist becomes an incorporeal demon in her sleep; in an eleventh-century Buddhist scroll, the jealous lover's body permanently shrivels and bends as she resolves to murder a man who scorned her; and in Ishii's contemporary film, a frail, Japanese career woman suddenly acquires entirely unexpected physical strength by enacting her revenge on her employer. Unlike *yōkai* stories, the monstrous aspect of the scene represents a primarily physical fear, rather than a predominantly spiritual one, but they share a deep

concern with change and the unknown. Both images demonstrate a fear of the passion of the individual. Further, both describe members of a weaker minority willingly transforming themselves to gain power over those who have harmed them, thus conveying a sense of doubt about the power of the social structure to restrain the evil of personal passion.

In this way, the monstrous fantastic in Ishii's film alludes to elements of traditional monsters but reinterprets the old into a contemporary unknown. The murdered *yakuza* who haunts Ayano's solitary moments after Ayano inadvertently desecrates the dead man's skeleton in the woods bears a striking resemblance to the *oni*, or demons, of Japanese myth. While he does not seem to share the tendencies of *oni* to eat people or to appear as part-man and part-animal, his essential behavior and function seem to be the same. As Foster explains, *oni* typically have "a fierce countenance" and "a large, muscular body stripped to the waist" and embody the antithesis of humane society in a human-shaped body. In his film, Ishii associates many of the visual cues of the *oni* with the activities of the contemporary *yakuza* through the figure of the ghost. In this way, he is able to incorporate the sense of a supernatural threat to society into his depictions of live *yakuza* later in the film. Even inanimate objects play a role in the monstrous fantastic as Ishii depicts it. Based on traditions of *tsukumogami*, or man-made objects that have in various ways become *yōkai*, there is perfect precedent for Ishii to frame contemporary items as members of the monstrous fantastic. For example, the commuter train that features prominently in Hajime's experience has certain lifelike and frightening qualities. Like places described in traditional stories of *kamikakushi*, or divine abduction, it has a tendency to hide or reveal things and obscure consciousness, as in the brief scene in which Hajime wakes up to find his father across from him and has to ask how long he has been there. (Yoshiko Okuyama 29). Similarly, it often becomes part of the scene for strange encounters like Hajime's experience with the cosplayers. Magical places can be just as alive as magical creatures in Japanese traditional stories, so the sense that the train has its own personality or meaning in the movie is entirely possible. Furthermore, the antithesis between the sleepy and surreal scenes in the train and the scenes in which Hajime seems to gain motivation by riding his bicycle or running emphasizes the idea that the train steals or possesses Hajime's volition.

Of course, some monsters portrayed in the film bear no clear ties to ancient manuscripts or traditional superstition. Yoshiko's burrowing ogre and zombie-like flying superheroes are as grotesque and improbable as other elements of the fantastic, but they truly are "Yoshiko's world, full on" (*The Taste of Tea*). Because of their position in relation to culture and the monstrous fantastic in their own work, artists in the film have the responsibility of mediating between the individual and the unease of Japanese culture. Yoshiko has the opportunity to control the symbolism and behavior of the monstrous fantastic through anime. The three-minute animation begins with a self-conscious opening sequence, in which a yawning Yoshiko works feverishly on a stack of papers with a timer counting down above her head. When the intro is over, the scene changes to an alien landscape of blue and purple rocks with an ominous red sky. Three unique, heavily-armed characters drop into the screen from above and strike grotesque poses for the camera. One hits another with a ball and chain, but they all quickly recover their dignity. The scene cuts to a completely

gray, rocky space with a single sparkling, rainbow flower in the background. A sand-colored monster shaped like a baby with a giant head and prominent penis bursts from the ground and simply stands, blinking in the scene. His arrival apparently prompts the posing warriors to launch themselves into the air where they become blurs of color against a black sky, emphasized by the audience's improvised battle-cry of "Super Big!" (*The Taste of Tea*). However, when they finally arrive to do battle with the docile burrowing baby, they turn out to be quite small, simply crashing into the side of the monster's head where he smashes them with the palm of his hand. To make the bizarre scene even weirder, an elaborately dressed and completely incongruous and garishly sparkly blonde girl calmly walks into the barren landscape, tickles the monster right below the smeared remains of the heroes, and giggles.

Reading this scene from the perspective of monster theory reveals an intriguing view of contemporary Japan. There are clear signs of the ambivalence and uncertainty that Ivy and Napier lead one to expect, but Yoshiko adds playful inversions that alter or subvert the predictable narrative. The animation consists almost exclusively of the monstrous fantastic, with the protagonists and antagonists both displaying elements of the monstrous. Members of the hero team are rendered as grotesque, inhuman, and unstable characters that seem to inhabit an ambiguous moral space. Their poses wildly distort the size of their limbs, and their expressions convey unhappy and uncontrolled expressions. One stretches his mouth to the size of his head and squints while exaggerated blue streams apparently representing tears stream down the face of another. The animation style exaggerates the characteristic slight shake of hand-drawn anime by rendering the heroes in loose scribbles so that the solid parts of the heroes seem to flow and writhe. The baby-monster, on the other hand, barely moves. His entire body is the color of the sand and rocks around him, and his eyes are tiny brown dots below several layers of wrinkles that denote eyebrows. Significantly, burrowing seems to be his only crime, at least until he crushes the hero team. Initially, this seems like depressing retelling of the postmodern cultural narrative: the dynamic forces of interconnectedness and courage within Japanese culture, symbolized by the hero team, prove to be both too small and fragile to do battle with the problems in contemporary global society and too hybrid and distorted to provide a clear alternative. Meanwhile, the monster to be fought blends into the color of the background to symbolize the way in which contemporary Japanese culture has come to reflect the values of global commercial culture. His minimal motion may express the sense of inertia or stagnation felt in Japanese society, while his exaggerated nudity may reflect the crudeness of Westernized or commercialized cultural values.

While this reading is convincing at first glance, Yoshiko includes several unexpected twists that turn the expected narrative inside out. Most significantly, Yoshiko's version of the story is funny. Rather than signaling the darkest point of the film, the sudden destruction of the hero team prompts laughter and excited exclamations like "What? They're tiny! And flat!" from the audience in the studio. (*The Taste of Tea*). Perhaps this response stems from the perfect comic timing of the scene, but more likely it arises out of the absurdity of the fictional situation as a whole: rather than the destruction of something great, venerable, or beautiful, the scene depicts the predictable demise of three clumsy warriors whose highest

claim to aesthetic value is their combination of the cute with the monstrous. Further, the anime emphasizes that the hero team was in fact the aggressors. To all appearances, the ogre-baby does nothing more monstrous than cluttering the landscape with his own ugly presence and his baby-sized molehills. For this reason, the death of the heroes seems appropriate within the world of the anime and causes no regret in the viewers. Finally, Yoshiko finishes the story with the apparent friendship between the sparkle girl and the monster-baby, as though to suggest that the baby has value and purpose within the world of the anime, despite the jarring disparity of style and symbolism between the characters. In this way, Yoshiko creates an altered or annotated cultural narrative that suggests a valuable interplay between cultural elements.

The sense that even the uncomfortable interplay of social forces can be valuable or even fun sets the artists apart from others in the film more than any other aspect of their character. By juxtaposing the comfortable with the frightening or the innovative with the mundane, they each acknowledge a wider range of options in their attempts to relate to society and cope with the monstrous. Their responsibility to observe and interpret cultural uncertainty helps to explain the unusual, countercultural decisions that shape their lives, as evidenced by their tendency to assimilate elements of Japanese popular culture and their willingness seek out or create innovative solutions to challenges in their own lives. Seen in this light, Ikki's decision to inhabit the stereotype of a manga otaku makes sense as a means of expressing his own goals, values, and insecurities through new media and genuinely appreciating the excitement and energy offered by contemporary popular art forms. Yoshiko's decision to pursue a career outside the home while continuing her job as an involved and supportive mother to Hajime and Sachiko actually represents a challenging and creative synthesis of two different responsibilities to the people around her. Akira's decision to abandon dignity and embody the perception and generosity necessary to unite people despite the tensions of isolation and doubt becomes just as much a work of art and creativity as his secret animation project. By identifying the genuinely valuable aspects of their culture and working towards balance and synthesis in their own lives, artists gain the authority and responsibility to interpret cultural tensions for others and advocate for a more fulfilling view of life and society.

## Conclusion

Ishii demonstrates the artists' role of mediating between others and their culture through the interaction between non-artists and completed works of art revealed in the piece. By seeing their own doubts and triumphs in completed art, both artists and non-artists receive hope and stability through their connection to the new narrative, and begin to restore the lost connection between individuals and society. Akira acknowledges the power of artistic communication as a relief from the monstrous by offering his family a parting gift of art before his death. When the Harunos open a series of four sketchbooks, they discover that Akira's playful observation throughout the film was specifically aimed at identifying and alleviating the monstrous for each of them. Sachiko's book is straightforward: in it, a flip-through animation depicts Sachiko completing her backflip. Hajime's book shows Hajime riding a bicycle with a look of intense concentration. Even though he loses his balance and

nearly falls, the animated Hajime regains control and determination to continue cycling. In both sketchbooks Akira uses the symbolism developed throughout the film to depict his grandchildren conquering their own personal monsters. At her next practice session, Sachiko completes the backflip and finally banishes her giant double, indicating that in some sense Akira's animation offered her the strength to overcome her self-doubt. For Nobuo and Yoshiko, the encouragement is subtler, but it nonetheless addresses their needs for encouragement in the face of the monstrous. A simple animation of Yoshiko walking through the rain depicts her with red hair and porcelain skin, practically glowing against a white umbrella, as through it were depicting some interior version of Yoshiko to remind her that "Yoshiko's world" and the bright colors she sees in her own subconscious are worth pouring out in art and animation. The animation of Nobuo—a child with a relay baton stumbling, falling, and getting up to continue the race—is apparently so unfamiliar that Nobuo at first believes it must be an image of Hajime. However, when Yoshiko finally convinces him that it was meant for him, he takes the book and flips it over and over, apparently drawing comfort from the image of a forgotten part of his character. In this way, Akira's farewell present perfectly captures the power of the artist to comfort and inspire others through their mediation between individuals and society.

If Ishii had stopped after demonstrating the cathartic effect of art on the Haruno family's experience of the monstrous, he would only have proved that art has power to connect and encourage the artist's family and friends, which would severely limit the influence of the artist. For this reason, he returns one final time to the case of the cosplayers. In her discussion of otaku culture, Amit describes the practice of dressing up as favorite anime, manga, and video game characters as an imitative art form that "mixes both real life and fiction together" and seeks to identify with or participate in the ideas and goals of an artistic project (174). The remarkable level of detail depicting the cosplayers' derivative artwork shows that they have taken the goals and values of the "Meteor Power Force" as their own. Through fandom, then, they have assimilated the artist's vision of culture and the world, and this assimilation has affected their behavior and values even at basic levels of behavior. When the boy with the large robot costume begins to complain about its bulk, the other responds with the comment, "You're a disgrace to the Meteor Power Force!" with the obvious intent to inflict real shame on his companion (*The Taste of Tea*). In this way, the values of a pop-art fandom have begun to create their own code of ethics and behavior. Further, Ishii suggests that the imitation of heroism in art can create a solid basis for ethical character and courage. When Sachiko discovers the head of a still-living yakuza who has been buried alive with only a straw to breathe through, the cosplayers happen to be the first people she asks for help. Surprisingly, they both believe Sachiko's report and respond in a spirit of heroism and compassion, not only helping to rescue the buried gangster but also listening politely to his shock-induced ramblings and offering him a handkerchief (useless though it turns out to be) to clean some of the mud from his face.

This incident may be the most significant impact of art in the film, because it demonstrates both the power of the artist to influence individuals outside his personal acquaintance and the power of art to reconcile the individual to real instances of the contemporary monstrous. In it, Ishii finally brings together all the threads of contemporary cultural

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anxiety, the destructive potential of monsters real and imagined, and the power of art to impact individuals and to mediate a constructive response to culture through a new understanding of the monstrous fantastic. In this way, Ishii demonstrates that the process of creating artistic culture has the potential to reconcile cultural uncertainty and anxiety by interpreting unseen elements of the monstrous in society's consciousness and rewriting the dominant narrative of the monstrous fantastic in a way that can be communicated to others. It is this progressive, constructive, and social aspect of the artist as mediator that allows Yoshiko to sum up her own experience with the words "Drawing is where the joy is" (*The Taste of Tea*). I suspect the director of the studio speaks for Ishii when he responds, "and that is what anime is all about" (*The Taste of Tea*).

## Notes

### On the treatment of Japanese words and names:

In order to facilitate easy reference or verification of the more unique Japanese concepts and terms throughout this paper, I have attempted to offer both the Japanese terminology and an acceptable, attested translation where possible. In these cases, an English spelling of the Japanese has been denoted with italics in its first and subsequent appearances. When the word is in common use in the English vocabulary, I have omitted italics for easier reading. To avoid confusion, all Japanese names have been treated according to Western convention; that is, the given name has been placed before the family name, except where the name appears according to Japanese convention in a direct quotation.

### On translation and direct quotations:

All direct quotations of the film and discussion of narration and sound refer to the English subtitled version of the film published by VIZ Pictures and may differ somewhat from the exact wording and sound editing present in the original Japanese and the English overdubbed versions.

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