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Reverse Japonisme:

Transpositions of Zola, Cézanne, and van Gogh in Twentieth-Century Japan

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Abstract

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This report examines how twentieth-century Japanese “artists” – Kafū Nagai, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, and Kurosawa Akira – applied characters and/or principles of nineteenth-century artists active in France to their works. Specifically, I study the influences of Emile Zola, Paul Cézanne, and Vincent van Gogh. The first chapter examines the way that Kafū adopted Zola’s *Nana* (1880) in his own novel, *Rivalry* (1918), arguing that *Nana* provided Kafū with a vocabulary to express anxieties about Japan’s future. Comparing social conditions in late nineteenth-century France to those in early twentieth-century Japan, the chapter explains how Kafū feared that the debauched world in *Nana* would be Japan’s new destination. My second chapter moves away from Kafū and Zola, examining, instead, how Akutagawa applies Cézanne’s notions of subjectivity in his Japanese short story, “In a Grove” (1922). Specifically, I argue that Akutagawa and Cézanne both conceive reality as dependent of, and inevitably attached to, subjective truth. My third and final chapter, shifting to a focus on film, examines the way that Kurosawa uses van Gogh’s character to express frustrations about society’s

neglect of nature, as well as about his own creative passions as an artist. Through the different mediums discussed in the report – novel, short story, painting, and film – I show that nineteenth-century French influence in twentieth-century Japan was not small in scope, concluding that the great influences merit further study, particularly since Franco-Japanese influences continue visibly today.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One Transposition of Characters.....	10
Introduction	10
Analysis.....	14
Conclusion	20
Chapter Two Transposition of Medium	21
Introduction	21
Analysis.....	23
Conclusion	28
Chapter Three Transposition of the Artist	29
Introduction	29
Analysis.....	30
Conclusion	39
Conclusion	40
Bibliography	43

Introduction

In this report, I will examine the ways in which Japanese artists employed French influences in their works. I will analyze three distinct works, Kafū Nagai's novel *Rivalry* (1918), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's short story "In a Grove" (1922), and Kurosawa Akira's film *Dreams* (1990), in order to highlight the range of twentieth-century Japanese artistic productions influenced by France. I will employ the term "artist" to apply to writers and filmmakers as well as painters, in order to be able to refer to Kafū, Akutagawa, and Kurosawa alongside Zola, Cézanne, and van Gogh through one umbrella term. Their works reflect three different roles that French influences played in twentieth-century Japanese artistic expression. For Kafū, the protagonist of Zola's *Nana* (1880) was refashioned to express anxieties for Japan's future. For Akutagawa, Paul Cézanne's various paintings inspired an outlook on reality and subjectivity. For Kurosawa, van Gogh's artistic fervor captured the unfortunate modern dismissal of nature as well as the difficult process of creative production (although van Gogh was Dutch, a majority of his artistic techniques were established while he lived in France). The ways that Zola, Cézanne, and van Gogh affected Kafū, Akutagawa, and Kurosawa form no obvious parallel, but that in itself points out the wide parameters of French influence.

In this introduction, I will briefly outline the formation of French and Japanese artistic relationships, beginning in the nineteenth century. Then, I will describe my methodology and provide a justification for this study. This report will demonstrate the ways in which the French works were integrated into Japanese works, in order to argue that nineteenth-century French art possessed more than a local message, but held deeper meanings that transgressed national borders, speaking to Japan.

THE ROOTS OF THE FRENCH-JAPANESE ARTISTIC RELATIONSHIP

The catalyst of the French-Japanese artistic relationship was inarguably Katsushika Hokusai's *Manga*, published between 1814 and 1878 (posthumously, after Hokusai's death in 1849). The *Manga* was discovered in France in the 1850s. Most theories contend that it is Félix Bracquemond, the French painter and etcher, who found the *Manga* in the form of wrapping paper for a cargo of ceramics. Bracquemond was so fascinated with the prints, that he showed it to his social circle, which included famous French writers and artists, such as Edmond and Jules de Goncourt and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Other theories, however, say that Claude Monet first found the Japanese prints in a spice shop in Holland. Whoever the real discoverer, it is indisputable that Japanese prints propelled a great change in French artistic style. Inspired at least in part by Hokusai, and later Utamaro Kitagawa's *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, French artists developed the methods of Impressionism. By 1872, the fad of all things Japanese culminated in the term "le japonisme." Prints from Japan had inspired not only painting, but also literature, ceramics, fashion, and even an exclusive society of writers and artists who dressed up in kimonos and ate Japanese food.

In the twentieth century, these nineteenth-century French changes inspired Japanese artists. It is difficult to argue, however, that the French inspiration caused a japonisme-like fad in Japan. Although it is true that Zola's method of Naturalism, Cézanne's Post-Impressionism, and van Gogh's paintings spoke to Japanese artists, France per se did not trigger a fad on the national scale.

Hoping to explain how heredity, social conditions, and the environment shape human character, in 1868 Zola conceived of the idea to write a series of twenty novels that examined

how a family grew and was shaped by the Second Empire of Napoleon III. Between 1871 and 1893, Zola published *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, addressing the problems that pervaded France between 1852 and 1870. Little did he know that his novels, particularly *Nana*, would serve as a model for Kafū.

The Second Empire saw no shortage in issues of moral decay, including corruption, prostitution, and uncontrolled capitalistic desire. Inspired by the literature of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) and the scientific theories of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Prosper Lucas (1808-1885), and Claude Bernard (1813-1878), Zola examined such issues, concentrating not on the description of the moral decay, but on an explanation of how it occurs. In his own words in the preface of the first volume of the series, *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), Zola explains:

Je veux expliquer comment une famille, un petit groupe d'êtres, se comporte dans une société, en s'épanouissant pour donner naissance à dix, à vingt individus qui paraissent, au premier coup d'œil, profondément dissemblables, mais que l'analyse montre intimement liés les uns aux autres. L'hérédité a ses lois, comme la pesanteur.

Je tâcherai de trouver et de suivre, en résolvant la double question des tempéraments et des milieux, le fil qui conduit mathématiquement d'un homme à un autre homme. Et quand je tiendrai tous les fils, quand j'aurai entre les mains tout un groupe social, je ferai voir ce groupe à l'œuvre comme acteur d'une époque historique, je le créerai agissant dans la complexité de ses efforts, j'analyserai à la fois la somme de volonté de chacun de ses membres et la poussée générale de l'ensemble.¹

Zola's Naturalism did inspire a group of Japanese "Naturalist" writers. However, the latter's concept of "Naturalism" strayed far away from Zola's own. In the end, Japanese Naturalism flourished for the seven or eight years between the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and the end of the Meiji period in 1912 (some scholars even argue that it flourished for only two or three years). *Shizenshugi*, as Japanese naturalism was called, had a core group of writers, but

¹ Zola, Emile. *La fortune des Rougon* (Paris: Charpentier & Cie., 1875) 1.

their label as “Naturalists” appeared haphazard and vague. Ultimately, *shizenshugi* writers were writers who had been called “Naturalist” at some point in their career, and even if their works had variegated, nonconforming styles that changed throughout the years, the label stuck with them, creating no uniform *shizenshugi*.

Cézanne’s Post-Impressionist paintings generated new ideas for Japanese artists, but they, too, were not enough to create a *japonisme*-scale fad in Japan. Nonetheless, the term “Cezannism,” used to describe Cézanne’s influence on Japanese painting, was coined. The Japanese interest in Cézanne’s works appeared early in the twentieth century, beginning with the paintings of Yasui Sotaro, who first saw Cézanne’s retrospective at the Salon d’Automne in 1907. Inspired by Cézanne, Yasui painted similar still life, figures, and landscape. Artists who could not travel to Europe still saw Cézanne’s works through publications like the periodical *Shirakaba*, published by artists and intellectuals who provided the first Cézanne art collection in Japan. Towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Cézanne’s work was still a prominent part of Japanese museum collections. The Yokohama Museum of Art presented the exhibitions *Cézanne and Japan* (1990) and *Homage to Cézanne* (2008). Cézanne’s influence contributed to *yōga*, literally “Western-style painting,” and artists like Yasui continued to emulate his flat painting style. However, *yōga*, pertaining only to the artistic realm, cannot be said to be the equivalent of *japonisme*, which affected multiple domains.

Van Gogh, who himself produced several appropriations of Japanese prints, also influenced *yōga*. In Japan, van Gogh’s fame was mainly posthumous, appearing for the first time in a 1910 publication of a well-known literary magazine, *Subaru*. In the same year, *Shirakaba* began a series of articles celebrating van Gogh’s artistic feats. In 1911 and 1912, respectively, the journal published a Japanese translation of van Gogh’s letters and a ninety-page

“supplement” on the painter. Van Gogh’s popularity grew so much that it exceeded the form of objective knowledge. Poems and short stories were written, theater shows were performed, and films were made to revere his greatness.²

Japanese artists admired van Gogh not only as an artist but also, more generally, as a great man. His disciples sought to understand not only his paintings, but also his life.³ In “Van Gogh in Modern Japanese Literature,” Kinoshita Nagahiro explains this sensation as the result of the Japanese view that van Gogh “had spent his life in dire poverty, struggling to overcome his limitations. His work was the product of constant endeavor, his madness the mark of his genius. That he failed to gain recognition during his lifetime attests to the difficulties of his circumstances.”⁴ Van Gogh’s disciples visited his grave – a practice that still continues today.

² The July 1911 issue of *Shirakaba* presents an example of van Gogh reverence. The poet Mushanokōji Sanaetsu wrote the following poem, titled “Van Gogh”:

Van Gogh,
With burning will and passion!
The very thought of thee
Gives me strength,
The strength to uplift myself,
The strength to transcend life.
O, the strength to transcend life!

Another poem by Motomaro Senke ends:

True art is the revelation of the self,
Pure expression of the self.
The cypress and the garden in Saint-Rémy
Reflect Van Gogh’s beauty.
The baring of his soul.

The number of such poems is countless. Similar admiration can be found in short stories like “The Death of van Gogh” (1912) by Shigeo Funaki, where the protagonist struggles with his life as an artist, lamenting the fact that nothing he knows would “raise [him] to the level of van Gogh” (Kinoshita 183). Other forms of reverence include plays such as Juro Miyoshi’s *Man of Flames* (1951), where Miyoshi himself, through the epilogue, expresses his empathy with van Gogh’s state of mental turmoil:

Vincent, poor in body and heart
Here in Japan where you wished to come,
A Japanese with the same poor heart
Dedicates to you a humble bouquet
Come, come to receive it... (qtd in. Kinoshita 184)

³ Kinoshita, Nagahiro. *The Mythology of Vincent van Gogh*. Tsukasa Kodera, ed. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993) 177.

⁴ Kinoshita 177.

In highly romanticized forms, articles and drawings of the grave appeared in elite fine arts magazines, such as *Bijutsu Shimpō* in 1914. The artist Yamamoto Kanae wrote, for instance, “Van Gogh’s grave was even more *pauvre* and beautiful than I had expected. The flowers in season, summer chrysanthemums and white lilies, had been placed on the other graves, but Van Gogh’s had only the wispy weeds that were God’s offering”.⁵

JUSTIFICATION AND METHODOLOGY

As the compendium of *japonisme* studies grows, there seems to be an unparalleled, unreciprocated number of studies of the ways that French artistic works have influenced Japan. Scholars, such as Gabriel P. Weisberg, Siegfried Wichmann, Pamela Warner, and Akane Kawakami continue to study the proliferation and the reception of Japanese art and objects in France, and even the annual conference of the Nineteenth Century French Studies Association saw a panel specifically for *japonisme* in 2012. In contrast to that compendium, the number of English sources analyzing nineteenth-century French influence on twentieth-century Japanese art appears to be fewer. Although studies of French influence on Japanese art, of course, exist, many focus on a single domain – literature, painting, film, etc. – without compiling the different domains under one study. My report does not aim to be a comprehensive work of all domains, and it cannot discuss all works under one domain, but it does aim to bring together Kafū’s novel, Akutagawa’s short story, and Kurosawa’s film – works of different media and genre – to show how a range of twentieth-century Japanese works were influenced by French antecedents.

Scholarship on Zola’s influence on Kafū exists. However, the studies available in English are still limited in number. As Kafū is not a Japanese writer popularly studied in Western academia, there are only a small number of studies of his work, let alone his work in relation to

⁵ Kinoshita 398-399.

Zola. The first chapter of my report examines Kafū's *Rivalry* in relation to Zola's *Nana*. While scholars such as Rachael Hutchinson and Stephen Snyder note that *Nana* influenced *Rivalry*, the studies that I found state little beyond the fact that the opening scene of both novels are alike. Through my study of *Rivalry*, I discovered that the similarities between *Nana* and *Rivalry* rest not simply in their beginnings. Rather, they are rooted deeply in Kafū's and Zola's conception of the demimonde and the theater. Kafū and Zola share not only an understanding of the demimonde's complexities, but also the vision of the animality and humanity of prostitutes that make the female, an icon of seduction, a metaphoric expression of the voracious capitalism destroying their societies.

Although *Rivalry* is not Kafū's only novel that contains Zola's spirit, I chose the novel for the range of Zola's influences that it has. Kafū's other novel, *American Stories* (1908), is said to have been influenced by Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877), but besides a similar scene describing laborers, there is little else to establish the parallelism of the two novels. Another one of Kafū's works, a "summary-translation" of *Nana* called *Joyū Nana* (1903), could have given great insight, but the lack of an English (or French) version limited the possibility of the study. The lack of Kafū's works in translation restrained the options that I was prepared to study. However, because Kafū is the "pioneer of naturalism" in Japan, his important role called for the study of whatever little material was accessible.

Compared to Kafū's, the works of Akutagawa and studies of them were much more readily available. Although it has been acknowledged that Akutagawa was familiar with Cézanne, there is little examination of how Cézanne's work translates into one of Akutagawa's works specifically. My second chapter, studying Akutagawa's "In a Grove" in relation to

Cézanne's idea of *dessin*, aims to understand the ways in which both artists treated the concept of reality and subjectivity similarly.

Although Akutagawa's other works were available for study, "In a Grove" provides the deepest sense of the inaccessibility of truth. Not driven by plot, but by questions of representation, the short story reflects the same mode of story-telling in Cézanne's canvases, where flat bodies and unrealistic backdrops force the viewer to question what the story is and how it is formed. Akutagawa's other short stories and novels sometimes also reveal a world that is clearly fictional (such as a land ruled by *kappa*, a Japanese mythic creature), but many of those stories follow a linear plot structure that does not clearly show Cézanne's influence about subjectivity.⁶ Therefore, to study the likeness of Akutagawa's and Cézanne's methods of formulation, I chose to examine "In a Grove."

Last but not least is Kurosawa. Inspired by Cézanne and van Gogh, Kurosawa originally wanted to be a painter, until he came to believe that his paintings were only subpar (Kurosawa 77). From the beginning of his career, Kurosawa's films have been inspired by Western works. Ideas of Marxism, Russian novels, auteur cinema, and Shakespeare shaped many of his movies. Just as Kafū adapted *Joyu Nana* from Zola's *Nana*, Kurosawa adapted Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to *Throne of Blood* and *King Lear* to *Ran*, and Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* and Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* to films of the same name. For Kurosawa, influences came from within Japan as well. One of his most famous films, *Rashomon* (1950), was based on Akutagawa's "In a Grove" and other short story "Rashōmon" (1915). Although many of Kurosawa's works can be studied for French influences, *Dreams* and particularly one of its vignettes, "Crows," provides one of the most unique cases of influence, which appears not in the artist's style, but as van Gogh, the

⁶ Lippit, Seiji M. *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 47.

character of the painter himself. Following the study of *Rivalry* and “In a Grove,” the study of “Crows” allows for a different kind of analysis, in which van Gogh’s character itself is the object of study.

By the time “Crows” debuted, the “van Gogh mythology” had already been established in Japan (and worldwide). Van Gogh stood for the passionate artist before his own time, his name appearing regularly in editorials and editorial postscripts with singsong praises: “Blood, blood. Blood, not ideas. Anything not of blood is a lie. Van Gogh’s paintings are great because they are neither ideas nor art. They are his own blood,” one writer writes in *Shirakaba*.⁷ Therefore, when Kurosawa showed “Crows” in 1990, the audience already knew who van Gogh was and had a venerated opinion of him. It still is no less of a surprise, however, that van Gogh appears in the film, since the rest of the film takes place in Japan and includes only Japanese characters.

Scholars have invested substantial effort into understanding and explaining Japanese influences in France, but given the connections between Zola and Kafū, Cézanne and Akutagawa, and van Gogh and Kurosawa, we may have to look further into French inspirations for Japanese artists. This report attempts to shed light on the inarguable effects that French artists had on Japanese works, drawing from some of the greatest figures from both worlds.

⁷ Shuji, Takashina. *The Mythology of Vincent van Gogh*. Tsukasa Kodera, ed. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993) 153.

Chapter One: Transposition of Characters

INTRODUCTION

Nana, the ninth volume of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, is Zola's portrayal of the demimonde, a world of courtesans who stood at the fringes of respectable society, putting on the façade of an *honnête femme* when they were truly members of a lower class. *Nana* is, like the rest of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, also a depiction of a morally disintegrating society that functions with new relationship structures largely defined through money. The novel focuses on the courtesan's ability to use her artifice to manipulate the people around her, as well as on the formation and the destruction of human relationships because of financial incentives.

Zola explains *Nana*'s rise to stardom within the context of the theater. The theater is an active character, a birthplace for *Nana*'s glamorous shows, fakeness, and deception. At the theater, *Nana* takes on the roles of various women, such as the Blonde Venus, pretending to be the praiseworthy icon that she – a lowly and greedy body-selling woman – is not. In fact, *Nana*'s “theater” extends beyond the showplace as well. In her apartment, for instance, *Nana* lives luxuriously, as if she belonged to nobility. Her home is compared to “le grand salon, du Louis XVI trop riche.”⁸ As for her room specifically, “Deux fois déjà, elle avait refait la chambre, la première en satin mauve, la seconde en application de dentelle sur soie bleue... Il y avait pour vingt mille francs de point de Venise au lit capitonné, bas comme un sofa...”⁹ *Nana* constantly performs a life in which she embodies the role of the rich, though ultimately her public displays of her body and her need for patronage remind us of her status as a prostitute.

Difficult figures to define, *Nana* and courtesans have been examined by many scholars. These women weave their way through social categories, creating a new identity of their own by

⁸ Zola, Emile. *Nana* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002) 341.

⁹ Zola 341.

blending the lifestyles of the upper-class and the prostitute. Alexandre Dumas fils states in *Filles, lorettes, et courtisanes* that the *fille* was a prostitute of the lower class, the *lorette* of the bourgeoisie, and the *courtisane* of the aristocracy.¹⁰ In other words, the courtesan is the highest category of the prostitute. In *De la Dame Aux Camélias* (1867), Dumas acknowledges that despite the rankings, it is nevertheless difficult to pinpoint who exactly the courtesan is. Dumas writes, “Il y a trente ans, on ne disait pas encore une femme entretenue, ni une lorette, ni une biche, ni une petite dame, ni une cocotte, tant il faut les noms différents pour désigner aujourd’hui cette vaste famille.”¹¹

Nana’s character is particularly threatening because she is free from social orders that try to restrain women like her. Since at least 1796, French policymakers had wanted to control women who sold their bodies for money. More specifically, the French policymaker Restif de la Bretonne called for policies supervising the activities of prostitutes at the end of the eighteenth century. Restif advocated the *parthénon*, a state-regulated institution sequestering all prostitutes. The *parthénon* would contain “inmates” and be “a totally self-contained and self-sufficient universe, operating according to a rigid code of conduct.”¹² Inside and outside, the “inmates” and their clients were subject to several strict rules. For instance, they were to be checked for venereal disease, and if ill, had to pay a fine. As another example, “inmates” would also no longer be able to manage their own movements, but instead would be transported in “hermetically closed carriages.”¹³

Then, in 1837, the work of hygienist A.J.B. Parent-Duchâtelet, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, came into view. (Nana being a high-class prostitute, however, meant that Parent’s

¹⁰ Dumas, Alexandre. *Filles, lorettes, et courtisanes* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1875) 57-100.

¹¹ Dumas, Alexandre. *Théâtre complet de Alexandre Dumas fils* (Paris : Michel Lévy, 1868) 21.

¹² qtd. in Charles Bernheimer. *Figures of Ill Repute* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989) 19.

¹³ Bernheimer 19.

rules would probably not have pertained to her anyhow.) This sociological study classified prostitutes and charted their behaviors, origins, and numbers systematically and quantitatively. Working on public hygiene for the sewage system at the same time, Parent inevitably came to view prostitution as “another kind of sewer, a place of biological decomposition and morbid decay.”¹⁴

Like Zola, Kafū was interested in using the world of the theatrical geisha to show the ills of society. The ills that Kafū saw came with the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), a crucial period in Japanese history, which emphasized the integration of western ideas for modernization. Great social and political changes arose during the thirty-four years of Meiji. Additions to Japanese culture included the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, free enterprise capitalism, an Industrial Revolution, and an influx of foreigners. As *Nana* represented the moral decay of France, the dying world of the geisha represented a disintegrating world of Japanese traditions. Geisha had existed in Japan since the 1770s (though they were then known as *geiko*). Specializing in Japanese performance arts, geishas were often looked upon favorably as professional performers, and until the early 1900s, they were viewed as women who embodied the knowledge and skills that made Japan beautiful. Being a geisha was perceived as an honorable way of making a living. Although geisha were not paid to sleep with their clients, some did. The conversation about whether or not geisha were prostitutes remains active today. While many Japanese people insist that geisha were not prostitutes, some Westerners think of them as high-class prostitutes (like *Nana*). Soon into the twentieth century, foreign influences that came with the Meiji period brought in Western institutions and ideas, including bars and hostesses, making traditional entertainers like the geisha seem obsolete. Facing modernizing

¹⁴ Bernheimer 15.

forces, the geisha now had to rival not only fellow geishas for patrons, but also the external influences effacing the value of her career.

Published in 1918, *Rivalry* expressed the author's nostalgia for old Japan. In *Rivalry*, Kafū raises the question of how to modernize yet maintain "Japanese-ness." The plot is wrought with the failures of a traditional geisha, as if Kafū were using the geisha as a symbol of the old order, which is now fading away. Komayo, the protagonist, returns to her career as a geisha after the death of her husband. By chance she meets a past lover, Yoshioka, who falls in love with her again and offers to take care of her expenses. Komayo considers Yoshioka's patronage, but so that she may have the funds to compete with her fellow geishas. While considering his proposal, however, Komayo meets Segawa, a young Kabuki actor who promises to turn her into the finest geisha in the city. Although Komayo has genuine feelings for him, she, too, desires the relationship for its professional benefits. Before either relationship flourishes, Komayo realizes that the men have made acquaintances with new lovers: Yoshioka begins a relationship with her rival, and Segawa forms a relationship with a former wealthy geisha (who could bring him more money than Komayo). Without a patron, Komayo's career fails. At the same time, another geisha, Ranka, excels. In no way professional or traditional, Ranka uses her body to gain men's attention. She behaves similarly to Zola's Nana, and in some ways is a contrast to Komayo. My analysis will argue that Kafū uses Komayo to represent the traditional Japanese geisha, which he sets in contrast to Ranka, to highlight how a new value system is destroying Japanese traditions. While doing so, I will also discuss the kinds of monetary relationships that govern Nana's and the geisha's worlds, since money-driven relationships are not separable from concepts of modernization and capitalism.

ANALYSIS

For Kafū, Nana could have represented defiance and disorder and been a symbol for what society should be afraid to face. In fact, she was not so much disobeying rules as she was living in a space even without any (men like Restif and Parent did not focus their regulations on her). Embodying decay, Nana was a fit model for Kafū to express concerns for the future: what if Japanese tradition was also rotting from modernization? Using geisha, symbols of the beautiful Japan, Kafū portrayed a world in which Komayo could not survive, but Ranka thrived. The geisha had been the trendsetters in Japan for several decades¹⁵, so if Komayo was no longer popular, but Ranka was, then what new norms was Japan setting for itself? Was it a world of artifice and the thrashing around of bodies for money and fame?

In both novels, a central idea marked since the beginning is artifice. The theater, the symbol of façade and the fake, is where both stories begin. Zola launches *Nana* with a scene at the Théâtre des Variétés, where a deluge of theatergoers wait anxiously to see Nana, a rising star whose name has been circulating around town. Lavishly dressed men and women wait to see her perform: "...autour de la rotonde du plafond où des femmes et des enfants nus prenaient leur volée dans un ciel verdi par le gaz, des appels et des rires sortaient d'un brouhaha continue de voix, des têtes coiffées de bonnets et de casquettes s'étageaient sous les larges baies rondes, encadrées d'or."¹⁶ When Nana appears, however, her performance is disastrous and anticlimactic – it is even called "une plaisanterie."¹⁷ Yet, through her generous corporeal display, Nana draws the audience's attention away from the catastrophe. Staring at her body "très grande, très forte pour ses dix-huit ans, dans sa tunique blanche de déesse, ses longs

¹⁵ Snyder, Stephen. *Fictions of Desire : Narrative Form in the Novels of Nagai Kafu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000) 60.

¹⁶ Zola 21.

¹⁷ Zola 35.

cheveux blonds simplement dénoués sur les épaules, descendit vers la rampe avec un aplomb tranquille” and the “rondeur sous la mince tunique”, the audience shouts in favor, “Très chic!” “Cest ça, très bien ! Bravo !”¹⁸

Like Zola, Kafū begins with a scene during intermission, as if making a structural and thematic nod to the French author. From the beginning, Kafū goes directly into a similar statement of the theater: “It was intermission, and the halls of the Imperial Theater were crowded with people who had left their seats to stretch their legs. A geisha making her way up the main staircase nearly collided with a man on his way down, and their eyes met with a look of startled recognition.”¹⁹ They notice nothing but each other’s appearances:

“You haven’t changed in the least.”

“No? Well you look even younger than before.”

“Oh! Be serious. At my age...”

“No, you really haven’t changed at all.”

Yoshioka looked long and hard at the woman’s face with genuine surprise. He did a little calculating: when she had made her debut as a geisha, she had been about eighteen years old; if seven years had passed since then, she would be about twenty-five now. But the woman standing before him was absolutely unchanged.²⁰

Ideas of theatricality and performance, foregrounded in the two texts, develop our understanding that Zola and Kafū are both concerned with deception and illusion. Nana, despite her horrible voice, passes as a star; Komayo, at twenty-five, looks like a teen.

¹⁸ Zola 35-36.

¹⁹ Kafu, Nagai. *Rivalry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 1.

²⁰ Kafu 1-2.

Although Komayo can deceive like Nana at the beginning, she is not successful throughout the rest of the novel. In an age of modernity, corresponding with the market and capitalism, Komayo finds herself in commoditized and artificial relationships that ultimately contribute to her downfall. Such relationships appear also in Zola's work.

Not only does Nana use her patrons to maintain her luxurious lifestyle, but she is also used by them to gain wealth and fame. For instance, a patron named La Faloise gives up his money, hoping that a connection with her will make him popular: "Il postulait depuis longtemps l'honneur d'être ruiné par [Nana], afin d'être parfaitement chic. Cela lui manquait, il fallait qu'une femme le lançât. En deux mois, Paris le connaîtrait, et il lirait son nom dans les journaux."²¹ Hoping to be the "victim" of Nana's fame, he invests his money in her, calculating, "Six semaines suffirent. Son héritage était en propriétés, des terres, des prairies, des bois, des fermes. Il dut vendre rapidement, coup sur coup... La dette l'écrasait, il ne possédait plus cent francs de rente, il se voyait forcé de retourner en province vivre chez un oncle maniaque ; mais ça ne faisait rien, il était chic, *Le Figaro* avait imprimé deux fois son nom..."²² His precise numerical quotations – "deux mois," "six semaines," "cent francs," and "deux fois" – and list of things to sacrifice, emphasize the idea that his relationship with Nana provides a quantitative end, as if it were a trade.

With a "friend" named Hanasuke, Komayo realizes that friendships are now looked upon as a means for money. After Yoshioka begins a relationship with another geisha, Komayo gets advice from Hanasuke. The latter introduces her to a wealthy patron, but only so that she will be able to "keep a portion of the customer's tip."²³ A similar relationship can again be found

²¹ Zola 440.

²² Ibid.

²³ Kafu 58.

between Nana and Zoé, her maid and sometime confidante. Described as Nana's obedient, doglike servant²⁴, Zoé responds to Nana's whims and obsequiously compliments "madame" to get her approval. Nana tells Zoé all of her affairs: "elle n'avait pas de secret pour Zoé"²⁵ and the latter listens and gives her advice, but only because she knows that Nana will shower her with gifts in return.²⁶ Worse, when Nana is unaware, Zoé sells her belongings.²⁷

Even Komayo herself views relationships as spaces for financial benefit. Left without Yoshioka, she seeks a way to advance her career through Segawa, her second lover:

... whenever she met one of Segawa's acquaintances, she did her best to be amiable, to make it plain to everyone how she exerted herself on the actor's behalf. In this way, she hoped, she would gradually attract the sympathy of all those around them, so that later, come what may, these friends would insist on his marrying her. When she learned that Yamai was a writer, Komayo decided that he might be a particularly reliable ally, and it seemed to her only reasonable that she should offer him an evening or two of amusement in return.²⁸

Segawa, at the same time, realizes that Komayo is becoming a financial burden. Rather than thinking about her well-being at a time when she is in trouble, he thinks, "Komayo was deep in debt, and if he were to continue seeing her for another six months or a year, like it or not, he might find himself assuming responsibility as her husband. But if it came to that, he felt sure

²⁴ Zola writes, "Zoé, très brune, coiffée de petits bandeaux, avait une figure longue, en museau de chien, livide et couturée, avec un nez épaté, de grosses lèvres et des yeux noirs sans cesse en mouvement" (53).

²⁵ Zola 41.

²⁶ Zola describes, "Seulement, madame donnait trop de mal à Zoé, par des imprudences, des coups de tête, des bravades folles. Aussi la femme de chambre se relâchait-elle peu à peu, ayant remarqué d'ailleurs qu'elle tirait de plus gros profits des heures de gâchis, quand madame avait fait une bêtise qu'il fallait réparer. Alors, les cadeaux pleuvaient, elle pêchait des louis dans l'eau trouble" (346).

²⁷ Zola 414.

²⁸ Kafu 127.

he'd have the courage to break with her, that in the end she would be no match for him."²⁹ With both Hanasuke and Segawa, Komayo's relationships are thought about in terms of financial gain or loss. Monetary matters create or break friendship and love ties, and Segawa thinks of how he will "match" with Komayo based on status.³⁰

Although Komayo lives in the end, unlike Nana who dies, she leads a solitary life that reflects her undesirability and downfall. At the same time that she is suffering, we learn that there is a rising geisha star. Ranka is introduced.

The way that Ranka appears is like Nana at the beginning. Zola introduces Nana in an atmosphere of gossip, sensationalizing her as the new, sought-after star. Before Nana appears, Parisians anxiously question one another in the following two conversations:

Et Nana, l'étoile nouvelle, qui doit jouer Vénus, est-ce que tu la connais ?
... Depuis ce matin, on m'assomme avec Nana. J'ai rencontré plus de vingt personnes, et Nana par-ci, et Nana par-là ! Est-ce que je sais, moi !

Pourquoi ne m'as-tu pas dit que tu connaissais Nana ?
Nana ! je ne l'ai jamais vue.
Bien vrai ? On m'a juré que tu avais couché avec.³¹

Likewise, Ranka appears in gossip:

It's less than a month since her debut, but there's hardly anyone in Shimbashi who doesn't know about her.

... What sort of woman is she? Is she pretty... But what does she do that's so unusual? Does she dance in the nude?

Yes, she does, actually, but it isn't anything vulgar like 'The Drizzling Rain.' I've heard about it only from the girls at my house, so I'm not sure, but it seems she doesn't really

²⁹ Kafu 138.

³⁰ Komayo does not have enough money to buy any friendship or love. Towards the end, she is taunted in her city newspaper's gossip column. Titled "Komayo Distraught," the article announces that "her very dear friend, the actor Segawa... has been stolen way from her, and try as she might to sleep, she lies awake waiting for him until dawn... the madness in her was real enough, and she was seen trampling on her dancing fan" (144-45). Kafu's use of the newspaper, as a vehicle to display the public's obsession with risqué stories, is similar to Zola's use of *Le Figaro*.

³¹ Zola 27.

dance at all – she just appears nude at banquets. They say this sort of thing is quite popular at variety halls in the West these days.³²

The he-said-she-said atmosphere from which the two women's names arise encapsulates the idea that Nana and Ranka are gossip material, subjects of interest for those who themselves habitually spread rumors and are interested in lowly sensationalism. Yet, they are successful female performers, and Kafū's point that "this sort of thing is quite popular at variety halls in the West these days" points out a fear of Japanese modernization, which is based on the Western model.

The moment at which Ranka arrives, towards the end of the novel, when Komayo is experiencing her downfall, makes it appear as if Ranka were replacing Komayo. Symbolically, the old geisha has given way to a new kind of geisha, one whose art is less refined and at the same level as Nana's.

Flesh is to Ranka and Nana a delightful part of the body, which they use as a plaything. Both women seduce with a child's innocence, exposing their bodies in a way that seems natural and not inappropriate. For instance, after Georges Hugon, one of Nana's audience, cries, "C'est ça, très bien! Bravo!"³³ "Nana, cependant, en voyant rire la sale, s'était mise à rire. La gaieté redouble. Elle était drôle tout de même, cette belle fille... Elle attendait, pas gênée, familière, entrant tout de suite de plain-pied avec le public, ayant l'aire de dire elle-même d'un clignement d'yeux qu'elle n'avait pas de talent pour deux liards, mais que ça ne faisait rien, qu'elle avait autre chose."³⁴ The same happens with Ranka, who, in fact, picks up famous roles like Nana's Blonde Venus: "... she announces the name of some famous statue and then strikes the pose – wearing snow white tights and a white wig to make herself look like marble" and "that's why it

³² Kafū 152.

³³ Zola 35.

³⁴ Zola 35-36.

hasn't been easy to lodge a complaint against her."³⁵ The flesh of both women mitigates the abominableness of their shows. In fact, Ranka, like Nana, uses that flesh in a playful and innocent way: "Some of the things she says at her engagements are quite wild – for example, that the trouble every year over nude paintings at the Education Ministry exhibition comes from the fact that Japanese people don't understand the beauty of the naked body. This she finds deplorable, so she gives her own little exhibitions for the 'aesthetic education of gentlemen of quality.'"³⁶

CONCLUSION

Nana's character, the voluptuous, free-reign woman, is, of course, not new in literature. It is, as Henri Mitterrand points out in the introduction to *Nana*, "un stéréotype littéraire" (10). What is particular about Nana, however, is the context in which she appears: nineteenth-century France was a period of rapid change, and the courtesan, a woman who breaks down boundaries and weakens categorization and control, appears then, setting new norms that speak for society's unrefined desires. Kafū encourages us to ask what would happen if Western desires such as those become the norm for Japan, too? For Kafū, the loss of Japanese identity was at least partially, so to speak, a form of decay, like Nana's society and her body, ultimately. The audaciousness of Nana's character is the opposite of the characteristic a Japanese woman (particularly a geisha) should have. Through the way that relationships are viewed in monetary terms and through the contrast between Komayo and Ranka, Kafū asks us what will become of Japan.

³⁵ Kafū 152.

³⁶ Kafū 152.

Chapter Two: Transposition of Medium

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1922, Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove" represents the impossibility of arriving at an objective truth. Centered on the question, "Who killed the samurai?" "In a Grove," presents the testimonies of seven witnesses, who are, at the same time, suspects. The entire short story unfolds in dialogue form, without an omniscient narrative voice or descriptions of the scene. Each witness tells his or her own story, which often contradicts the stories previously told. By the end of the story, the reader still does not know whose testimony is true – or if any are true at all.

While *Rivalry* sees a French courtesan transposed onto different Japanese characters to reflect Kafū's fear for Japan's future, "In a Grove," written with Akutagawa's knowledge of Cézanne's works, draws on the epistemology Cézanne established in his paintings. Like the French painter, Akutagawa highlighted the difference between subjective and objective truth. For Cézanne and Akutagawa, subjectivity infiltrates and affects all modes of story-telling, rendering impossible the production of an objective truth that everybody will see similarly.

New and unorthodox ways to represent a scene concerned both Cézanne and Akutagawa. In Cézanne's paintings, the new way to represent a scene manifests itself in flat and unrealistic subject representations. Cézanne painted blocks of color onto one another, creating art that was more of an expression than an account of the real – he called the effect of his brushstrokes "sensations."³⁷ A Cézanne scholar, Pepe Karmel explains, "...Cézanne reacted against the potential formlessness of this technique by inventing a new kind of pictorial architecture... which allowed him to evoke three-dimensional volume while respecting the two-dimensional

³⁷ Karmel, Pepe et al. *Cezanne and the Dawn of Modern Art* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2005) 183.

integrity of the picture plane."³⁸ More than a “realistic” picture, his canvas was a hazy version of the scene, a comment, perhaps, on the futility of trying to depict a scene “realistically.” In addition to his technique of “sensations,” Cézanne also painted similar scenes but with different perspectives, showing how even the same viewer will see something different each time he or she looks. A question that Akutagawa might have taken from Cézanne then is the question of optical experience. In “In a Grove,” Akutagawa asks how people capture a visual experience in words and examines what happens when an experience is transformed or condensed into a story and relayed by multiple observers.

In “In a Grove,” Akutagawa focuses on *how* the story is told, rather than *what* story is being told. As mentioned above, “In a Grove” is the story of a samurai’s death told through seven different characters’ perspectives, which sometimes lead to radically different versions of the same events. The characters all tell stories that benefit themselves, indicating either that they did not kill the samurai or that their murderous act was not their fault. While Cézanne tried to capture the three-dimensional world on his canvas, showing that the canvas space cannot replicate exactly what is being seen, Akutagawa captures the three-dimensional world in words, showing that stories cannot present what truly happened. In his essay “Literary, All Too Literary” (1927), Akutagawa writes, “Of course, the novel without a proper story is not merely depicting the details of one’s personal life. It is, among all novels, the closest to poetry... To cite once more the example of painting, a painting without *dessin* cannot exist... Yet there are paintings given life more by color than by *dessin*. This fact is proved by the several paintings of Cézanne.”³⁹ Just as Cezanne relied on color and not *dessin*, Akutagawa might have used

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ qtd. in Lippit 45.

notions of subjectivity, perspective, and fabrication – and not the actual plot – to give life to a story.⁴⁰

ANALYSIS

Cézanne and Akutagawa are interested in questions of vision, witnessing, representation, and destabilization. “In a Grove,” like Cézanne’s paintings, is interested in how perspective and form portray an event. In the story, several characters present their own accounts explaining the murder of Kanazawa no Takehiro, a samurai whose corpse was found in a bamboo forest. Each succeeding account supplies more information about the murder, yet obfuscates what the reader already knows. The accounts form a complex and contradicting set of “realities,” highlighting the impossibility of “reality” ever being the same for everyone.

Each character takes on the liberty of truth-designing. The first person to give his testimony, the woodcutter begins, “Yes, sir. Certainly, it was I who found the body. This morning, as usual, I went to cut my daily quota of cedars, when I found the body in a grove in a hollow in the mountains. The exact location? About 150 meters off the Yamashina stage road. It’s an out-of-the-way grove of bamboo and cedars.”⁴¹ Then, when the Buddhist priest takes his turn, he explains, “The time? Certainly, it was about noon yesterday, sir. The unfortunate man was on the road from Sekiyama to Yamashina. He was walking toward Sekiyama with a woman accompanying him on horseback, who I have since learned was his wife...”⁴² Next, when the

⁴⁰ It would be largely inaccurate, however, to view Cézanne’s influence on Akutagawa as the sole trigger for “In a Grove.” While Akutagawa did think about Cézanne’s concept of *dessin*, Cézanne was not the only artist whose work inspired Akutagawa. Japanese texts, such as the Buddhist moral stories *Tales of Times Now Past* (ca.1120), also influenced Akutagawa’s story. As Akutagawa was an avid reader and student of the arts, his work was shaped by other artists as well. My intention, therefore, is not to map Cézanne’s concept of *dessin* onto “In a Grove” point by point, as if Akutagawa’s work were an adaptation of one of Cézanne’s paintings. Rather, I aim to examine that more general spirit that pervades an artist’s attempt, to translate the optical experience world into his own medium.

⁴¹ Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. *Rashomon and Other Stories* (New York: Liveright, 1999) 17.

⁴² Akutagawa 18.

policeman relays his version of the story, he testifies, “The man that I arrested? He is a notorious brigand called Tajomaru. When I arrested him, he had fallen off his horse. He was groaning on the bridge at Awataguchi. The time? It was in the early hours of last night...”⁴³ Taking on the role of the author of his story, each recreates and refashions the story, beginning in whatever fashion he wishes and stressing whatever point he cares to. None of the accounts stand out as “wrong,” but instead, they capture the variety of experiences that can be taken from a single event.

The accounts continue to differ, with the testimonies of Tajomaru, the samurai’s wife, and the samurai’s spirit. According to Tajomaru, the wife initiated her husband’s death. “I had no wish to kill him,” he claims, “I was about to run away from the grove, leaving the woman behind in tears, when she frantically clung to my arm. In broken fragments of words, she asked that either her husband or I die. She said it was more trying than death to have her shame known to two men. She gasped out that she wanted to be the wife of whichever survived.”⁴⁴ Tajomaru even claims that he was fair to the samurai: “But I didn’t like to resort to unfair means to kill him. I untied him and told him to cross swords with me.”⁴⁵

On the contrary, according to the samurai’s wife, Tajomaru was much more ruthless and beastly: “That man in the blue silk kimono, after forcing me to yield to him, laughed mockingly as he looked at my bound husband.”⁴⁶ She, on the other hand, was much more sympathetic and loyal towards her husband: “How horrified my husband must have been! ... In spite of myself I ran stumblingly towards his side. Or rather I tried to run toward him, but the man instantly

⁴³ Akutagawa 19.

⁴⁴ Akutagawa 23.

⁴⁵ Akutagawa 24.

⁴⁶ Akutagawa 25.

knocked me down.”⁴⁷ It was *she* who did not receive justice: “Just at that moment I saw an indescribable light in my husband’s eyes. Something beyond expression... his eyes make me shudder even now. That instantaneous look of my husband, who couldn’t speak a word, told me all his heart. The flash in his eyes was neither anger nor sorrow... only a cold light, a look of loathing.”⁴⁸ If she had indeed killed him, the cause would have been “the cold contempt in his eyes.” He chastised her for being a rape victim. Then, furthermore, he asked to be killed: “Despising me, his look said only, ‘Kill me’”⁴⁹ After killing him, she was still loyal, wanting to be with him even in death: “I stabbed my own throat with the small sword, I threw myself into a pond at the foot of the mountain, and I tried to kill myself in many ways...”⁵⁰ but none of her attempts were fruitful.

But the account of the dead samurai, as told through a medium, fails to portray her as such a prey. Rather than being a faithful wife, she was ready to give herself up to the bandit: “The robber finally made his bold, brazen proposal. ‘Once your virtue is stained, you won’t get along well with your husband, so won’t you be my wife instead? It’s my love for you that made me be violent toward you,’... What did my beautiful wife say in answer to him while I was sitting bound there? ... Truly she said, ... ‘Then take me away with you wherever you go’”⁵¹ To make matters worse, “When she was going out of the grove as if in a dream, her hand in the robber’s, she suddenly turned pale, and pointed at me tied to the root of the cedar, and said, ‘Kill him! I cannot marry you as long as he lives.’ ‘Kill him!’ she cried many times...”⁵² The victim

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Akutagawa 25.

⁴⁹ Akutagawa 26.

⁵⁰ Akutagawa 27.

⁵¹ Akutagawa 29.

⁵² Ibid.

in the scene according to this testimony is the samurai, not his wife, since it was she who demanded his death and left him cold-heartedly for the thief.

The various stories are *a* subjective truth, not *the* objective truth. Akutagawa demands that the reader decide for himself or herself the final verdict for the story. In the process of discovering that truth, the reader has to create it himself or herself, as he or she picks what part of what narratives to privilege and piece together. Therefore in discovering truth, the reader has to discard some things “that have happened” and piece together what “must have happened.” Ironically then, truth relies on the individual’s ability to *formulate*, not to find.

The multiplicity of realities allows Akutagawa to also make “In a Grove” a social commentary. “In a Grove” expresses Akutagawa’s view that “everyone, underneath a layer of skin, is alike.”⁵³ Everybody experiences “reality” as an individual experience and recounts that reality in a way that benefits himself or herself. As a result, characters are equalized. The priest, who is often the emblem of morality, becomes criminalized; the woman, who is often the victim of injustice, becomes questionable; and the criminal, who is often the token of evil, becomes as trustworthy as anyone else.

Indeed, while the priest is often the symbol of ethical values and morality, the priest in “In a Grove” becomes just another person who is capable of fabrication. In fact, his account represents him not only as a figure capable of lying, but also as a man tempted by desire. His testimony demonstrates the notable amount of attention he has paid to the samurai’s wife as he testifies, “A scarf hanging from her head hid her face from view. All I saw was the color of her clothes, a lilac-colored suit. Her horse was a sorrel with a fine mane. The lady’s height? Oh,

⁵³ qtd. in Lippit 27.

about four feet five inches.”⁵⁴ Yet, he finishes by negating, “Since I am a Buddhist priest, I took little notice about her details.”⁵⁵ Clearly, his ability to recall the many details, and even give a rather precise number for her height, attests to the contrary. Despite being a Buddhist priest, he had given his close visual attention to her.

Whereas the priest is debased by his account, Tajomaru, on the contrary, is purified by the others’ and his own. Tajomaru’s vindication does not come from the fact that he did not kill the samurai, but from the others’ evilness and greed. Although Tajomaru may have killed the samurai, his vice is universal. In fact, Akutagawa uses the bandit to reveal the hypocrisy of some of society’s most respected positions. Tajomaru justifies his killing by saying to the High Police Commissioner, “To me killing isn’t a matter of such great consequence as you might think... Am I the only one who kills people? You, you don’t use your swords. You kill people with your power, with your money. Sometimes you kill them on the pretext of working for their good. It’s true they don’t bleed. They are in the best of health, but all the same you’ve killed them. It’s hard to say who is a greater sinner, you or me.”⁵⁶ Akutagawa then describes “an ironic smile”⁵⁷ on the face of the delinquent, as if to point out the irony, that it is a murderer who is pointing out the wrongdoings of an officer. Moreover, Tajomaru, confesses his crime without repentance. Rather, he seems full of pride. He says, “I soon tied him up to the root of a cedar. Where did I get a rope? Thank heaven, being a robber, I had a rope with me, since I might have to scale a wall at any moment.”⁵⁸ As the other characters fail to meet the expectations of their roles, as with the priest who paid a notable amount of attention to the samurai’s wife and the samurai who might have

⁵⁴ Akutagawa 18.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Akutagawa 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Akutagawa 22-23.

demanding his wife's death, Tajomaru, the criminal, commits the crime only because he was fully prepared to be the criminal. Akutagawa plays with the reader, confusing the latter with the questions of whom to applaud, for what the applause should be, and if it is justifiable or perverted for the reader to find himself applauding at all.

CONCLUSION

Although Cézanne did not address issues of criminality in his paintings, subjectivity, which complicates the discovery of an objective truth, is central to Cézanne's works. What matters for both artists is the idea that art can only present the subjective impressions of the individual. Similar to the ways in which Cézanne triggered reflections on the difference between subjective and objective truth, Akutagawa encourages his readers to think about how subjectivity informs a story and how stories are shaped by the storyteller's desire to make himself or herself look inculpable. The implications of Cézanne's and Akutagawa's works cannot be overemphasized. If even looking at the same scene, we see different things, then how should we describe what we see and what we believe is true? More importantly, how much should we insist on what we claim to know?

Chapter Three: Transposition of the Artist

INTRODUCTION

Seventy-two years after the publication of *Rivalry* and sixty-eight years after the publication of “In a Grove,” “Crows” exhibits, of the three, the most obvious reference to French artistic influence. While Kafū and Akutagawa had subsumed French characters and style, Kurosawa presents van Gogh himself. (Although Dutch, van Gogh’s activities in France and the inspiration that he found from French Impressionist painters classify him as a member of the French artistic society.) In this magical realist vignette, Kurosawa himself is a student examining van Gogh’s paintings at a museum, but, after suddenly being sucked into them, he experiences different kinds of revelations.

Although *Dreams* claims to be a kind of autobiography, dreams can be interpreted. Particularly because the dreams here are also exhibited in a movie, they can be viewed as part of a constructed text, like any other Kurosawa film.⁵⁹ In *The Emperor and the Wolf*, Stuart Galbraith IV points out that “the dreams play as if they were written rather experienced” and therefore seem “detached” and “distant” from Kurosawa.⁶⁰ Even van Gogh’s character, played by Martin Scorsese, has often been criticized for its unrealistic qualities. The character’s over-dyed red beard and New York accent while speaking English, not Dutch or French, make him obviously fictional.⁶¹

For the film, van Gogh serves at least two purposes: first, to express Kurosawa’s nostalgia for a nature that is vanishing; second, to voice Kurosawa’s passion for creation, using

⁵⁹ Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 361.

⁶⁰ Galbraith, Stuart IV. *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2002) 607.

⁶¹ Galbraith 610.

nature as a symbol for novelty and innovation. Entering the painting *The Langlois Bridge*, Kurosawa, played by Akira Terao, asks a group of French women where he can find van Gogh. Finding him, Terao/Kurosawa notices that he – van Gogh – is staring at the sun, the sky, and a field (the setting which will become *Wheatfield with Crows*). Terao/Kurosawa looks at van Gogh with awe, but the painter himself does not understand why the student is behaving in such a way. He asks why the student is not painting to take advantage of the beautiful scene, then expresses his frustration at the little time there remains to paint. Annoyed by Terao/Kurosawa, van Gogh leaves the scene. Terao/Kurosawa runs across the field, suddenly entering other van Gogh's paintings. There is no dialogue, only Chopin's music in the background. After meandering through van Gogh's painted forests, Terao/Kurosawa suddenly returns to the wheat field, where he sees van Gogh disappearing at the peak of a hill. A giant murder of crows surfaces and caws, and the student suddenly is transported back to the museum. He stands outside of van Gogh's painting, where he first entered.

ANALYSIS

A clear message to be taken from van Gogh's character is that love for nature has been lost (and must be regained). Made up of eight vignettes, *Dreams'* overall theme appears to be that humans, who no longer cherish nature, will suffer from the destruction they have caused onto nature and themselves. This theme appears throughout the film: in the second vignette, "The Peach Orchard," spirits berate a boy and his family for cutting down peach trees; in the third vignette, "The Blizzard," mountaineers die on a trek; in the fourth vignette, "The Tunnel," casualties of war remind an army officer of the destruction battles have caused; in the sixth vignette, "Mount Fuji in Red," the meltdown of a nuclear power plant destroys an entire town; in the seventh vignette, "The Weeping Demon," nuclear-infused dandelions and humans sprouting

horns appear in a post-apocalyptic world; and, finally, in the eight vignette, “Village of the Watermills,” a group of villagers choose to live a life that foregoes technology. While “Crows” expresses Kurosawa’s identification with van Gogh, its place in the middle of these other ecocentric vignettes implies that it too expresses Kurosawa’s concerns about humanity’s relationship with nature. Van Gogh’s role makes him similar to a preacher, who is forcefully drawing our attention to our surroundings.

Van Gogh speaks the first English words in the film, compelling us to listen to what he has to say. The audience would not have expected English, particularly because Terao/Kurosawa speaks to him in French, and the entire vignette has been unfolding in French. English appears unnecessary, but by defying expectations, van Gogh draws more attention to his message: take advantage of nature and capture her beauty while she is still there. (While Kurosawa was a Japanese filmmaker and his oldest films had been shown mostly in Japan, by 1990, when *Dreams* debuted, Kurosawa was aware that his films had reached a worldwide audience. In fact, *Dreams* was shown at the international 1990 Cannes Films Festival. Therefore, it can be argued that Kurosawa used English to speak to his audience more directly.)

The directness of English is important to and consistent with Kurosawa’s “preachy” style in *Dreams*.⁶² In other vignettes, the theme of human relationships with nature does not appear in a subtle manner either. In “Village of the Watermill,” for example, an old man living explains to Terao’s/Kurosawa’s character why his village has no electricity, saying obviously thematically, “People get used to conveniences. They think convenience is better. They throw out what’s truly good.” Similarly, in “Mount Fuji in Red,” after the meltdown of the nuclear power plant, a woman shouts, almost directly into the camera, “Human accident is the danger!”

⁶² Galbraith 608.

Van Gogh's statement in "Crows" gives him a similar function as these characters, who state outright what has been done to nature and what will happen as a result. In his enchanting soliloquy, van Gogh cries:

To me this scene is beyond belief. A scene that looks like a painting doesn't make a painting. If you take the time and look closely, all of nature has its own beauty. And when all that natural beauty is there, I just move myself. And then, as if it's in a dream, the scene just paints itself for me. Yes! I consume this natural setting! I devour it completely and whole. And then when I'm through, the picture appears before me complete. It's so difficult to hold it inside!... You take the time and you look closely. All of nature has its own beauty.

Like Terao/Kurosawa who stands beside him, listening like an obedient student, we, too, must listen.

Then, before Terao/Kurosawa has a chance to respond, van Gogh declares, "There's so little time left for me to paint!" Although we could understand these lines in terms of van Gogh's desire to paint (anything), the context of "Crows" encourages us to understand them in terms of van Gogh's desire to paint and to embrace nature in particular. His last words, "The sun – it compels me to paint! I can't stay here wasting my time talking to you!" suggest that it is his awe for nature specifically that drives him. We wonder if the appreciation of a barren wheat field is a feeling only a madman can have. The painter seems to see in nature a value that is not readily striking, making us ask if it is he who is not understanding or if we have lost touch with nature and can no longer see its beauty.

However, the nature that van Gogh is concerned with also symbolizes creation and innovation. Just as nature gives birth to new life, artists, such as van Gogh and Kurosawa,

create and nurture new works. Kurosawa uses van Gogh also as an expression of creativity and the producers' passion. The way that nature continuously generates new objects in the environment captures the heat and the momentum of van Gogh's and Kurosawa's artistic drives. There are at least three factors that allow us to read van Gogh also as Kurosawa: first, van Gogh's English may be Kurosawa's attempt to visibly show him as somebody else - a "universal language," English symbolically represents the voice of international opinions; second, because van Gogh's character obviously deviates from the real van Gogh, Kurosawa could have been nodding to us to view him as somebody else; third, van Gogh is played by Scorsese, and the fact that Scorsese, like Kurosawa, is a film director creates a triangular relationship that suggests that Kurosawa might not have seen a necessary separation between painting and film.⁶³ Tying together the two media through the character of van Gogh, Kurosawa highlights the idea of a greater Art, pointing out that differences in media do not necessarily divide artists, and therefore their opinions.

Kurosawa emphasizes a scene when van Gogh brings up his unstoppable production, as van Gogh compares himself to an engine. After Terao/Kurosawa asks how he deals with the overwhelming beauty around him, van Gogh replies, "I work, I slave, I drive myself like a locomotive." Immediately, a rapidly moving locomotive appears on screen, lasting for several seconds. The camera focuses on its different parts to show how mechanical and powerful it is, as if it were giving us a metaphoric image of van Gogh's unquenchable drive.

Van Gogh's passion for painting cannot be overemphasized. Growing up, Kurosawa belonged to a Japanese society that looked up to van Gogh for his artistic endeavors. Kurosawa was aware that despite various kinds of hindrances (such as his mother's discouragement and

⁶³ Van Gogh is at once both Scorsese and Kurosawa; Kurosawa is at once both van Gogh and Scorsese; and Scorsese is at once both van Gogh and Kurosawa. All three men are connected by their relationship as the creators of art.

many physical and mental illnesses), van Gogh painted diligently.⁶⁴ Even van Gogh himself was aware of his own fervor, calling himself a fanatic.⁶⁵ Because of his fanaticism, those around him often treated him unkindly. Theo, his brother, heard people calling the young Vincent *fou*. Even before van Gogh's commitment to an asylum in Arles in 1888, his work was called the work of a madman, "the product of a sick mind."⁶⁶ Despite the many hindrances, van Gogh painted until the last years of his life. In 1888, when he moved to Arles to seek refuge, he hoped to create an artists' utopia; then, in 1889, when he moved to the Saint-Paul asylum, he found subjects to paint using the clinics, its garden, and even other painters' paintings. Van Gogh was known for having said, "As my work is, so am I."⁶⁷ Kurosawa's passion for film echoes his sentiments.

Through van Gogh, Kurosawa reflects on his own mania for artistic production. In his memoir, *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa writes, "[If] I were to write anything at all, it would turn out to be nothing but talk about movies. In other words, take 'myself,' subtract 'movies', and the result is zero."⁶⁸ According to *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa, like van Gogh, was taunted for his art, but he also did not give up. Those around Kurosawa were often critical. His feelings towards art became ambivalent as early as elementary school.

One day, the young Kurosawa was told to, "Draw whatever you like."⁶⁹ He then composed a picture unlike his peers': "I don't remember what it was I attempted to draw," he writes in the memoir, "but I drew with all my might. I pressed so hard the pencils broke, and then

⁶⁴ Kakutani, Michiko. "'Van Gogh: The Life,' by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith." *The New York Times* 20 Oct. 2011. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 22 Apr. 2013.

⁶⁵ Naifeh, Steven, and Gregory White Smith. *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011) 4-5.

⁶⁶ Naifeh 4.

⁶⁷ qtd. in Naifeh 6.

⁶⁸ Kurosawa, Akira. *Something Like an Autobiography*. (New York: Knopf: 1982) xi.

⁶⁹ Kurosawa 12.

I put saliva on my fingertips and smeared the colors around, eventually ending up with my hands a variety of hues.”⁷⁰ The class laughed at his product, but the teacher praised him, calling his classmates’ attention to the spots with saliva smears, putting three large concentric circles on the painting. It was the sign for the highest mark, rewarding him for his creativity. In a later class, however, a second teacher scolded Kurosawa for doing something similar. Wanting to represent the volume of a vase, Kurosawa used different colors to indicate various degrees of depth. He “emphasized ... shaded areas with a thick purple” and “showed the light leaves of the cosmos as masses of green smoke, and the pink and white blossoms as scattered splashes.”⁷¹ Instead of praise, this teacher – like van Gogh’s critics – reproached the young Kurosawa, asking, “What’s the matter with the shading on this vase – where do you see any dark purple? What is this green here that looks like a cloud? If you think that looks like the leaves of cosmos flowers, you’re crazy.”⁷² Kurosawa, however, simply turned his creative energy towards film.

Kurosawa’s passion can be seen directly through his films, and even the director himself elaborates on it in his memoir. In *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa even attempts a list of nearly one hundred films that impressed him.⁷³ In the first chapter, “Babyhood,” Kurosawa recalls a French movie that he saw before he could even form any clear memory, describing nostalgically, “And I remember a scene in which a man who has escaped from prison scales a tall building. He comes out onto the roof and jumps off into a dark canal below. This may have been the French crime-adventure film *Zigomar*, directed by Victorin Jasset and first released in Japan in November 1911.”⁷⁴ Kurosawa’s attention to detail and items such as his

⁷⁰ Kurosawa 12.

⁷¹ Kurosawa 24.

⁷² Kurosawa 25.

⁷³ Kurosawa 73-74.

⁷⁴ Kurosawa 6.

long list of films reflect the passion that he has for movie-making, giving us an idea of how we can see his and van Gogh's passions as similar.

Returning to "Crows," we see how nature and the locomotive function for Kurosawa to express his mania for production. After van Gogh leaves the scene, Terao/Kurosawa becomes lost in a multitude of van Gogh's landscape paintings. His wandering gives him the space to find his way through the meaning of van Gogh's art and creation; it is a space that indicates the result of his mental journey with van Gogh.

Being left by van Gogh means that Terao/Kurosawa has no choice but to try to find his own answer. Running energetically with an easel in his hand, Terao/Kurosawa must understand what scenery to sit with and embrace. The scenes become progressively colorful, while the music still maintains a solemn yet domineering tone. While the colors of the trees change, from dark undertones of black and brown to an assortment of vivid blue, green, yellow, and red, Chopin's piano beats deepen, repeating the A-flat note. The bold, thumping punctuation of the beats stop the scenery from being totally paradisiacal, sounding like obstructions in Terao's/Kurosawa's journey.⁷⁵ The connotations of large raindrops and heaviness invite us to view Terao's/Kurosawa's journey as disrupted by conflict. In another way, Terao's/Kurosawa's wanderings may also speak to Kurosawa's fear of being overwhelmed by the subjects to depict. What should Terao/Kurosawa sit with and when all of what he sees could become part of his art?

As with nature, the locomotive itself may also depict Kurosawa's artistic struggles. The locomotive symbolizes, first, the artist's lack of control during production. The locomotive represents the artists' determination, as it is a mechanical being that moves towards its destination as if – and because – its sole *raison d'être* is to do so. In that sense, the locomotive

⁷⁵ Chopin himself might have linked the note to death. In George Sand's autobiography, *Histoire de ma vie* (1855), she writes of her stay with Chopin that he, after seeing Sand and her son return from a heavy storm, said that he dreamt that "He saw himself drowned in a lake" (qtd. in Huneker).

represents van Gogh's and Kurosawa's instinct, to work without deviating from their path, and the fact that the locomotive is at the same time moving but lifeless, grand but lonely, shows power that is in itself contradictory and incomplete⁷⁶.

Moving alone like the locomotive, van Gogh and Kurosawa are, in a sense, artists in solitude. Van Gogh's solitude was epitomized by his periods in the asylum in Arles and during his isolation in his Yellow House. Usually surrounded by the camera crew and actors, Kurosawa was often in group settings but his unique style of commanding his team set him apart as a lone thinker. Aside from waiting hours on end for the perfect weather to shoot (Buruma), Kurosawa also had a short temper that made group work difficult for him. In *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa dedicates an entire chapter to discuss how his lack of patience makes working with others a chore. He writes, for instance, "I have a distaste for argumentation, and I can't stand people who spout together all kinds of strung-together logic. One argumentative screenwriter used some syllogistic reasoning to prove to me that his script was right. I became annoyed and countered that, no matter how logically he defended it, what was dull was still dull, so forget it."⁷⁷

Another reason the locomotive captures the characters of van Gogh and Kurosawa is that it is capable of going out of control. When van Gogh tells Terao's/Kurosawa's character that he cut his ear off because he could not capture it perfectly in a painting, he shows us how *his* engine crashed: van Gogh could no longer exercise "normal" behavior (that is: not cutting one's ear off). When Kurosawa presented "Crows" at the Cannes Film Festival, he was aging in his eighties, a time during which the films he produced, including "Crows," received less positive reviews and

⁷⁶ The locomotive may further symbolize Kurosawa's camera. Composed of connected compartments moving forward singularly, the locomotive is like the camera whose compartment-like frames combine different pieces together to make progress.

⁷⁷ Kurosawa 110.

were considered inferior to his preceding hits such as *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran* (1985). Kurosawa was, in a sense, by 1990, producing art that had “crashed” the way an engine could.

In the end, Terao’s/Kurosawa’s character emerges from the paintings to the wheat field once again. Seeing van Gogh in the far distance, Terao/Kurosawa runs after him but gives up at the foot of the hill. When van Gogh disappears from the horizon, a giant flock of crows surges, cawing and flying noisily in various directions. What initially appeared to be van Gogh’s scene of natural serenity transforms into cacophonous disorder, the crows obscuring our view of van Gogh, who gradually disappears. In a way, the scene looks as though van Gogh awakens the crows. The intersection of his disappearance and the crows’ appearance makes it possible to view the crows as van Gogh’s replacement or extension, ending Terao’s/Kurosawa’s journey in a more solemn tone.⁷⁸

While the crows caw noisily, Kurosawa switches to a scene of *Wheatfield with Crows* as a painting. Suddenly, the sound of a locomotive’s whir ascends, the camera zooms out of the painting, and we see Terao/Kurosawa at the museum, facing the painting once again. The magic of having entered van Gogh’s world is highlighted. Terao/Kurosawa silently takes off his cap, a display of respect, and the vignette ends. We see only his back, and therefore experience the painting from the same angle as he, feeling like we, too, were invited into and had just left the same painting. Having us identify with Terao/Kurosawa at the end of the vignette, Kurosawa deepens his invitation for us to think about the lessons to be learned from van Gogh.

⁷⁸ The meaning of the crows is ambiguous. Although crows are often viewed as bad omens in Western cultures, in Japanese mythology, crows can also be a good omen, heavenly deities that help humans (Ashkenazi). If we were to look at the crows in a more positive light, we could perhaps think that Kurosawa was not entirely focused on the destructive endings that locomotive-like artist face when trying to capture nature and produce art. Instead, he might have been suggesting via the crows, from the Japanese point of view, that hope can still exist.

CONCLUSION

“Crows” leaves the audience questioning how removed we are from nature, but nature, as a symbol of production, in addition to the image of the locomotive, also yields a space for Kurosawa to express his anxieties as an artistic producer.

As troublesome as it is to think that Kurosawa felt some anxiety, there is still a positive message to be taken from the locomotive image. Locomotives shake the ground, and though they move alone, they carry people and items towards new spaces and places. On top of that, a locomotive seldom passes unnoticed. Locomotives are, in other words, engines that produce change, demand attention, and carry things toward something new. Equating himself to the same locomotive Kurosawa takes “Crows” away from the more visible ecocentric subject of *Dreams*, emphasizing instead his and van Gogh’s status as movers and shakers of art.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ironically, in real life, van Gogh himself did not know that he would be a star in the art scene. Writing to a Parisian newspaper in response to a critic’s praise, “It is *absolutely certain* that I shall never do important things,” he had sold almost none of his paintings. Similarly, in his last letter to Theo, van Gogh wrote, “Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it, and my reason has half floundered because of it” (qtd. in Maurer 113). Kurosawa, on the other hand, realized his importance in the film world by the time of “Crows.” He knew of his works’ popularity, particularly in the West, where they were more watched and studied than in Japan, and he had already won the Oscar award for *Ran*, in addition to being nominated and winning several prestigious international awards.

Conclusion

In this report, I examined the manner in which Kafū, Akutagawa, and Kurosawa adapted the works of Zola, Cézanne, and van Gogh in their art and literature. In the first chapter, I analyzed Kafū's *Rivalry* as an adaptation of Zola's *Nana* to show how Kafū remolded Nana, a French symbol of moral decay, into Japanese geisha who similarly expresses Japanese moral corruption. In the second chapter, I analyzed Akutagawa's *Rashomon* as a medium transference of Cézanne's message that the artist can never reproduce reality as it truly is, and that everybody will tell a subjective version of stories that they know. In the third chapter, I analyzed van Gogh's importance for Kurosawa's nostalgic appreciation of nature and his struggles with artistic identity.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, French interest in Japan has developed an artistic tie between Japan and France. It is possible to view the twentieth-century works of Kafū, Akutagawa, and Kurosawa as Japan's reciprocation of nineteenth-century French *japonisme*, when most of the interest was not through French dialogue with the Japanese, but through French projections of how the Japanese should be. Using the works of Zola, Cézanne, and van Gogh with which they were familiar, the Japanese artists involved France in their fictional worlds. In both *japonisme* and the Japanese twentieth-century works, there was little collaboration between French and Japanese artists, and instead great production based on what the artists knew or thought that they knew of the others' work.

Although the nineteenth century was the booming period of *japonisme* and although French painting is not as frequently praised in Japanese literary magazines, there is no indication that the French-Japanese artistic tie has come to an end. One could say that in the twenty-first century, French-Japanese artistic representations only manifest themselves differently. The

newer artistic products reflect processes of globalization and actual confrontation that were less marked during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mid-twentieth century films, such as *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), bring forth the complications of French and Japanese romantic love during wartime, and later films such as *Yuki & Nina* (2009) address the complexities of a child's being half Japanese and half French.

Japan and France are now not only interested in learning and adapting from each other, but they are also interested in making available the work of the other in their own community. French literature is continuously translated in Japan, and Japanese literature maintains its popularity in translation in France. In Japan today, one can find translations of Zola's novels, and in France, Japanese manga, such as the well-known *Yu-gi-oh!* and *Naruto*, are available in French. In fact, France leads other European countries in manga sales.⁸⁰ Contemporary influence of Japanese manga has even contributed to the establishment of the *nouvelle manga*, an artistic movement that brings together francophone and Japanese manga artists, enabling francophone artists to break away from the limits of the *bande dessinée*. In painting, French art continues to inspire Japanese works. Japanese artist Morimura Yasumasa, famous for his translation of Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, provides the epitome of increased Japanese boldness in appropriating French ideas.

If one sees *japonisme* as a series of Orientalist events that should not be repeated in the twenty-first century, one would also have to inquire about the appropriateness of Kafū's, Akutagawa's, and Kurosawa's works. The question arises as to where the balance lies, between one-way creation and two-way collaboration. How do we not repeat the mistakes of *japonistes* in the past? How do we honor and respect an artistic tradition while simultaneously incorporating it

⁸⁰ Fishbein, Jennifer. "Europe's Manga Mania." *BusinessWeek: Global Economics* 26 Dec. 2007. *BusinessWeek*. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

into our own culture? With the help of Kafū, Akutagawa, and Kurosawa, we see that to take inspiration from another culture does not necessarily have to end with an “-ism,” as in *japonisme* or Orientalism. More than taking ideas from France to apply to their own works, the three Japanese artists show us that borrowing can be a form of honoring. If put into words, their actions might say, “You speak to me.”

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