Forest Mythology Symbols
in Contemporary Japanese Cinema

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Abstract

NATURE and mythology have historically shaped Japanese art. In contemporary Japanese cinema, these symbols are often reinterpreted through a renewed perspective on the forest, or *chinju no mori*, viewed as a sacred space. Throughout history, the reverence for these forests inhabited by deities and spirits has played a fundamental role in artistic expressions, inspiring mythical figures and scenarios. From this perspective, this paper examines how symbols of forest mythology influence and are depicted in Japanese cinema, focusing on the evolution of these representations and the meanings attributed to these symbols. The comparative analysis in this paper reveals stylistic and thematic transitions over time, illustrating how each era contributes to the understanding of the role of the forest in cinematic narratives and the evolution of Japanese cinema in its representation of natural spaces and mythology. A significant shift in the portrayal of forest mythology in Japanese cinema can be observed from the 1980s onward, influenced by urban, social, and cultural changes. Previously depicted as mystical and sometimes terrifying entities in horror films, figures such as *kami* and *yōkai* have since been represented through a more environmentally conscious lens, fostering a deeper emotional connection to these spaces. This evolution reflects a broader cultural shift, underscoring the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world in contemporary cinematic narratives.

Introduction

IN Japanese cinema, the use of the forest as a narrative space reflects a distinctive cultural perspective. According to Erik Schoneveld, both within and outside Asia, the portrayal of Japan's national character as unique and distinct from other cultures has long been a prominent feature of the country's modern visual culture. It is often suggested that the Japanese hold a singular relationship with Nature, fundamentally different from the Western inclination to control and exploit the environment, as noted by Masao Watanabe. According to the author, Japan distinguishes itself through its deep and enduring connection with the natural world, a trait rooted in ancestral traditions. This perspective portrays Japanese culture

as characterized by a profound reverence for natural environments, an intuitive appreciation of their beauty, and a harmonious coexistence between humans and Nature. However, as Aike Rots affirms, many scholars contend that this view is idealized, essentialist, and often misaligned with the realities of modern life.

Nevertheless, according to J. Baird Callicott and James McRae, "[there are] three elements that have made a contribution to the Japanese appreciation and respect of their natural environment: mythology, legends, and folklore" (209). These influences have been crucial in the development of Japanese environmental philosophy, and they have been present in the culture of the people since the prehistoric Jōmon period (14,000 to 300 BC), during which the concept of kami (gods or spirits of Nature) emerged among the indigenous peoples, developing into animism and animatism, according to Callicott and McRae. In this perspective, Ueda Atsushi, Japanese scholar whose works focus on the relationship between Shinto beliefs and environmental conservation, affirms that Jōmon people perceives the forest as

> a divine mother, and worshipped the forest's "mysterious power", which laid the foundation for later developments: "This kind of forest-centred faith, and the belief in a return to the forest [after death], was not only strong among the "people of the forest" [i.e. Jōmon-period people], but has also remained strongly in the consciousness and behaviour of later Japanese people. (Qtd. in Rots 115)

In Japanese tradition, the symbolic elements of mythology are closely aligned with Shinto principles, incorporating *kami* (deities), forest spirits, animals, and legendary heroes. These symbols are central to the construction of cultural imagery and collective identity. In this regard, Roland Barthes, French literary theorist, critic, and semiotician emphasizes that "myth contains a message, 'a type of speech chosen by history,' and the cultural meaning of the message is endowed by its social usage" (qtd. in Okuyama 209) Barthes' concept of myth as a "discourse chosen by history" is particularly relevant to understanding how Japanese mythological symbols have been perpetuated over time, acquiring renewed significance through their ongoing social interpretation. In this perspective, Yoshiko Okuyama argues that Japanese mythology operates not only within historical frameworks but also as a fluid mechanism linking modern society to its cultural roots.

Mythological elements gained prominence in Japan's "New Wave" cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting responses to the social and cultural upheavals of post-war Japan. David Pinho Barros ("Édipos") highlights this period's incorporation of Japanese and Western mythological figures, blending traditional and contemporary narratives. These themes often explored rural Japan through mystical lenses, particularly in Japanese horror, where forests and their supernatural inhabitants served as agents of karmic retribution.

Rooted in pre-war traditions like Noh and Kabuki theater, which used mythological elements to examine morality and existential struggles, New Wave cinema reimagined these motifs to critique modernity, societal disillusionment, and humanity's relationship with nature and spirituality. Unlike wartime propaganda or

pre-war melodramas, these films employed mythology as a tool for introspection and cultural critique.

Over time, perceptions of natural spaces and supernatural elements have evolved significantly. Contemporary directors like Hayao Miyazaki and Takahiro Omori often depict enchanted forests inhabited by gods and spirits, reflecting a Shinto worldview where the natural and spiritual worlds are interconnected. Mythology has become increasingly associated with religion and contemplation, particularly in the context of valuing *chinju no mori*, the sacred forests surrounding Shinto shrines in Japan. According to Rots, these forests, considered spiritual sanctuaries, are protected as integral components of the shrines' environment, illustrating the deep interconnection between Nature and spirituality. Rots highlights that in the early 1980s, the movement to conserve *chinju no mori* gained traction. The collaboration between conservationists, scientists, and Shinto priests intensified in the following decades, as *chinju no mori* idea grew in ecological and symbolic importance (Rots).

This shift toward ecological consciousness emphasizes emotional connection to Nature and environmental preservation, particularly through sacred spaces like *chinju no mori*. According to Barney Warf and Santa Arias, this "spatial turn" originally conceptualized in the humanities to emphasize the critical role of spatiality in understanding cultural and social phenomena, highlights how spaces serve as intersections of ecological, spiritual, and cultural significance. This spatial awareness is particularly evident in Japanese cinema, where natural environments and landscapes have become central narrative elements. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano explores how Japanese cinema uses these spaces to reflect modern and contemporary concerns. Contemporary directors often depict forests as living, mythical entities bridging spiritual and physical realms. These films critique humanity's relationship with Nature, emphasizing environmental preservation and sustainability amid rapid modernization.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion of contemporary Japanese cinema and its engagement with traditional symbols and narratives analyzing the evolution of traditional and forest mythological symbols in Japanese cinema, focusing on how these elements transition from their earlier forms to contemporary representations. The scope of this study is limited to film, with a comparative analysis of pre-1980s and post-1980s films that exemplify key moments in the reinterpretation of forest mythology and its symbolic narratives. The pre-1980s films—*Ugetsu Monogatari* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953), *Onibaba* (Kaneto Shindō, 1964), *Kwaidan* (Masaki Kobayashi, 1965), and *Kuroneko* (Kaneto Shindō, 1968)—were selected for their groundbreaking contributions to Japanese cinema and their use of supernatural and mythological themes to explore both narrative symbolism and social critiques. The post-1980s selection—*Himatsuri* (Mitsuo Yanagimachi, 1985), *Tonari no Totoro* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1988), *Pom Poko* (Isao Takahata, 1994), *Mononoke Hime* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1997), *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), *Hotarubi no Mori e* (Takahiro Omori, 2011), and *Wood Job! Kamusari Nana Nichijo* (Shinobu Yaguchi, 2014)—was chosen for their reinterpretation of tradi-

tional mythological motifs in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences, emphasizing themes of environmentalism, modernity, and the human-nature relationship.

Together, these examples portray the forest as a sacred and mysterious realm, rich in mythological symbols, while demonstrating continuity and innovation in their visual and narrative representations. Their cultural significance and critical acclaim position them as milestones in Japanese visual culture.

The Forest in Japanese Mythology

Shintoism and Buddhism are the two religions that have most significantly shaped ethical consciousness in Japan. According to Callicott and McRae, *Shintō*, meaning "the way of the kami", originated from the Chinese classic *Ekikyō*, where it was interpreted as the "principles of Nature's unexplained mysteries". This concept deeply influenced the development of Shintoism in Japan, reinforcing the indigenous reverence for the natural environment. Shintoism lacks formal written doctrines but is regarded as a practice that promotes preservation of the environment, animal protection, and a moral consciousness focused on human well-being. As Callicott and McRae (209) note, "Kami, in Japanese mythology, does not refer to a single deity, but rather to myriad deities that exist". These deities are sacred manifestations of yōkai, as affirms Michael Dylan Foster, which are

> supernatural creatures, the weird and mysterious "things" that have been a part of Japanese culture (and perhaps every other culture) for as long as history has been recorded [. . .]. In contemporary Japanese discourse, they are most often denoted by the word *yōkai* 妖怪 , variously translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order deity, or, more amorphously, as any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence. (Foster 2)

These deities reveal their presence through various manifestations, including animals, mythical creatures, and supernatural beings, often acting as guardians of the forest and protectors of the harmony between the natural and spiritual realms. Throughout Japan's history, these beliefs have remained a constant presence, not only in formal texts like the *Kojiki*[1] and *Nihon Shoki*,[2] but also in *minkan denshō* (popular oral traditions), persisting as deeply embedded elements of the Japanese collective imagination.

According to Okuyama, there is a term for the exploration and preservation of Japanese folklore. The field of *minzokugaku* studies traditional beliefs, spiritual

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[1] The *Kojiki* holds great significance in Japanese literature and history as a foundational text. Its name translates to "Record of Ancient Matters". Compiled in the early 8th century, it is often regarded as Japan's oldest historical account, containing myths, legends, and historical narratives that delve into Japan's origins, its imperial lineage, and the essence of Shinto.

[2] The *Nihon Shoki*, alternatively known as the "Chronicles of Japan" or *Nihongi*, is another foundational piece of Japanese history and literature. Compiled in 720 AD, it provides a more complex and comprehensive narrative of early Japanese history and mythology.

rituals, superstitions, and narratives involving deities, the afterlife, natural phenomena, myths, and legends prevalent in both traditional and popular religions in Japan. These narratives contribute significantly to the "imaginary" of Japan, even for those who do not approach them from a religious perspective, as this belief system has become more of a cultural conviction than a religious one; many Japanese who identify as non-religious still believe in kami (Callicott and McRae). This concept has become central to contemporary Shinto, particularly with the emergence of the concept of *chinju no mori*. These are sacred[3] sites developed for worship, located in ancient primeval forests that have been preserved from the mythical past to the present day (Rots). As the Japanese scholar, literary critic, and translator Motegi Sadasumi notes:

> [Chinju no mori are] forests that have remained from the ancient age of myths until the present time. These are forests where old trees grow in abundance; where high trees, brushwood and plants growing under the trees are in balance. Many birds, insects and micro-organisms have the space to live here. These are forests with rich ecosystems. Inside, one can find pure gardens (*kiyorakana niwa*), where annual festivals (matsuri) are organised. These are places that remind one of distant, ancient times. This is where the voices of the gods (*kamigami*) sound in your ears. This is where our ancestors lived, humbly and diligently, in harmony with nature. (Qtd. in Rots 85)

The term *chinju* refers to a local protective deity, often designated as *chinjugami*, while mori is commonly translated as forest (Rots). In this perspective, the *chinju no mori* hold ecological significance. Thus, the underlying concept of *chinju no mori* evokes reverence for these spaces, which are viewed as unique locations where spirituality and divinity intertwine exceptionally.

As noted by Rots since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest not only in cosmologies and religious belief systems as sources of environmental ethics but also in sacred sites with ecological importance. This increased focus on religious environmental paradigms may have contributed to a re-evaluation of the concept of "space" in religious studies, emphasizing issues such as place-making, territoriality, and the notion of sacralization. These themes resonate strongly in Japanese cinema, particularly in contemporary works, which continue to explore forest mythology as a central narrative element.

Forest Mythology in Japanese Cinema before the 1980s

Aᴛ the dawn of the 20th century, Japanese cinema entered a period of profound engagement with the deeper layers of its cultural tradition. Pioneering filmmakers recognized the rich potential of folklore, dense mythology, and traditional

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[3] It is essential to emphasize that the term *sacred* should not be interpreted as 'religious'. Instead, according to Rots, it can be understood as 'special' and 'non-negotiable' through discourse, spatial demarcation, and ritual practices. This is evidenced by the fact that many people visit these places without establishing any specific religious connection to the site.

elements for narrative construction. This movement not only reflected a return to cultural roots but also marked the beginning of a dialogue between ancient art forms and the modernity represented by cinema, which emerged at the close of the 19th century. According to Jolyon Baraka Thomas, stories that had woven through Japan's cultural fabric for centuries, appearing in *engi emaki* and Edo-period (1603–1868) *yamato-e* paintings and other artistic expressions, found a new dimension of expression on the cinematic screen.

The use of mythological elements was significantly prominent in the modern era of Japanese cinema, often referred to as the "Japanese New Wave" (Nūberu Bāgu), marked by a series of significant changes in the aesthetic and thematic approaches to films, reflecting the social, political, and cultural transformations of post-war Japan. David Pinho Barros notes that this era of Japanese cinema "is filled with references to fabulous beings from Japanese tradition, as well as Western mythological entities" ("Light and Colour" 165). Renowned incorporated elements of popular beliefs into their works, particularly set in forest spaces, portraying rural Japan with a touch of mysticism. These films, often classified within the j-horror genre, constitute notable adaptations of *kaidan*[4] tales—stories of ghosts and the supernatural—deeply rooted in Japan's literary and folkloric tradition. They presented a mystical perspective in which the forest and its inhabitants were seen as agents of karma, punishing those who acted immorally.

Emerging films from this trend are distinguished by characters from marginalized social classes, often engaged in battles for survival amid a backdrop of hardship. For example, *Nobuko Otowa's* character in Shindō's *Onibaba* (1964) is a widow surviving by ambushing and robbing soldiers in a war-torn landscape, haunted by a cursed demon mask—a symbol of karmic retribution and psychological despair. Similarly, in Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953), the protagonists—a potter and his wife—must navigate the devastating effects of war, with their survival marked by isolation and suffering surrounded by a backdrop of supernatural events. These characters are shaped by their marginalized positions in society, confronting personal and collective struggles amidst environments steeped in mysticism and morality.

These films demonstrate a connection to mythology, reflecting the influence of traditional religious practices and beliefs in cinema. Although Donald Richie in his book *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* suggests that traditional Japanese theater has not directly influenced film, the thought processes that created Noh and Kabuki still permeate Japanese filmmaking. On the other hand, Frank Bishop affirms that Japanese theater, rooted in the country's ancestral mythologies, provided a strong foundation for the assimilation of mythological elements into cinematic works. This transition from performing arts to the screen is particularly evident in j-horror, where traditional theatrical forms, alongside

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[4] "Japanese supernatural stories are commonly called *kaidan* 怪談. The ideogram kai 怪 carries the meaning of 'strange' or 'mysterious apparition', while dan 談 means 'to narrate'. 'Thus, [. . .], *kaidan* can mean 'a narrative of the strange'" (Spanghero 8, my translation from the Portuguese).

beliefs grounded in the supernatural from Buddhism and Shintoism, play a decisive role (Bishop).

These elements are masterfully articulated in the works of filmmaker Kaneto Shindō. Drawing from traditional theater, Shindō integrates classical narratives and stage techniques to depict rituals that reference demonic figures from Noh and Kabuki. Zvika Serper notes that this influence is particularly evident in the narrative structure of his movie *Kuroneko* (*Black Cat*) (1968).

The first half of the film follows the dual pattern typical of a *kaibyō eiga*, where a murdered human returns as a ghost cat, while a demonic cat disguises itself as a human to seek revenge. Professor Branislav L. Slantchev, as quoted by Collete Balmain's, explains that if a cat licks the blood of its murdered owner, it transforms into a *kaibyō*—a cat monster also known as *bakeneko* (changed cat), capable of possessing humans and controlling malevolent spirits. The cat spirit serves as a metaphor for those who died violently and were never given proper burials, particularly resonant in the context of recent wars. In a 1975 interview with Joan Mellen, Shindō suggests that

> [t]he idea of the cat came to [him] because the original story was based upon an old Japanese folk tale called "The Cat's Revenge." It was at least partly based on that story. [He] liked the idea of using the cat because [he] could thus express the very low position in society which certain people occupy by using so useless and low an animal as the cat. (Mellen 90)

In *Kuroneko*, the two women transformed into these vengeful entities are depicted with the iconography of *yūrei*,[5] or vengeful spirits, representations of vengeful spirits that will frequently appear in films of this era. According to Serper, the remainder of the narrative draws from traditional literary sources, such as the *Heike Monogatari*, which recounts the story of Watanabe-no-Tsuna, a warrior who encounters a mysterious woman on a bridge and accompanies her on her journey. In the film's context, the two women lure samurai into the forest, where they inhabit a house. A particularly striking scene portrays an illusion of the *yūrei*'s house moving through the forest. The overlapping frames of the house and forest encapsulates a tension between the visible and invisible, the real and imagined, suggesting that the samurai, by traversing the forest, is transitioning from the mundane world to the sacred or supernatural realm.

Another of the filmmaker's works that exemplifies the influence of natural elements and mythological narratives in his storytelling is *Onibaba* (*The Hole*) (1964). The film tells the story of two women, a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, who live in an isolated hut in a reed field. With the men of the family dragged to war, the two women survive by killing lost samurais and selling their

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[5] According to Balmain, vengeful spirits, or yūrei, in Japanese horror cinema are primarily female. However, it is interesting to note that, while female yūrei dominate, these movies also portray male ghosts. In Japanese horror, male ghosts are typically secondary characters alongside vengeful female yūrei or are depicted as long-deceased warrior spirits, as seen in Hochi: The Earless" from *Kwaidan* (Balmain).

weapons and armor. In the climax of the film, the appearance of a lonely samurai wearing a demon mask heightens the film's tension and mythological symbolism. The mother-in-law tries to use the mask to frighten the daughter-in-law and drive her away from Hachi, a neighbor and soldier who seduces the young woman. However, she ends up getting stuck with the mask, which disfigures her face (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Frame from the movie *Onibaba* (1964), by Kaneto Shindō.

Okuyama affirms that this supernatural mask element is rooted in Japanese mythological stories and reflects the influence of Noh theater, where masks often symbolize spirits and demons, such as Oni. As Shindō himself remarks:

> Shindō: [. . .]. *Onibaba* is an old Japanese folk tale, probably a Buddhist tale. I made it into a dramatic, dynamic drama.
>
> Mellen: Are you then adapting Buddhist lore to your own particular style of social expression?
>
> Shindō: I adapted the story into a script resonant with the spirit of modern man. It is a modern version of an old traditional story. (Mellen 86)

From this perspective, *Onibaba* can be seen as resonating with the "spirit of modern humanity". Shindō's work offers a reinterpretation that channels the anxieties, values, and existential dilemmas of contemporary society, all while drawing from Japanese Buddhist traditions. In the same way, the film portrays characters shaped by Buddhist concepts of heaven, hell, and purgatory. As Keiko I. McDonald observes in *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context*, the samurai general in the film, driven by unchecked political ambition, becomes a victim of his own sins, paralleling the fate of the elderly woman who ultimately punishes him. His fall into the pit, with no hope for redemption, serves as a symbol of Buddhist hell.

Similarly, the old woman, consumed by jealousy, faces the karmic consequences of her actions, reinforcing the film's focus on sin and retribution.

This Buddhist framework is complemented by Shinto elements, particularly the reverence for Nature and the animistic belief in spirits residing in natural spaces. The swamp in the film, for instance, is not just a physical setting but a liminal space, reflecting Shinto notions of the sacred and the profane. The interplay between the two belief systems becomes evident in the film's treatment of morality and spirituality. While Buddhist philosophy emphasizes karma, impermanence, and detachment from worldly desires, Shinto practices highlight the coexistence of humans with the natural and spiritual worlds. This dual influence creates a layered moral landscape where characters are not only bound by karmic retribution but also haunted by restless spirits (yūrei), who embody unresolved emotions and attachments.

Moreover, the elderly woman delivers a sermon on purgatory and hell in her attempt to dissuade her daughter-in-law from marrying Hachi, grounding the narrative in Buddhist teachings. These references underscore the film's integration of religious doctrines into Japanese horror narratives. As Frank Bishop observes, this Buddhist influence resonates with Noh dramas, where protagonists often appear as ghosts, demons, or restless souls unable to find peace due to excessive attachment to worldly honors, love, or desires. At the same time, the Shinto belief in spiritual purification and the cyclical harmony between humans and nature provides a counterpoint, suggesting a balance between punishment and renewal.

By weaving together these complementary yet distinct belief systems, *Onibaba* reflects the syncretic nature of Japanese spirituality, where Buddhism and Shinto coexist, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in tension, to shape narratives that are both morally intricate and spiritually profound.

Another emblematic example of this type of narrative can be found in the film *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of moonlight and rain*) (1953), directed by Kenji Mizoguchi and based on the series of stories by Akinari Ueda. *Ugetsu Monogatari* masterfully blends poetic realism with the supernatural, creating a fluid narrative that navigates between the real and spiritual worlds. Tadao Sato (2008) emphasizes the thematic depth and visual representation of the film, noting how Mizoguchi employs long takes and fluid camera movements to evoke a seamless integration of the supernatural within the real world. Similarly, McDonald (*Ugetsu*) discusses the critical reception of these techniques, highlighting that Mizoguchi's signature long takes have been praised by Western critics for their rhythmic beauty, reminiscent of medieval Japanese *emakimono* (illustrated scrolls). These scrolls often included a diverse set of mythological narratives interwoven with historical events, blurring the boundaries between storytelling, artistic expression and the defence of religion.

The story follows two peasants, Genjuro and Tobei, who see the war as an opportunity to climb the social ladder. Genjuro, driven by the desire for prosperity, decides to abandon his wife and child to seek fortune in the city, where he encounters Lady Wakasa, a beautiful yet ghostly figure. As Balmain states,

Lady Wakasa is the prototype of the beautiful but dangerous Japanese ghost who haunts Japanese horror cinema. [. . .] [T]he seductive female ghost represents the 'intense attraction of the Other, of the outside, an Other that the collectivity seeks to shield its members from' [. . .]. In Japanese mythology vengeful ghosts are called yūrei, and more often than not are female. Cinematic representations of yūrei are very similar to those in traditional ukiyo-e prints. Dressed in white (white kimonos are used for burial in Shintō), with long unbound black hair, yūrei are often depicted with no legs, and hands that dangle uselessly from the wrist [Figure 2]. (Balmain 47)

Fig. 2. Frame from the movie *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953), by Kenji Mizoguchi.

The presence of *yūrei* iconography is a prominent symbol in several works of Japanese horror, as also exemplified in *Kuroneko* and is considerably more evident in *Kwaidan* (*Ghost Stories*) (1974) directed by Masaki Kobayashi. *Kwaidan* is an anthology of four ghost stories inspired by the tales of Lafcadio Hearn. Richie (*Japanese Cinema: An Introduction*) observes that *Kwaidan* is renowned for its use of color and visual composition to create a haunting, otherworldly atmosphere, drawing on Japanese folklore and visual techniques to evoke the supernatural. Similarly, David Desser emphasizes Kobayashi's visual approach, noting the film's use of elaborate sets and vivid colors to bring the ghost stories to life, resulting in a hauntingly beautiful cinematic experience.

This film adds a new layer to the traditional representation of *yūrei* by exploring these entities with an unusual depth of emotional and spiritual complexity. Notably, in the segment "The Snow Woman", the *yūrei* is portrayed not only as a figure of terror but as one with moral and emotional intricacies. The Snow Woman's decision to spare a young man's life and later enter a marital bond with him, all while concealing her spectral nature, reveals a more humanized and introspective dimension to these spirits, which are typically depicted through the lens of vengeance or malevolence.

Reflecting on his work, Kobayashi stated that his primary intention was to explore the juxtaposition between the material and spiritual nature of humanity,

creating a drama that directly addresses the spiritual significance in human lives (Mellen). He emphasized that, although the film is often categorized as "horror", its true focus lies in spiritual concerns. Kobayashi's emphasis on spirituality anticipates a trend of humanizing supernatural elements, which became more prevalent in subsequent cinematic productions.

Therefore, by deeply incorporating symbols from mythological and folkloric narratives, Japanese films from the 1950s to the 1970s delve into the complexities of mythology, particularly through the depiction of forested landscapes and rural settings. These films intertwine mysticism with an undercurrent of latent hostility, offering a nuanced perspective on the relationship between humanity and nature. This cinematic approach challenges the commonly accepted notion of an inherent, harmonious connection with the natural environment, instead portraying forests as dualistic spaces—both sites of beauty and realms of danger and mystery.

Forest Mythology in Japanese Cinema after the 1980s

FROM the 1980s onward, a significant shift in the use of forest mythology becomes apparent in Japanese cinema, as it increasingly adopts an ecologically conscious perspective on Nature. This shift reflects broader cultural and social transformations, indicating a movement toward a more sustainable appreciation and stewardship of the natural world. Such evolution marks a crucial turning point in the representation of environmental themes, demonstrating a deeper engagement with ecological concerns within the context of Japanese cinematic narratives.

In addition to employing the forest as a setting for mystical representations, Japanese cinema has, since the 1930s, prominently portrayed pre-urban spaces with a sense of nostalgia. According to Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano (*Nippon Modern*), like trends in literature, this cinematic practice reflects a collective yearning to return to traditional hometowns in response to the rapid urbanization and economic transformations that reshaped Japan throughout the 20th century. Following World War II, this nostalgic tendency was revitalized as Japan grappled with the complex task of reconstructing its national identity amidst the postwar devastation.

The 1960s marked another crucial period in Japan's history, characterized by accelerated economic growth and a significant real estate boom in the areas surrounding Tokyo. As observed by Wada-Marciano, during the 1960s and 1970s, Japan experienced rapid and often uncontrolled development of agricultural lands and forests into planned suburbs. This urbanization process led to mass migrations to the capital, Tokyo, which is now the largest city in the world in terms of urban and metropolitan areas. The exodus from rural areas also resulted in a growing physical and mental distance from Nature.

In this respect, the concept of *furusato* (hometown) gained greater significance, reflecting nostalgia related to environmental destruction. This is a sentiment that reveals a longing to preserve an idealized image of the past, where Nature, once considered threatening, can now be romanticized and appreciated without its

negative aspects. Jennifer Robertson discusses how this idealization manifests in a shift in the definition of space and in the representations of natural spaces, both in cinema and popular culture. According to the author,

> [u]sing cinemographic history as a social indicator, the motivations for and contexts of nostalgia today appear to be qualitatively different than in the past. Film critic Donald Richie notes that the "new nihilism" of the 1960s, an offshoot of the high premium placed on industrialization, was accompanied by a "new nostalgia". The *furusato* theme is not new to films, but in the context of the "new nostalgia", *furusato* films suggest that it no longer is possible to return to a native place. (Robertson 507)

Alongside the growing need to return to these natural spaces, there was also an increasing environmental concern. In response to this, the *chinju no mori* movement represents a significant effort to preserve essential elements of Japan's cultural and natural heritage as an organized response to the environmental degradation observed during periods of intense urbanization and industrialization (Rots).

Calls for the preservation of sacred forests are often accompanied by nostalgic reflections on the state of Japanese society and culture. Sonoda Minoru, a Japanese scholar specializing in religious studies, Buddhism, and Japanese cultural history, for instance, explicitly linked environmental degradation to individualization, the erosion of family life, and rising crime rates, arguing that the rapid economic growth between the 1960s and 1980s inflicted significant damage on the country's natural environment through overdevelopment and pollution (Rots).

This "desire to reconnect with the past and find (or construct) a space of a lost hometown" (Foster 163–64) sparked a renewed interest in folklore and popular traditions during the 1970s and 1980s. From that point on, a trend emerged in Japanese cinema of representing Nature and forest mythology as environments for human transformation, reflecting a broader effort to re-evaluate and strengthen cultural ties to these spaces.

The film *Himatsuri* (*Fire Festival*) (1985) directed by Mitsuyo Yamaguchi is an emblematic example of this trend, exploring the complex relationship between progress and environmental preservation. The narrative unfolds in a small village facing the dilemma of building a new road to facilitate access to a marine park. Noboru Tomonari highlights that Tatsuo, one of the central characters, has an intimate connection with the mountain and with the *kami*, the spirit he believes inhabits the area, which leads him to vehemently oppose the road's construction. This opposition manifests a deep expression of his spiritual connection with Nature, and, according to Tomonari, symbolizes the tensions between tradition and modernity in Japanese society.

On the other hand, Richie ("Transgression") argues that *Himatsuri* confuses the viewer by not establishing a clear connection with ecological issues. He suggests that environmental concerns in the film serve merely as a pretext to introduce the true central theme of the work. Richie proposes that ecological issues are used more to explore deeper themes related to the relationship between humans and

Nature and the spirituality associated with it, rather than treating ecology as an end.

On the other hand, Tomonari argues that the film addresses ecology in an indirect way, by situating the human and natural conflict within a Japanese spiritual and cultural context. Tatsuo's opposition to modernization and his subsequent downfall can be seen as a response to modern society's inability to reconcile progress with ancestral traditions.

In *Himatsuri*, as discussed by Richie ("Tractate"), the forest is depicted as a divine entity, endowed with a power capable of retaliating against the destructive actions of modern man. This representation reaches its climax in a cathartic scene where Nature manifests its unyielding presence, highlighting the intersection between the sacred and the mundane. Richie describes this scene as a transcendent encounter between the protagonist Tatsuo and the goddess who embodies Nature. In the sacred forests of Kumano—which, according to Tomonari, still carry the intact culture of the past in their sensibilities and rituals such as the fire festival (*himatsuri*)—as the loggers rush to fell trees before an impending storm, Tatsuo lingers, as if sensing what is to come. When the storm finally subsides, he embraces a large tree (Figure 3) and the sun emerges, creating a silence laden with meaning. This event is described by Richie as the appearance of the goddess (*Kami*), an invisible yet undeniable manifestation of natural power.

Fig. 3. Frame from the movie *Himatsuri* (1985), by Mitsyo Yamaguchi.

Another work that expressively illustrates the conflict experienced by modern man when confronting the rural world is *Wood Job! Kamusari Nana Nichijo* (*Wood Job! The Easy Life in Kamusari*) (2014), a film adaptation of Shion Miura's novel *Kamusari naa naa Nichijo* (2009). This dramatic comedy explores the contrast between urban and rural life in Japan, blending humor with reflections on the human connection to Nature.

The narrative follows Yuki Hirano, a young high school boy graduate from Tokyo who enrolls in a forestry training program in a small rural village in the mountains and begins working in the logging industry. From the outset, Yuki faces significant difficulties adapting to rural life, which starkly contrasts with the urban environment he was accustomed to. He struggles not only with the intense physical challenges of forestry work but also with the local culture and traditions, which are entirely unfamiliar to him.

Over time, however, Yuki begins to develop a deep respect for the forest and the community surrounding it. As noted by Kazuhiko Takeuchi, this transformation is emblematic, new *satoyama* ideal, which refers to transitional zones between wilderness and cultivated areas that evokes a nostalgic representation of Japan's rural past. These zones symbolize an ecological paradise where harmony between humans and the natural world is achievable (Takeuchi).

In this context, the figure of the *Kami* emerges. In *Wood Job!*, the presence of this mythological entity is exemplified in a scene where Yuki is guided by this divinity, metamorphosed into the figure of Naoki—the young woman he has affection for—to find a lost boy in the forest during a festival. The film suggests that the *Kami* assisted him after Yuki made an offering to a statue representing this deity by the riverside. This event indicates a reciprocal relationship between humans and deities, where devotion and respect for spiritual traditions can attract divine benevolence.

The depiction of the *Kami* as an active agent interacting with human characters reinforces the importance of ritual practices and spirituality in Japanese rural life. Festivals, such as the fire festival portrayed in both *Wood Job!* and *Himatsuri*, symbolize moments of interaction between the human and spiritual worlds, taking place in these sacred spaces, or *chinju no mori*.

On the other hand, Japanese animations explore the relationship between humans and Nature, addressing the conflicts that arise from this interaction while delivering an environmental critique that is both powerful and subtle. This is evident in films like *Pom Poko* (1994) by Isao Takahata, and most notably, in the works of Hayao Miyazaki.

Miyazaki, through films like *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbor Totoro*) (1988) and *Mononoke Hime* (*Princess Mononoke*) (1997), constructs narratives that emphasize the importance of harmony between humanity and Nature, while highlighting the environmental damage caused by industrialization and unchecked progress. As McDonald (*Reading*) argues, by 1988, parents were concerned that their children were gradually losing their connection with Nature. Miyazaki's works address these concerns; however, their strength does not lie in explicit social critique, but rather in the harmonious fusion of two worlds: the real and the imaginary. According to the author,

> the anime fantasy enrichment is set against a realistic backdrop throughout. Miyazaki takes full advantage of naturalistic detail, as in his careful attention to seasonal detail. He also makes sure that pictorial effects evoke a specifically Japanese response by dwelling on the surviving evidence of the country lifestyle. Rice paddies, an unpaved country road, a roadside

bus stop—details such as these, familiar for time out of mind, speak for
the director's childhood memories of 1950s country life. (McDonald, *Reading*
179–80)

Tonari no Totoro celebrates Nature, childhood imagination, and the simplicity
of rural Japanese life. The film's narrative is imbued with elements of Shintoism,
particularly in its reverence for the spirits of forest mythology, which are seamlessly
integrated to captivate both children and adults. Totoro, the forest spirit after whom
the film is named, is a large, friendly, protective, and benevolent creature who
interacts with the children and assists them in times of need. This emblematic
figure not only represents the connection between the human and natural worlds
but also symbolizes the importance of respecting and preserving the environment.

The work is widely praised for its detailed animation, serene and contemplative
atmosphere, and affectionate, nostalgic portrayal of childhood—much of which is
attributed to its setting in the *chinju no mori*. In the film, Totoro resides in a
small grove surrounded by ancient trees, a location clearly identified as a Shinto
sanctuary due to the presence of a *shimenawa* (sacred rope) and a small *torii*
(gate). According to Rots, Totoro acts as a protective spirit within this space—
exemplified when he rescues little Mei after she gets lost—thereby popularizing
various notions associated with the *chinju no mori*, even though the specific term
is not used in the film.

As Timothy Iles affirms, an emblematic scene in the film that illustrates the
role of Nature and the relationship between humans and forest spirits is when
a snail slowly climbs the stem of a flower, set against a deep blue sky. This
seemingly simple scene carries significant weight in the viewer's perception of
harmony among humans, Nature, and *kami*. The absence of human figures does
not diminish the feeling of safety and peace; rather, it intensifies the notion
of a supportive and observant community comprised of these elements. This
lack of human presence allows the viewer to experience a moment of rest and
contemplation, emphasizing the natural harmony that the film seeks to convey
and deepen immersion in the idealized world created by Miyazaki, as Iles notes.

On the other hand, the animations *Pom Poko* (1994) and *Mononoke Hime* (1997)
provide a direct critique of modernity and industrialization, emphasizing the neg-
ative impacts of these human forces on animals and forest beings. Each of these
works places environmental preservation at the center of its discussions, present-
ing the conflict between Nature and the destructive actions of humanity as a true
battle for survival.

In *Pom Poko*, the narrative unfolds in the outskirts of Tokyo during the 1960s,
a period marked by rapid urban expansion that led to the deforestation of vast
forested areas, leaving the *tanuki* (raccoon dogs) homeless. Through this story,
we follow the journey of these animals in their attempt to restore the forest
that has been taken from them. Takahata blends the fantastic with traditional
Japanese elements to construct a critique that Todd Andrew Borlik describes as
"carnivalesque" regarding the devastating impact of modernity on the environment.

Borlik explores how *Pom Poko* utilizes nostalgia for a pre-industrialized Nature to highlight the loss and damage caused by modernization.

Furthermore, Borlik argues that the metamorphosis of the*tanuki* into human beings serves as a metaphor for the flexibility, adaptation, and resilience of Nature. By citing the Russian philosopher, literary theorist, and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin, Borlik draws a connection between Renaissance grotesque and the universe of *Pom Poko*, suggesting that Takahata's work embodies a proto-ecological vision derived from Shintoism and Japanese Buddhism, where Nature is animated and endowed with spirit, and where forms are seen as illusions, allowing everything to blend and transform—a hallmark of Japanese animations that explore the mythological, spiritual, and fantastic realms.

Therefore, rather than solely engaging with the ancient form of Shinto or passively drawing from Shinto worldviews, these movies suggest the converse. Rots extensively underscores Miyazaki's main role in creatively reimagining spirits, deities, and traditional landscapes. Through this creative process, Miyazaki actively contributes to the construction of Shinto as an ancient tradition deeply rooted in veneration for Nature, thus fostering an inherent link between *kami* (deities) and environmental concerns. This notable phenomenon is vividly exemplified in his work *Mononoke Hime*, for example.

In this narrative, ancient forests teem with deities and spirits whose transformation into aggressive entities is a direct consequence of the destruction of their natural habitats. Critically assessing the concepts of 'progress' and the exploitation of natural resources that accompany modern industrialization, the film serves as an allegory, portraying an existential conflict between human society, estranged by its reliance on modern technology and its exploitation of Nature, and the animal deities whose existence is interwoven with the forest for their sustenance (Rots). The work addresses the human attempt to subjugate the environment, which symbolizes the erosion of traditional Japanese values, represented by the guardian spirits of the forests.

Iles argues that, in the same way, *Mononoke Hime* centralizes themes of environmental restoration, and made it possible through the sacrifices of young characters. This work positions Nature as a vital and redemptive element that must be protected by the youth, seen as the guardians of a more harmonious future. It portrays technology as a potentially destructive force threatening the natural balance while exploring individual agency as essential to "saving" the community from its own transgressions, as Iles affirms.

In *Mononoke Hime*, the forest serves as a site where the sacred and profane intersect and conflict. Susan Napier highlights the film's opening, which portrays the non-human realm through panoramic shots of mist-covered mountains and dense forests inhabited by ancient gods. Rather than a mystical refuge, the forest is depicted as a space of resistance and confrontation, embodying the tension between natural forces and human intervention. This shift from initial serenity to violent disruption underscores the forest's active role as a dynamic force responding to external threats, as observed by Napier.

Iles highlights Miyazaki's cinematography in *Mononoke Hime*, which creates a connection between the viewer and the natural environment depicted in the film. A particularly significant scene occurs when San, or Princess Mononoke, leads Ashitaka, the film's hero, to the healing lake in the forest, the domain of Shishigami, the Deer God. According to Iles, the camera adopts Ashitaka's perspective, revealing to the viewer the wonder and serenity of the natural setting. This cinematographic technique transforms Ashitaka's reverence for the place and the *kami* into a shared experience for the viewer. Iles affirms that Miyazaki employs low angles and detailed visual composition to emphasize the grandeur of the forest, presenting it as an inviolable sanctuary, protected from the threats of the outside world.

Mononoke Hime significantly incorporates elements of Japanese mythology, including *kami*, temples, *torii*, and rituals, as well as mythological figures like *yōkai* and forest animals. A striking example of this mythological integration in the film is the figure of the forest protector, an entity formed by a mixture of various animals, symbolizing the union of Nature's beings as guardians of this sacred place (Figure 4). This figure illustrates what Borlik discusses about the fantastical world, where everything is possible within animated narratives, allowing for the coexistence and interaction of mythological and fantastic elements with the real world.

Fig. 4. Frame from the movie *Mononoke Hime* (1997), by Hayao Miyazaki.

Although Miyazaki frequently denies a direct connection to Shintoism, as discussed by Rots, his works undeniably exhibit the influence of Japanese mythology and spirituality. Within Japanese culture, mythical beings—such as *kami* (spirits or deities associated with natural elements) or *yūrei* (restless spirits from folklore)—are integral to regional traditions and beliefs. These beings, while not necessarily tied to formal religious practices, play a significant role in shaping Japanese moral consciousness and the cultural interaction with the environment.

Midori Kagawa-Fox emphasizes that while Miyazaki's films are often categorized as "animated cartoons," their narratives reflect a profound Japanese moral framework and a strong emphasis on respect for Nature. This unique blend of cultural spirituality and environmental consciousness has earned Miyazaki global recognition, influencing both filmmakers and scholars. Films *Mononoke Hime* and *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* have garnered critical acclaim, with *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* winning the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003 and described by Roger Ebert as "one of the finest of all animated films". These achievements highlight Miyazaki's skill in integrating spiritual and environmental themes, situating his work within a broader global context. Comparisons have been drawn to narratives like James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), which explores ecological concerns, and, as Anna Sophia Poncinelli Garcia Rodrigues et al. note, to the positive psychology present in Pete Docter's Pixar films, which similarly emphasize human potential and emotional growth.

The distinctiveness of Miyazaki's films also lies in presenting a uniquely Japanese lens on global issues. Hisaaki Wake argues that Miyazaki's ecological approach is integrated in a way that does not impose an ideological conversion on the viewer but rather invites reflection on the coexistence and reconciliation of opposing forces. In his animations, Miyazaki often presents Nature and humanity as conflicting entities, but also as forces that can find balance, symbolizing this reconciliation through the magic of animation, according to Wake.

In a similar vein, the film *Hotarubi no Mori e* (*To the Forest of Firefly Lights*) (2011), which remains relatively understudied in the context of Japanese animated mythology, uses the traditional *torii* as a symbolic portal. This is akin to *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, where such a passage is represented by a bridge, facilitating the character's *kamikakushi*, or transition from the mundane world to the sacred realm (Figure 5). Okuyama (29–30) highlights the concept of "divine abduction, or kami-kakushi", linking it to Shinto myths and the folklore of *marebito* (a visiting deity) and *iruikon* (interspecies marriage).

Directed by Takahiro Omori, *Hotarubi no Mori e* exhibits strong connections to Japanese forest mythology, notably through the presence of mythical beings such as *yōkai* and folkloric practices, like the *matsuri* (festival). The narrative revolves around Hotaru Takegawa, a young girl who visits her uncle every summer in rural Japan. During one of these visits, she becomes lost in a forest, known among the locals as the "dwelling place of mountain spirits and *yōkai*". Within the forest, Hotaru encounters Gin, a human-like entity who wears a mask. He helps her find her way out, but Hotaru's curiosity and fascination compel her to return in the following days and every summer thereafter, fostering a friendship marked by the impossibility of physical contact. Gin is bound by a curse from the mountain god, which dictates that he will vanish forever if touched by a human.

In the first interaction between Hotaru and Gin in *Hotarubi no Mori e* Gin warns Hotaru: "You must not come here. This is the forest where the mountain gods and *yōkai* live. If you enter here, you will be lost forever" (Omori). This statement underscores the sacredness of the forest and the perception of a threshold between

Fig. 5. Frame from the movie *Hotarubi no Mori e* (2011), by Takahiro Omori.

the human world and the spiritual realm. At this moment, the forest is presented as a liminal space where the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds are thin.

The presence of *yōkai* reinforces this atmosphere of mystery and sanctity. Gin, raised by these beings, is a living symbol of the reconnection between humans and mythological creatures, showing how these elements act as mediators between the human and spiritual worlds. As Foster asserts, *yōkai* can transform into multivalent metaphors through which various themes can be explored, implicitly questioning the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Among the *yōkai* that inhabit the forest, a *kitsune* (fox) stands out, warning Hotaru not to touch Gin. Traditionally, *kitsune* are seen as protectors; they guard shrines, homes, and families, warding off evil spirits and bringing good fortune, as Okuyama affirms. However, they can also be seen as shapeshifters and tricksters when they wish.

Kitsune, like *tanuki* and *kaibyō*, are known for their transformative abilities, often associated with the term *bakemono* ("things that change"), which underscores their mutable and illusory nature (Foster). Foster notes that while visual representations attempt to fix the appearances of kitsune and tanuki, this fixity is undermined by their intrinsic connection to transformation. These *yōkai* defy stable forms, embodying change and ambiguity, and challenging fixed perceptions of identity and form.

In *Hotarubi no Mori e*, the kitsune's relationship with Gin reflects the duality of human and spiritual interactions in Japanese mythology, where spiritual beings can be both protective and dangerous. As Foster explains, Shinto emphasizes veneration of *kami* and the need for harmony with these forces, while Buddhism focuses on impermanence, interconnectedness, and karma. Despite their distinct foundations, these traditions often overlap in Japanese narratives, creating a syn-

cretic perspective. This synthesis shapes *Hotarubi no Mori e*, where the interplay of spiritual and natural realms underscores the importance of balance and reverence in human interactions with the spiritual world.

Another important aspect to highlight is the connection between forest mythology beliefs and religious and cultural practices: the *matsuri*. *Matsuri* is the name given to the Japanese festivals that serve to preserve and transmit cultural traditions and local histories. For instance, in *Hotarubi no Mori e*, Gin invites Hotaru to participate in the *Yōkai no Matsuri* an annual festival organized by the spirits within the forest, where, occasionally, humans—usually children who venture into the forest—also take part (Figure 6). During this festival, the *yōkai* disguise themselves as humans, reflecting human festive practices where people often dress as these mystical beings. This intertwining of forest spirits' traditions with human festival customs illustrates a fascinating cultural exchange, where, once again, the line between the supernatural and the human becomes fluid and permeable.

Fig. 6. Frame from the movie *Hotarubi no Mori e* (2011), by Takahiro Omori.

The concept of *matsuri* is deeply rooted in Japan's religious and cultural practices, particularly in Shintoism, where festivals take place at shrines. Napier emphasizes that *matsuri* is essential to Japanese religious and social life, functioning as a celebration in the "realm of play and ritual". Much like Western carnivals, *matsuri* creates a liminal space where controlled chaos allows for extraordinary behavior, liberating people from the constraints of everyday order. These festivals often include rituals that honor the *kami*, seeking their blessings and protection.

Therefore, it can be asserted that Japanese cinematic works, influenced by the new ecological perspectives emerging in the 1980s and continuing into the contemporary era, intricately explore the symbolic and functional roles of Nature within their narratives. These films reaffirm the importance of what Wada-Marciano

(*Japanese Cinema*) describes as the "cinema of place", emphasizing regionality and intertwining mythology with space in alignment with the concept of satoyama. These sacred forest spaces, or chinju no mori, are imbued with mythological dimensions that reflect Japanese aesthetics and philosophy. As Rots observes, these forests—ideally primordial and untouched—serve as living connections to the mythic past, embodying a timeless bond between humanity and Nature.

From this perspective, post-1980s narratives frequently portray the forest as a sacred space enriched with mythological characters and elements, symbolizing a return to origins. These settings provide an escape from urban life, enabling a reconnection with tradition and a pathway to renewal. The consistent focus on young protagonists in these stories assigns them the role of safeguarding and revitalizing Japanese cultural heritage, illustrating a generational effort to bridge the past and the future. By emphasizing cultural roots, these cultivate a sense of belonging, cultural identity, and reconnection with ancestral heritage.

Final Remarks

THIS study has centered on a comparative analysis of forest mythology in Japanese cinema, tracing its evolution across eras to reflect shifting cultural, spiritual, and environmental paradigms. Early films such as *Ugetsu Monogatari* and *Onibaba* depict the forest as a liminal space of moral and existential tension. Here, its enigmatic qualities serve as a mirror for human frailty, a stage where struggles unfold and karmic retribution takes root. In contrast, later works like *Mononoke Hime* and *Pom Poko* reimagine these spaces with an ecological lens, embedding them within narratives that emphasize environmental stewardship and cultural preservation. This transformation reveals a broader shift in perspective: from portraying the forest as a realm of fear and otherness to venerating it as a sanctuary of renewal and interconnection.

By juxtaposing these periods, I have notice how earlier films often cast forests as sites of punishment and spiritual reckoning. These works explored the darker facets of religious beliefs, such as Shinto's sacred spaces and *kami* or Buddhist notions of karmic justice, to expose humanity's moral failings and environmental negligence. The mid-20th century cinema, particularly from the 1950s to the 1970s, delved into these liminal spaces with a profound sense of ambiguity. Forests in these narratives became stages for latent hostility and moral dilemmas, reflecting tensions between human greed and spiritual forces. Films from this period also grappled with the impermanence of life, highlighting the fragile equilibrium between human desires and the sacredness of nature.

In more contemporary works, this spiritual and ecological interplay is reframed. Shinto's reverence for nature spirits remains a foundational theme, while Buddhist concepts of balance and interconnectedness enrich the portrayal of forests as vital, sacred entities. These cinematic narratives echo societal changes—rising urbanization, environmental degradation, and an increasing awareness of humanity's precarious relationship with the natural world. As McDonald (*Reading*) aptly ob-

serves, this shift parallels Japan's post-war trajectory, transitioning from anxieties of cultural loss to a renewed commitment to ecological harmony.

This study has also illuminated how mythological symbols such as *kami, yōkai, yūrei,* and *matsuri* are preserved and reinterpreted to address contemporary concerns. For example, the demon mask in *Onibaba* embodies traditional fears and moral ambivalence, while the guardian spirits in *Mononoke Hime* serve as emblems of resistance against environmental exploitation. These evolving representations underscore the enduring adaptability of mythology, bridging ancient traditions with modern ecological and cultural discourses.

In analyzing these narratives, I argue that in Japanese cinema forests and mythological symbols emerge as dynamic, symbolic realms where the sacred and mundane converge, offering a space for filmmakers to navigate themes of cultural identity, moral decline, and ecological responsibility. Also, the recurring presence of youthful protagonists in contemporary films in this environment further emphasizes the generational imperative to reconcile tradition with modernity and envision a sustainable future.

This comparative study has achieved its aim of tracing the thematic and stylistic evolution of forest mythology in Japanese cinema. By highlighting these transformations, it has demonstrated how film serves as both a vessel for cultural memory and a reflective medium for ecological consciousness. At a time of global environmental challenges, these cinematic narratives resonate far beyond Japan, offering a universal call to reconnect with the natural world.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining the reception of these themes among international audiences or exploring their manifestation in other art forms. As cinema continues to evolve, the representation of forest mythology will likely remain an essential and evocative element, reminding us of the profound interconnectedness between humanity and nature.

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