

A Poetic History

ISLAMIC AND JAPANESE
PARALLELS IN FILM

DAVID SANDER

BLOOMSBURY

A Poetic History

A Poetic History

Islamic and Japanese Parallels in Film

David Sander

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1359 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2026

Copyright © Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2026

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790.

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: HB: 978-1-6669-3134-1

ePDF: 979-8-216-25500-0

eBook: 978-1-9787-7089-8

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Complete Filmography	vi
Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction	1
1 Hell, History, and Perpetual Creation	17
2 A Poetic History: The Wanderer	49
3 Film and Poetic Transformation of Trauma	87
4 Monstrosity, the Beloved, and Nature	119
5 Soul and the Sword	151
6 No Riddle but Time	193
7 Love That Tames	219
8 Surviving Totality	247
Bibliography	275
Index	286
About the Author	295

Complete Filmography

Bab'Aziz (Nacer Khemir, 2005)

Baran (Majid Majidi, 2001)

The Clay Bird (Tareque Masud, 2002)

The Color of Paradise (Majid Majidi, 1999)

Death of a Tea Master (Kei Kumai, 1989)

The Dove's Lost Necklace (Nacer Khemir, 1991)

The Forty-Seven Ronin (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1941)

Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931)

Gav (The Cow) (Dariush Mehrjui, 1969)

Godzilla (Ishiro Honda, 1954)

The Great Yokai War (Takashi Miike, 2005)

Harakiri (Masaki Kobayashi, 1962)

Iron Island (Mohammad Rasoulof, 2005)

Kabuki Akadousuzunosuke (Kikunojo Onoe, 2022)

Kwaidan (Masaki Kobayashi, 1964)

The Lizard (Kamal Tabrizi, 2004)

Moby Dick (John Huston, 1956)

My Neighbor Totoro (Hayao Miyazaki, 1988)

Onibaba (Kaneto Shindo, 1964)

Princess Mononoke (Hayao Miyazaki, 1997)

Ran (Akira Kurosawa, 1985)

- Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950)
- Rikkyu* (Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1989)
- A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011)
- Seven Samurai* (Akira Kurosawa, 1954)
- Shin Godzilla* (Hideaki Anno & Shinji Higuchi, 2016)
- Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001)
- A Time for Drunken Horses* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2000)
- Ugetsu* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953)
- Umoregi (The Buried Forest)* (Kohei Oguri, 2005)
- Wanderers of the Desert* (Nacer Khemir, 1984)
- The White Meadow* (Muhammad Rasoulof, 2009)
- The Wild Pear Tree* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2018)
- The Wind Rises* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2013)
- Yojimbo* (Akira Kurosawa, 1961)

Acknowledgments

In gratitude to my parents, ancestors of all kinds, teachers, and students.

Special thanks to Shaykh and Anne
to Ana Lúcia, Yousuf, Noura, Becki, and Mark
to my students, colleagues, and friends
to our extended families
to all those from whom I have learned love.

I'm grateful to the makers of the films discussed in these pages. And to Carole Matthews, my high school film studies teacher. To Bill Ventimiglia for help with Jungian insights, to my colleague Christopher Ives for his reading and help with Japanese translations, to Michael Chikuzen Gould for shakuhachi instruction and lore, to Nicholas Dunham who helped with proofreading, editing, documentation, and film images, to Becki Sander, Elliott Bazzano, Iliona Khalili, and Don Davies for their reading and comments, to Jessie Tepper at Bloomsbury for encouraging and helping to improve this book, and to many others too numerous to name. You are not forgotten.

Introduction

A Strange Pairing

This book explores film's capacity to be a space in between, an interspace, where we can hear each other, hear the cries of persons undergoing great suffering, across boundaries of time, language, and culture. It can spur us to embark on a journey which will make us fugitives from the familiar routines of accumulated indifference. Ultimately, film, along with other great human expressive traditions, has the potential to awaken elusive capacities for healing.

Put another way, film is like the polished shield of the hero Perseus. It is a kind of looking glass, through which a blurred image of totality appears. Seen directly, the face of totality would turn one to stone. Film, like dream, like poetry, may allow our psyche to survive an encounter with the Gorgon.

In this moment, I take stock of my life, and my childhood yearnings are still there, attached to strings that weave through the years and decades of my life. Before most other redirecting influences in my life, I have loved movies. I have always found film to be a reference point for the unsayable, and the oceanic feeling of being alive in time, and innately linked to other lives that I had never before imagined. Certain films prompted me to take long and slow journeys of immersion into new worlds. They humbled my theory-wielding mind, soothing the dry itch and confinements of rationality. A collection made of what can be called poetic films is a nice place to camp on the slopes of the giant mountain of our moment.

Decades later, my "grown-up" job is teaching history, and it still brings me into deep questions I would like answers to. I wrestle every day with what it means to teach and learn history. Some seemingly obligatory blocks of history curriculum help to keep things pre-framed in dry, neat boxes which separate lives and times from each other, making it difficult for feeling and experience to be shared. What spills out of the frame is life and death coming inevitably toward

all, including the numbed historical spectator. Having been a fugitive from that kind of history, I have found film and other forms of creative expression to allow a lively interspace to dwell in.

A curriculum like the one I was taught in school is persistent in one thing above all: showing the human past as a linear path of “progress.” Such a story ultimately gives weight to the developments and victories leading to the status quo. We are all familiar with the standard frame for modern history, which tends to focus on dominant forces: the rising power of the nation-state, potent and innovative governing systems, the scientific establishment and capital, and the rational individual and their push into the “wilderness” and “virgin territory” of the rest of existence. According to such a framework, powerful, wealthy, and “enlightened” people may have had their squabbles and flaws, but history is essentially their story. They rightfully take up the frame.

Those who do not star as winners, righteous victims, or emblematic avengers tend to be glossed over. Their experiences of time, and their voices, may be given brief acknowledgment before being neatly stowed on the sidelines. As such, history contributes to a bunkered, siloed, rational, egocentric world where we are selectively deaf to the cries of others. In it, we can’t easily encounter difference, form bonds, or share with Others, or fall in love.

That indifference pushes aside whatever is determined to be, to use a word modified from the German philosopher Leibniz, *impossible*.¹ Impossible things have, and can have, nothing to do with each other. They cannot share a time, and have no interspace or pathway between them. It is impossible for them both to exist and be true. The space between such things is an antiseptic distance or vacuum, an apparent Nothingness, upon which conquest has always been predicated.

The “impossible” Islamic and Japanese traditions (whose historical meetings we will address in a later chapter), each in their own ways, have interrogated this apparent Nothingness through their expressive forms, especially poetry. Poetic interrogation, distinct from rational investigation, is distilled into film. Film, like poetry, emerged from the juxtaposition of images, each of which fits inside a visual or verbal frame. In this book, we will explore how poetic use of the film medium cultivates awareness of what is outside the frame and allows a healing of the riven, boxed, and framed awareness which we confuse with reality.

At the present moment many are seized by a feeling of endings of the world-as-we-have-known it, of apocalypse, in the sense of unveiling. A global pandemic

shakes almost every human being. Whole cities turn into dusty graveyards by bomb, earthquake, flood. A well-stocked and advocated Third World War looms or grinds into gear. Climate change accelerates, and with it each season's millennial ravages. Artificial intelligence seems poised to replace both education and culture, promising to boost inequality and oligarchic power with a scarcely imagined set of repressive and lethal forces. As Norman O. Brown put it, the world faces apocalypse and/or metamorphosis.²

Politically, economically, socially, we are on the brink of implosion, because we have failed to let suffering speak, which is a precondition of truth. History as it has been mediated cannot break through the numbness permeating the virtual web that has come to substitute for our collective imagination.

Why "Islamic" and "Japanese" film? Aren't these incongruous categories, one from a global religious tradition, the other from a national culture? Such a strange pairing made no difference to me as a filmgoing young person, but, as I will develop in the coming pages, provides a unique and powerful viewfinder. Each of these different and apparently impossible traditions reached into my insulated teenage life and swept it into new galaxies of difference, meaning, love, and connection. Films like the ones I explore in these pages helped set me on paths of wandering across cultural and other boundaries. Film as a medium allows us to bring diverse, even impossible images, events, ideas, and subjects together, and explore history in a fresh but also grounded manner.

Non-anthropocentric and pre-Anthropocenic cultures prepare(d) their people for encounters with an underlying and overwhelming quantum reality, through their cultivation of *poetic history*. The latter implies an endless and indeterminate interplay between things, possibilities, and the void. One of the ways human collectives have approached this interplay is through poetry. Film is a "ghost," a continuation in different form, of that foundational poetic interaction that makes communities and helps them live.

Film is a form that, like poetry, works on the principle of juxtaposition. Rather than simply achieving an end by linear progress toward a predefined point, it achieves a series of images that appear to us as motion in time. However, these unique moments are not merely subordinated to each other, but revelatory in themselves and in relationship together. They join with each other poetically side by side, rather than in a subordinated structure.

This book invites us to start paying attention to, archiving and juxtaposing our film experiences—as we might do with our dreams when we begin to suspect they have something important to tell us, but precisely in a language

we cannot immediately understand. There is a positive value in what the French philosophers like Deleuze and Derrida have called *differance/difference*. Difference means not sameness, not rational equivalence. It means unmatched, unsymmetrical juxtapositions, things that do not correspond with each other in a neat system. A blending of time frames disrupts our easily expected frame of ordinary “reality” and the difference allows the film to mediate consciousness. The “impossible” is a specialty of poetic, filmic, and oneiric (dreaming) presentation.

The body of films I explore here represents an intentionally questionable, awkward, or impossible pairing when seen from a hegemonic historical viewpoint. The films in this strange archive form a kind of temporal ornamentation, an arabesque. Arabesque forms create immersive and touchable spaces. They invite participation and contemplation because their organic patterns move free of representation and of deliberate or realist signification.³

Across this strangely inclusive panoramic film archive, which *strings through* distant imagined cultural spaces, appear figures that resonate weirdly with each other:

children, orphans, wanderers, lovers, monsters, demons, warlords, ghosts, spirits, princes, birds, camels, turtles, samurai, suicides, Sufi guides, tea masters, ruins, battles, festival floats, imams, priests, shamans, the “mad”, the impoverished, the drowned, the displaced, uncanny flute and *biwa* sounds, singers, graveyards, secret identities, blind(ed) children, torturers, victims, abdicating royals, ghost ships, trees (burned, burning, buried, blooming), sacred calligraphy, wells, apocalypses.

Uncanny resonance among unlike things is elemental not only to poetry but also to the quantum entanglement that underlies our sense of linear time, to dreams, and to unexpected togetherness among humans, and between humans and others. This is how, from the illuminated cinematic darkness, arise possibilities of solidarity and sharing that seem impossible from within the apparent historical order. Indeed, film has the potential to both reflect and create what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called the “Undercommons.”⁴ In short, the work I invite you to join in here as a reader, filmgoer, and imaginer is intended as a small contribution to the possibility of collective world renewal.

The following lines present an introduction to key terms that underlie the analysis in this book.

The Cinematic Frame and “Nothingness”

To sum up the argument at this point, films can be understood on the same level as myths, fairy tales, and dreams. That is, they reflect our sense of reality through many channels, conscious as well as unconscious. They underlie our unquestioned values and feelings, our political ideas, our relationships with the world and all its creatures. What holds true for fairy tales, as described in the words of Japanese psychologist Hayao Kawai, holds true for films. Namely, each has “two aspects, one universal to [hu]mankind and the other peculiar to the culture in which the story is told.”⁵

Now, in between the frames of a film, what is there? An initial, reflexive answer might be “nothing.” A different way of picturing it suggests that it is *everything*, because while the contents of the frame have taken specific and limited form, what is outside the frame has not yet been locked into anything particular. It is pure potential and thus all-possibility. Because we are dealing with frames and what can be discovered between them, a central analytical tool here is what is called in Arabic the *barzakh*, or interspace. The word *barzakh* means “something that stands between and separates two other things, yet combines the attributes of both.”⁶

Like the Tibetan Buddhist term *bardo*, *barzakh* is used to refer to the realm a human being enters immediately after death and before the next stage of existence, but its implications travel far beyond this meaning into spiritual ontology and psychology.⁷ In this book I will refer to the Arabic term because it is so subtly analyzed by Sufi writers.⁸ However, as we will see presently, this concept is fundamental to the spiritual topographies within the cultural and poetic traditions that underlie both Islamic and Japanese cinema. It is confirmed at many levels in the films we will explore.

As already suggested above, we are ordinarily screened by veils of separation that come from imagining the absoluteness of material appearances. The universe contains visible objects, according to this view, with empty space in between. When we remain comfortably within most cultural conditioning, we tend to think and operate as if no *barzakh* exists, that time is an iron cleaver between past, present, and future. Nobody and nothing that lived and died a year or ten thousand years ago is still alive. The future does not yet exist. In our comfort zone, entanglements between times, between the living, the dead, and the unborn, tend to be kept at a minimum threshold.

Deep suffering often brings people, and characters in films, past this threshold, but not onto an already mapped path. That is, they descend from secure places, familiar equations, and highways, and become wanderers. Here, they are extremely vulnerable, as the landscape can pull them in different directions. In one direction, time and the interspace are imagined as empty, blank, sterile, and meaningless. Given this perception, wanderers appear drawn by suffering only toward annihilation and death. Hence literal or figurative suicide is a vast social tragedy and a motif explored directly or indirectly in a surprising number of the films in our archive. In the other direction, the wanderer may discover that the *barzakh*, or the Void, or what is between the frames of a film, is not indeed empty, sterile, and blank, but full and teeming with life.

To begin to introduce aspects of Islamic views on this matter, the absence of visible form does not imply nothingness, but rather the infinite potential energy of the Divine prior to its actualization in manifest forms. In a *hadith qudsi*⁹ Allah says, “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created.”¹⁰ The creative act of Allah, and by extension that of the poet and the filmmaker, is undertaken for self-sharing, and ultimately for love. Allah’s capacity to create is among the divine qualities that form the human make-up. Particularly as expressed within the poetic and initiatory lineages of Sufism, keeping alive the spark of *poesis*, that is, perpetual and new creation, is central to the maintenance of the purpose of creation and the community’s connection to divine guidance.

In the terminology of Zen Buddhism, *mu*, or Nothingness, also does not have a nihilistic connotation. In the words of Hayao Kawai, “It is Nothing and, at the same time, Being.”¹¹ Pure “Being” only looks like nothing because it is potential energy that has not yet taken a form. The awareness of this distinction is central to Japanese aesthetics and culture. Kawai tells us that at the end of a folktale where, apparently, “nothing happens,” the audience would recognize that “the Nothingness has happened.”¹² Hence, he argues, many Japanese myths (and, by extension, films, in my view) can be understood as “Japanese folk expressions of the primordial ‘Nothingness.’”¹³ In this book we will encounter films that reveal collective, dreamed human responses to this otherwise unutterable situation. Instead of an empty void, encounters with *mu* can bring pleasure and a sense of meaning, revealing vast natural patterns in which polarities interact. As we will explore in the coming pages, the binary forces of *inga* (karmic retribution) and *zoka* (creative action) dance with each other in the subtext of many Japanese films, providing the seeds of a historical critique as well as a dynamic aesthetic space.

Core to this book is the notion that in both Japanese and Islamic tradition, creation, or *poiesis* represents a crescendo of the successful journey of the wanderer, the filmmaker, and the audience. A poem or a film, in the light of these traditional contexts, involves both a critique of history and a potentially healing metabolization of historical trauma. In sum, I approach film as an opportunity to experience, investigate, and share this fugitive, quantum, wandering, potentially therapeutic history.

The reader will notice an abundance of strands in the discussion: historical, poetic, religious, and psychological. To the extent possible, these will be introduced and explained one by one. However, because it is not purely linear, the process of weaving threads together into a tapestry cannot be realized and followed all at once. In the case of a written work, both the reader and the writer engage in weaving. Individual filaments become visible, then disappear, then appear again. The finished tapestry eventually comes into being as a whole, the internal consistency of which could only have resulted from many articulate gestures with separate strands. Similarly, patience with the breadth of subject matters in this book will help toward a rewarding moment when the threads are glimpsed in their unity. The whole would not have existed without this patience, and without all the transitions within the weaving. Indeed, patience is a, if not the, primary quality of energy acting to transform a pile of strings into a coherent vision.

That having been said, the extended journey toward a gestalt understanding is, like the path of the wanderer, never empty. In these pages we will meet a stunning array of people, perspectives, archetypes, and moments. Our film archive, not to mention its age-old poetic roots, contains within it multiple worlds or rather galaxies, to which the prose in this text can only offer an introduction. Nevertheless, not only do I hope readers will be inspired to watch films they have never seen or heard of, but also that a persistent sense of the awe and heartrending beauty embodied within these artistic creations will seep into your experience of these pages.

A Journey toward Meaning: Methods and Chapters

The following lines introduce the rest of the book in terms of, first, general style and approach. Then they go on to preview the themes of the coming chapters.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, this book is a journey through an interspace. Its manner, like that of poetry and film, is more field-making than rhetoric. As with any journey, we start out faced with unfamiliar details that cannot be sorted all at once. In this *barzakh*, we will find allusions to a large number of films, theoretical works, and past events. Of course, bits of historical information and theory that sit stored in books are as inert as unwatched films. Their potential is released by bringing them into discourse with each other and with readers. Keep in mind that in such a journey, digressions are pivotal, anecdotes are crucial, and tangents are essential. The sense of a whole among these elements emerges gradually. It needs time and the reader's persistent attention to unfold.

Because of the "strange pairing" mentioned above, a large percentage of the films discussed in this book may be unfamiliar even to eclectic filmgoers. That's not a problem in itself, since any good film book should open up new cinematic avenues for the reader. At the same time, writing about film faces the same challenge as writing about food or music: the writer explores in detail something that is not physically present, and perhaps completely unfamiliar, to the reader. No amount of words can substitute for the embodied experience of viewing a film. Historical and theoretical context can help bridge the gap, but withstanding the *barzakh* nature of the subject is of the essence. Ultimately, writer and reader must be able to enter a shared virtual space. To proceed together, they must enter into what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "poetic faith," which enables the "willing suspension of disbelief."¹⁴ That is, to begin approaching unfamiliar films the way one approaches one's own dreams. The first thing a dreamer encounters is a strange succession of images which seem random. We easily dismiss a dream upon awakening, and let it evaporate. But if we persist, the dream can lead us into associations with memories, other dreams, historical referents, myths, and other contents of the *barzakh*, which could also be called the *psychosphere*. The dream begins to vibrate with a sense of potential, though mostly unconscious, meaning. Carl Jung called such a relaxed but attentive associative process "amplification," and it is indispensable to the logic of this book.

The still photos provided in these pages are intended to help with entering into the aesthetic and intellectual atmospheres, that is, the dreamlike frequencies, of the films. In the spirit of Mr. Rogers' trolley to the Land of Make-Believe, imagine a bell sounding when discussion begins of a given film, or the traditional storyteller's phrase "There was, there was not. . ." (in Arabic, *kan ma kan*).¹⁵ This verbal doorway into a story announces the subtle entanglement between what

we consider the “real” and the virtual, the imagined. We will be going back and forth over this threshold throughout the book. Chapter titles and headings also serve as a map for the unfolding journey. Apropos of which, I will now introduce each of the chapters to come.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), inviting the reader into historical questions central to the rest of the book. The chapter is entitled “Hell, History, and Perpetual Creation,” implying that *Rashomon* allows us to enter a strange intersection of ideas. It explores an interspace or *barzakh* between “Hell” and “history.” As may be familiar to many readers, *Rashomon* presents contradictory versions of a traumatic event as narrated by various characters. Within the film, these narrations become fully developed, yet impossible, worlds unto themselves. It shows humans as unable to simply “tell the truth” of history, because of our entanglements, and conscious or unconscious complicity, with the events we are describing. If the film is mirroring the reality of the human condition at large, it confronts us with the seeming impossibility of escaping this situation.

The film moves beyond facile truism by pulling the audience into the nature of our collective entrapment in self-deception. This entrapment and, in fact, our commonplace and everyday hell are tied to the unquestioned place we tend to give to master narratives of “objective,” linear history. Such history is predicated on the myth of progress, and on our illusory separation from others, and people of distant places and times. It blinds us to our connections with a more expansive history, conceived on a different scale. Our self-deceptions may even hide our unconscious participation in cruelties, injustices, and even the problem of child abandonment, which is central to Japanese mythology as well as the sacred history of Islam.

As Chapter 1 further explores *Rashomon*’s implicit critique of linear history, it connects to the imagery of Hell in both Japanese and Islamic contexts. As a window into the deeper stores of wisdom in these traditions, the “hellish” human predicament in both Islamic and Japanese imaginaries is not restricted to the afterlife. It is this-worldly as well, and profoundly addressed in poetic and initiatory traditions. The poetic ground of history resonates with film, poetry, and other expressions of what has been called *metahistory* by Hayden White and others. As Chapter 2 ends, the whole book begins to unfold as a metahistorical dialogue in film between these two cultural and religious worlds.

Chapter 2 goes further along this path by peering into the poetic roots that underlie what we experience as “Islamic” and “Japanese” film. It explores how

poetry and history interrelate on a deep psychological level, from the Chinese *Ch'u Tz'u* canon and the pre-Islamic Arabic *qaṣīda* poets all the way up to the figure of the Ottoman poet Şeyh Galip, a contemporary of William Blake. In the midst of these threads, an overwhelming theme emerges: *the poet as an archetypal wanderer*, whose creative act of what we can call “de-framing” allows the perpetual possibility of renewal even in the midst of collapse.

As an example, the Tang-era Chinese poet Du Fu plunged from a relatively privileged social position into years of hunger, fear, and grief in the course of his displacement during the horrifically violent An Lu Shan Rebellion. He kept writing poetry throughout these experiences, and in retrospect was seen in Japan as well as in China as both the “poet historian” par excellence and indeed the “sage poet” 詩聖 (*Shisheng* in Chinese, and *Shisei* in Japanese-しせい). Generations of later scholars focused on realizing the boons Du Fu’s poetic work produced for the society. His and other Chinese influences remain essential to the story of the evolution of Japanese poetry up through the haikai master Matsuo Basho. I believe that such a manner of gifts continues to flow in poetic film.

Islamic poetic history is also explored in this chapter, in order to allow insights to come forth about the intimate relation of poetry and history latent in films discussed throughout the rest of the book. Indeed, the two traditions share astonishing parallels in terms of not only the archetypal “wandering” highlighted in a profound Qur’ānic verse but also in terms of central images through which allusions to a comprehensive historical outlook were articulated. The very fact that such images come up in poetry (later in film) throughout centuries of both Islamic and Japanese history is evidence of overlapping psychospheres: the *barzakh* again, reaching through time with its underlying, often overlooked signposts for our contemporary world.

Chapter 3 explores the metabolization of trauma through the actions of poetry and poetic film. A central image running under the surface of both poetry and film between the Islamic world and Japan is that of “ruins.” Ruins and traces are deeply connected to the understanding of the past and its meaning. Through allusions to and images of the remains of former lives, poets brought themselves and audiences to consider the human situation beyond habitual boundaries. From the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* to contemporary film, the various forms of *aṭlāl* (traces) of the lost beloved became in themselves the preoccupation of the entire poetic tradition as poets and filmmakers alike seek to make sense of a world in which we are only fleetingly aware of trace indicators of the infinite “other,” and of the reverberations of the past within the present. In Japan, a parallel theme

is that of the “buried forest” (*umoregi*), itself the title of a film explored in this chapter.

I invite the reader to ponder the ways ecstasy touches and coexists with trauma throughout this book’s archive of films. Inspired by the psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched, we explore in Chapter 3 the abandoned child as a theme that permeates cultures both historically and mythically. Abandonment is in turn the core archetype underlying psychological trauma. When we can amplify images of abandonment by juxtaposition, we find compelling parallels with the same theme in both Islamicate and Japanese cultures. The loss of love or of the beloved is of course another way of articulating this primordial trauma. It comes up repeatedly in the oneiric images in both the *qaṣīda* and its many poetic spin-offs, as well as in contemporary film. In Japanese culture this keen feeling of separation from a beloved, or from love itself, can take the form of natural phenomena, ghosts or even *yokai* (“monsters”) in the imaginal realm, connecting to the history of not only poetic forms but also Nōh and Kabuki theater.

Kalsched argues that trauma triggers a psychic immune response which seeks to preserve the individual spirit, that is, the inner treasure or essence, by overprotective means, including withdrawal, fragmentation, and shutting down the capacity for feeling and experience. This idea helps understand not only individual but also collective psychology. Kalsched’s analysis of his patient’s dreams brought him to the insight that such images appear in mythopoetic form in order to “‘outpicture’ otherwise unbearable suffering.”¹⁶ Thus, films are rich with archetypal images of the dismemberment of the psyche. In this chapter, I explore this depth and richness across a variety of films originating on each side of the *barzakh*.

Chapter 4, entitled “Monstrosity, the Beloved, and Nature,” explores ways in which apocalyptic visions stem from child abandonment. These experiences of trauma flow into nature and the surrounding world, often generating monsters and other imagery of the abject, or unbearable. The resulting films, through poetic logic, create an understanding of the past and the present in an ecological context. I start with the example of *Frankenstein* (1931). If taken as a dream, the story of a tragic artificial human awakening to consciousness composed of the severed bits of other people has enormous relevance to the inner fragmentation of modern people and their growing separation from nature.

This dynamic allows a flexible view in which to juxtapose a wide range of cultural expressions. In Islamic/Sufi culture, the Layla/Majnun myth,

springing from the same root as the *qaṣīda* and foundational for the whole range of subsequent poetry, is the story of the separation of two lovers, and the transformation of the natural world into ecstatic experience of the lost Beloved. It is at the heart of the trilogy of films by Nacer Khemir, as well as several Iranian films, like Majidi's *Baran* (2001).

Looking in parallel, Japanese anime films like *Spirited Away* (2001), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), and especially *Princess Mononoke* (1997) show multifaceted attunement to the metamorphosis of cosmic forms. Such transformation underlies the ordinary linear model we customarily inhabit, an awareness permeating Japanese culture through the *haikai* poetic tradition. The chapter goes on to include connections between the *yokai* complex in Japanese culture and films such as *Kwaidan* (1964) and *Gojira* (Godzilla) (1954). These speak to the past in terms of traumatic separation from, provocation or twisting of natural and ancestral energy through mundane human acts. In *Kwaidan*, for example, the hidden worlds of cause and effect can turn the act of simply drinking a bowl of water on a hot day into one of enormous consequence.

The films discussed in Chapter 5 ("Soul and the Sword") deal with war as a threshold of apocalyptic violence, understood by at least some of its participants and witnesses to be ushering in the "end of the world as we know it." If we look at the mythical beginnings in child abandonment, and history's subsequent "iron law of doom" which is human fixation on self-preservation, this end has been prefigured from long ago, and is inevitable. Islamic and Japanese histories of warfare are interwoven with unique dreams and metahistorical paradoxes in films ranging from the fanciful theatrical and folk contexts of *Kabuki Akadou Sozunosuke* (2021) and *Kwaidan* to the realism of *Clay Bird* (2002). The boon provided by these films is that they allow apocalyptic violence to be turned into an image, like Moses' bronze serpent. In this biblical story, the image of the snake is a medium of healing for its venomous bite. To me, the films provide evidence that a common human poetic, if not initiatory, lineage has always been essential to metabolizing trauma. To paraphrase a quote from Simone Weil, conflict appears when suffering is turned into violence. Conversely, healing becomes possible when violence transforms into suffering.

In the context of its central role in the reunification of Japan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Chapter 5 also explores the tea ceremony as Japan's core psychological, aesthetic, poetic, and political ritual. No tradition in Japanese history seems to me both so Japanese and so universal as the intertwining of the tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*) and the often bloody

world of Azuchi-Momoyama-era state politics (1568–1600). The roots of this delicate matrix reach back into the early Taoist worldview, whereby the sage as “homo politicus” is described in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*, and has reverberated in both Chinese and Japanese poetry ever since.¹⁷ The main idea being that the sage, and subsequently the tea master, embodies harmony with the Tao and as such refuses to exert an independently conceived will. Because such a person is in deep harmony with the nature of reality as it flows in the ten thousand things, that individual’s presence has a subtle but powerful influence upon the practical, visible world. The ancient *Ch’u Tz’u* poems, as well as the cinematic Japanese tea ceremony, deeply mourn a consistent pattern: the rejection of subtle poetic power in favor of the “forcing” power of military or other officials who could apparently master public affairs in a more directly visible way.

The films discussed in this chapter show that primordial acts of child abandonment, whether on screen or implied by allusion to collective memory, are involved in mass violence. Ultimately, through abundant, if subliminal, images, each film allows the audience to gaze upon the pre-manifest void, evoking the original religious crisis and journey of the tradition, and reemerge with a profoundly intimate shift in perspective.

Chapter 6 investigates ways in which film expresses “internal history” in the context of Muslim cultures.¹⁸ As such, it enquires how film can work as both Islamic art and historical contemplation. The films discussed here, Nacer Khemir’s *Wanderers in the Desert* (1984) and Muhammad Rasoulof’s *Iron Island* (2005), inhabit and explore the borderline between imagination and reality. The films in question offer an imaginal interspace between “modern” and “traditional” worlds. As such, they open up critical perspectives on the meaning of history. The chapter develops into a discussion of how each film offers a window onto differing perceptions of time, and what may be glimpsed through this window.

Chapter 7 starts as an exploration of one Japanese and two Iranian films that draw upon spiritual, artistic, and poetic roots in Japanese and Islamic history, while at the same time engaging in critiques of knowledge and power in contemporary societies.¹⁹ These films offer a chance to explore ways in which culture (as distinct from political or theological discourse) deals with problems of reform in Muslim societies. This chapter again touches upon apocalypse, as it amplifies film images with the trickster archetype in folklore, Sufi thought about leadership, and beliefs about the figure of the *Mahdī* (“the guided one” mentioned in prophetic hadith as preceding the second coming of Jesus).

Chapter 8 explores how these film traditions address whether it is possible to “Survive an Encounter with Totality.” It delves into the heart of the matter, what I am calling the “*waw* factor,” the depth of transformative poetic power in film from both cultural worlds. In this concluding chapter, I draw upon the films in Khemir’s Desert Trilogy, Kumai Kei’s *Death of a Tea Master* (1989) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s contemporary Turkish drama *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018). These films implicitly and explicitly lay out a poetic view of history in traditional language and images. The letter *waw* in Arabic is “the only letter that has its own meaning”: by itself it is simply the conjunction “and.” This deep line in Khemir’s film essentially brings the entire book together.

Waw is the Arabic “letter of the traveler,” of imagination, of divine self-disclosure (*tajalli*), and thus it is the letter of infinite possibility, quantum entanglement, the transformation of the 10,000 things, and, as the Sufi saint and prolific writer Ibn ‘Arabi said, endless creation.²⁰ In psychological terms, the means of the soul’s healing transformation into symbols, the metabolization of experience and memory into meaning.

The hope behind allowing all these elements (films, images, memories, and poetic and historical allusions) to jostle next to each other, like beads on a rosary, is an enlivened, humbled, freshly attentive practice of history, and that such a practice enables a renewed, creative solidarity among human and other beings.

Notes

- 1 See Gregory Brown, “Compossibility, Harmony and Perfection in Leibniz,” *The Philosophical Review* XCVI:2 (April 1987), 173–203.
- 2 Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- 3 Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 54.
- 4 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 22:(2 (79)), (Summer 2004), 101–15.
- 5 Hayao Kawai, *The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in the Fairy Tales of Japan*, trans. Hayao Kawai and Sachiko Reece (Thompson, CT: Spring Publications, 1996), 19.
- 6 This word is mentioned in the Qur’ān in relation to “two seas.” The seas are both joined and separated by what comes between them. (Qur’ān 55:19–20). The human imagination is such a *barzakh* between the eternal infinite and the finite moment in time. On the one hand is God and on the other is absolute nothingness. Existence is their *barzakh*. As the twelfth-century Spanish sufi Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi said,

- “There is nothing in existence but *barzakhs*.” Quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 14.
- 7 See Jennifer Green Woodhull, “The Barzakh and the Bardo: Challenges to Religious Violence in Sufism and Vajrayana Buddhism” (PhD Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2019), 10–13.
 - 8 For readers unfamiliar with the meaning of “Sufi,” here is a *very* brief introduction to this contested but important term. Sufism is a word for traditions of spiritual development in Islam. It is not distinct from Islam, nor a sect of Islam, but rather a word coined to represent the inner dynamic of the individual’s journey to Allah. Hence it can be seen as standing for the “essence of Islam.” This journey has been helped by lineages of one-on-one teachers and mentors (known as Shaykhs) reaching back to the Prophet Muhammad. It is also abundantly described in poetry, prose, music, architecture, dance, and many other arts across Islamic history.
 - 9 A non-Qur’ānic narration by the Prophet Muhammad of divine speech.
 - 10 See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 1975), 189.
 - 11 Kawai, *The Japanese Psyche*, 31.
 - 12 Kawai, *The Japanese Psyche*, 31.
 - 13 Kawai, *The Japanese Psyche*, 31.
 - 14 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “From Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV,” Poetry Foundation, accessed June 25, 2025, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69385/from-biographia-literaria-chapter-xiv>.
 - 15 Inea Bushnaq, trans. and ed., *Arab Folktales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), xv–xvii.
 - 16 Donald J. Kalsched, *The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 77.
 - 17 See Chapter Twelve “Homo Politicus,” in Toshihiko Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 457–66.
 - 18 A version of Chapter 7 was previously published in *The Journal of Religion and Film* 24:1 (2020).
 - 19 A version of Chapter 8 was previously published in *The Journal of Religion and Film* 17:2 (2013).
 - 20 As the Japanese scholar of Islam, Toshihiko Izutsu, says in the conclusion of his book, *Sufism and Taoism*, “both Ibn ‘Arabi and the Taoist sages picture the process of creation as a perpetual and constant flow. . . . nothing remains static. The world in its entirety is in fervent movement. ‘As water running in a river, which forever goes on being renewed continuously’ (Ibn ‘Arabi), the world transforms itself kaleidoscopically from moment to moment.” Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 492.

Hell, History, and Perpetual Creation

The Broken Gate

Rashomon. What does this word mean, and what does it imply? The name evokes many images, each one (seemingly) separated from the others by time:

- A large, splendid gate at the entrance of the imperial city of Kyoto, announcing the surplus of power and its ordering of the landscape.
- The same gate, but now a half-collapsed and dangerous ruin frequented only by the desperate. A site where newborns are abandoned. A dumping ground for the unnamed dead.
- The memory of a legendary place, now under modern city streets and commemorated by a municipal sign.
- The name of a classic medieval Nōh play, and a pivotal short piece of early twentieth-century Japanese fiction.
- The first Japanese film to reach a global audience, made and released within five years of the atomic bomb: *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950).

The film is so widely known that “the Rashomon effect” has entered popular discourse to mean a storytelling pattern where radically different narrations of an event jostle together, without any of them turning out to be objectively true. Here, there is no Sherlock Holmes untangling a web of lies, no master narrative that comes to rescue to tell us “what really happened.” The result is a deeply unsettling feeling of uncertainty about how, and whether, we can objectively know what happened. Because cinema has unique ways of letting the audience inhabit subjective experience, the “Rashomon effect” rightly belongs to the film age, and indeed the post-nuclear world, where the master narrative of the Newtonian universe has been broken into the strangeness of quantum physics. Let us enter this entangled and multilayered space by exploring the start of the film.

There was, there was not . . .

Two weary, impoverished men wait out a monsoon downpour under the broken eaves of a massive city gate. One is a Buddhist priest, the other a woodcutter. They have just come from giving testimony at a murder trial and are in a state of bewilderment and anguish. Their eyes are fixed in haunted stares, their jaws are slack. The film's first lines of dialogue announce the breakdown of rational comprehension. "I just can't understand it," the woodcutter repeats twice, grimacing.

A passerby joins the two under the eaves of the Gate to shelter from the rain. He takes an immediate interest when he hears them discussing this confusing case. He says in a dry manner that presumably the learned priest will be able to sort out whatever meaning is in the story. The priest does not take offense at the man's jibe, but replies slowly, in a trance-like tone: "Even Abbot Konin of the Kiyomizu Temple, though he is known for his learning, wouldn't be able to understand this."

The priest goes on to elaborate that the case in question included a murder. At this point, the newcomer (named in the script only as "Commoner")¹ scoffs with a laugh, "Only one?" One murder is hardly a remarkable event, because on any given day, "five or six bodies" can be found abandoned upstairs in the ruins of the Rashomon gate. As the scene continues, we realize that each of the three men has witnessed much collective trauma, death, and destruction. We glean from their talk that calamities have followed each other unabated, and the social order itself is breaking down. The priest intones: "Wars, earthquakes, great winds, fires, famines, plague—"

Each new year is full of disaster . . . and now every night the bandits descend upon us. I, for one, have seen hundreds of men dying, killed like animals. . . . Yet . . . even I have never heard anything as horrible as this before.²

Yet the case they just witnessed involved only one deceased victim. How can the story of a single human death so trouble these characters, who have been exposed to so many kinds of violence and trauma? Apparently, something has happened which religious doctrines, books, erudition, and even historical knowledge will not be able to grasp or explain.

It is key to note that Kurosawa, the film's director, personally witnessed the destruction of Tokyo, not once but twice. (This context will be discussed further in a coming chapter.) What could be so unique about the story of a single death in a notoriously violent medieval past? What could horrify people accustomed to horror? By posing such a puzzle at the start of the film, Kurosawa took a risk. The story would have to deliver on the promise made in its first lines of dialogue. That it did so seems to account for the film's global success. The Golden Lion

prize from the Venice International Film Festival brought Japanese cinema onto the world stage, even as the country was still emerging from vast destruction.

What they have seen has put the priest and woodcutter in a broken world, a state of *aporia*, where rational meaning is shattered. Yet they each use different words to describe their feelings. The priest names his sense of ultimate, inexpressible horror, while the woodcutter only repeats blankly that he “can’t understand” what has happened. We will come back to this key difference in their reactions presently. The commoner, for his part, pries for details with a sardonic tone. In fact, he bluntly states he has taken an interest in the stories only to relieve boredom as he waits out the rain. He is now a thirdhand witness, and as with many students marking time in required history classes, the narrated events appear at best a minor curiosity that bears little relevance to him.

As the woodcutter begins to tell what he has seen and heard, we follow the camera’s traveling shots into the forest where the events took place. There has been a deadly encounter between a well-known, violent bandit and a samurai leading the reins of a horse on which his wife is riding. The woodcutter comes upon the woman’s personal effects scattered among the bushes, and a few steps further, finds the samurai lying dead.

In the extended flashback, we see the woodcutter experience all that he says happened as he came upon the crime scene. However, as he recounts the start of the trial, the events are soon also retold through other eyes as well. Soon we understand that each of the key figures—the dead man, his wife, and the bandit—voices radically different versions of the events. So far this is just what we would expect at a trial. Hardly a cause for horror.

The bandit, the famous Tajomaru, clearly relishes the attention paid to him at the trial. He tells the story as a towering sexual exploit that exalts his reputation as a swordsman without making him a cold-blooded murderer. He describes how, after waking from sleep beside a forest path and being strongly attracted to a passing woman accompanied by her samurai husband, he hatches and executes his plan to have sex with her without killing the man. Through a ruse, he succeeds in tying up the man and then approaches the woman, who struggles against him but then is apparently seduced by him into willing sex. In the bandit’s telling, the woman then demands that the two men fight over her to restore her honor. Tajomaru releases the samurai from his bonds, and the two fight with swords until the samurai is killed. At that point, the bandit says he found the woman had disappeared during the fight, which troubles him not at all. “She turned out to be just like any other woman. I didn’t even look for her.”



Figure 1.1 Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Rashomon* (8:31).

After the series of flashbacks enacting Tajomaru's story, we return to the three men waiting out the rain in the shelter of Rashomon gate. The woodcutter abruptly states that the bandit's story was a lie. A brief dialogue ensues that highlights the commoner's cynical view of humanity.

"Well, men are only men," he says. "That's why they lie. . . . They can't tell the truth, not even to themselves." The priest speaks up, voicing the mercy and faith in humanity that underlies his religious belief, to which he is desperately trying to cling. "That may be true. But it's because men are so weak. That's why they lie. That's why they must deceive themselves."

The commoner's response announces his view of history. "I don't mind a lie. Not if it's interesting. . . . Look, everyone wants to forget unpleasant things, so they make up stories. It's easier that way." Thus, he remains a spectator, and has no qualms with a false story as long as it entertains him. Indeed, any account of the past will involve denial and lies. Corruption is universal to the human condition. This is because, from the commoner's view, we are already living in Hell.

Hell . . . and History

The unnamed woman's version of the story is enacted next, followed by that of her husband, the dead samurai, speaking through the words of a medium engaged at the trial. Each version delivers the intense subjective feelings and, in fact, violence, of the narrator. Ironically, each storyteller identifies her- or himself as the one who wielded the blade that killed the man. After each flashback, we hear from the woodcutter, who from the beginning has professed his inability to "understand" the events, yet condemns each version as a lie. To prove this, he says, both the woman and the dead samurai had claimed that he was killed with the woman's pearl-handled knife. The woodcutter, who says that he observed the whole event, claims the man was killed with a sword.

We still may be thinking that this is a standard whodunit, and wonder where any particular hellishness might be in the story. Up to now, the woodcutter has appeared to be a neutral and uninvolved observer of the crime. But the commoner now takes a special interest in hearing the woodcutter's version. He says, looking at him with a dark gleam in his eye, "yours seems the most interesting of all these stories." The priest, who has visibly suffered at each repetition of the events, begs not to hear another retelling. The commoner replies that "Stories like this

are ordinary enough now.” They confirm for him his low view of humanity. To him, humans are such an abject lot that they frighten away the *oni* (demons), a Japanese archetype we shall return to in coming chapters. “I heard that demons used to live in the castle here by the gate, but they all ran away, because *what men do now* horrified them so.” (emphasis added)

This line holds a key to the depth of the film. While each of the direct participants tells a story that is incompatible, indeed impossible, with the versions told by the other two, the second and thirdhand witnesses (the priest, the woodcutter, and the commoner) are interpreters who remain at some remove from the events. They can say nothing whatsoever about the passions in the hearts of the woman, the samurai, and the bandit. What they wrestle with is the meaning of the story in relation to the fate of humanity at large. “What men do now” has gone beyond what humans did in the past and has surpassed what even the demons can withstand. A cosmic unveiling, an apocalypse, is coming.

The woodcutter fills out his version next, and the commoner casts doubts on its truth as well. “I don’t tell lies,” the woodcutter answers back sharply. The priest’s haunted face shows his deep anxiety as he reveals why the situation is an ordeal of anguish for him. “If men do not tell the truth, do not trust one another, then the earth becomes a kind of hell.” That is, Hell is not this world’s past violence and trauma in themselves. It is the endless veils of alienation and denial within the interpreters and tellers of the past. The commoner replies, “You are right. The world we live in is a hell.”

We are nearing the end of the film. The debate is interrupted when a baby cries out from offscreen. The men rush to find it, and the commoner runs toward the noise, but not to help the child. He quickly grabs whatever he can from it, in this case its swaddling clothes, and prepares to run off. The woodcutter catches and grapples with him, shouting that he is “evil.” The commoner yells back that it is the infant’s parents who are to blame for abandoning it. It is so easy to see the thinness of the commoner’s excuse that we are still ready to identify the woodcutter as the moral voice.

The woodcutter yells, “Brute! . . . All men are selfish and dishonest. They all have excuses. The bandit, the husband . . . you!” The commoner now releases a bombshell he has apparently been waiting to drop:

And you say you don’t lie! That’s just funny. Look, you may have fooled the police, but you don’t fool me. . . . That pearl-inlay handle that the bandit said was so valuable? Did the earth open up and swallow it?³