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Erin Schoneveld

Haverford College, eschonevel@haverford.edu

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Article

Naomi Kawase's "Cinema of Place"

Erin Schoneveld

Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures and Visual Studies, Haverford College, Haverford, PA 19041, USA; eschonevel@haverford.edu

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Abstract: This article evaluates contemporary filmmaker Naomi Kawase's (b. 1969–) status within Japan's film industry as well as her place among women directors. Using Kawase's three award winning features *Suzaku* (Moe no suzaku, 1997), *Shara* (Sharasōju, 2003), and *Mogari* (Mogari no mori, 2007) as the basis of my analysis, I examine the way in which these films illuminate the construction of Kawase's female authorship in relation to a specific location. While Kawase has made a number of critically and commercially successful films since 2007, I limit my discussion to her early narrative works set in Nara, Japan in order to illuminate the significance of the international film festival apparatus in establishing and upholding the discourse of auteurism in relation to regional identity. Through my analysis I argue that Kawase successfully negotiates this discourse through a strategy of self-promotion that emphasizes a "cinema of place" within the broader context of international film festivals such as Cannes. Kawase's "cinema of place" ultimately allows her to rearticulate the meaning of female authorship within an art cinema context by representing a new national cinema that challenges the structures and boundaries of Japan's studio system.

Keywords: Naomi Kawase; cinema of place; women directors; art cinema; international film festivals; female authorship; auteur

1. Introduction

I've got the potential to do it . . . After Kurosawa and Ōshima, I think Kawase will be the next internationally known name among this generation [of Japanese filmmakers].¹

—Naomi Kawase

Naomi Kawase (b. 1969–) is regarded by many as Japan's leading female filmmaker, winning the Cannes Camera d'Or in 1997 for her debut feature length film *Suzaku*, the Cannes Grand Jury Prize for her second feature *Shara* in 2003, the Cannes Grand Prix in 2007 for her third feature *Mogari no mori* (The Mourning Forest), and the Carrosse d'Or prize in 2009 for lifetime achievement.² While some critics maintain that Kawase tends to shy away from the media spotlight, it is clear that she is extremely aware of her public image as well as the conscious construction of her persona within national and international discourses of Japanese cinema. Kawase is not the first female film director to come out of Japan, however, she is considered one of the most successful and is on her way to becoming the most prolific. In the twelve years since her provocative statement Kawase has continued making films—both documentary and feature—with a body of work that totals thirty-eight to date. Most recently in October 2018, she was appointed to direct the official film of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic

¹ Kawase made this statement at a June 2007 press conference in her native Nara, Japan when she announced the production of her film *Nanayomachi* (2008) and her intent to win the Cannes Palme d'Or (Schilling 2007b).

² Kawase is the youngest-ever winner of the Cannes Camera d'Or for *Suzaku* (1997) and upon her return to Japan she became an instant celebrity.

Games making her the fifth woman ever to oversee an official Olympic film.³ Yet, in spite of these successes, the question remains whether or not she will be the next internationally known name among this generation of Japanese filmmakers.

When it comes to the study of Japanese film, scholarship focusing on the role of Japanese female directors is still in its infancy. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto points out, since the 1960s Western scholarship on Japanese cinema has focused primarily upon three major modes of analysis: (1) the celebration of great male auteurs; (2) the formalist celebration of Japanese cinema as an alternative to classical Hollywood; and (3) a critical reexamination of the first two approaches through the discourse of “otherness” and cross-cultural analysis (Yoshimoto 2000, p. 8). While these approaches serve to frame the major discourses surrounding the development of Japanese cinema, they do little to illuminate the role of women, particularly regarding their contributions to and participation in national and world cinema cultures. Furthermore, these modes of analysis tend to eclipse important issues regarding cinema’s production, distribution, exhibition, genre, audience, and reception.

At the 10th International Women’s Film Festival in Seoul (April 2008), Louisa Wei highlighted some intriguing paradoxes in an attempt to assess the status of Japanese female directors and women’s film of the past century. First, she noted that, during the early 1920s, women’s film became an important genre even though the early masters of this genre were all male (Wei 2008, p. 58). Second, while Western feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s sparked scholarly studies of the works of female directors, a critical gap remains in the systematic and in-depth analyses of these works (Ibid.). Unfortunately, Wei’s observations—while over ten years old—still hold true. Despite the fact that the field of women’s cinema is flourishing with a rigorous focus on the study of non-Western art and cinema cultures, there still remains no extended study of any female director in postwar Japanese cinema that has been critically examined within the larger context of Japan’s cinematic history.⁴

Thus, the question of Kawase’s status as a Japanese filmmaker within the international film festival context becomes all the more interesting, especially when trying to understand how her work is received in a culture where very few women directors have been actively promoted and recognized. In her book *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema* Patricia White opines that “... the few women who have risen to the top ranks of elite auteurs have cannily negotiated discourses of female exceptionality both in their personae and in their films” (White 2015, p. 22). Kawase’s alignment with filmmakers such as Akira Kurosawa (1936–1993) and Nagisa Ōshima (1932–2013) clearly reveals an awareness of the way in which the global/western film industry—particularly within the space of international film festivals—continues to privilege the auteur model to create and market a national cinema culture.

Yet, Kawase’s embrace of this model is also a strategic one in which she seeks to establish herself as a cineaste by promoting a specific brand of authorship within an art cinema context that simultaneously sets her on par with her male predecessors and avoids the potential for marginalization associated with discourses of women’s cinema as counter cinema. As Timothy Corrigan has argued, “the romantic roots of auteurism need to be taken another step toward recontextualizing them within industrial and commercial trajectories (Corrigan 1991, p. 103)”. Indeed, by embracing and asserting her agency over the auteur model—both critically and commercially—Kawase has succeeded in articulating a visual language that posits regionalism as a new form of nationalism through what I call a “cinema of place”.

Using Kawase’s three feature length films *Suzaku* (*Moe no suzaku*, 1997), *Shara* (*Sharasōju*, 2003), and *Mogari* (*Mogari no mori*, 2007) as the basis of my discussion, I will examine the way in which these early narrative works illuminate the construction of her auteur status in relation to a specific location.

³ Kawase follows in the footsteps of Caroline Rowland (London 2012), Gu Jun (Beijing 2008), Mai Zetterling (Munich 1972), and Leni Riefenstahl (Berlin 1936).

⁴ In the past twenty years the most notably scholarship devoted to Asian women’s cinema has manifested itself in the form of Yoshida Mayumi’s (Yoshida 2001) *Josei kantoku eiga no zenbō = Films of the World Women Directors*, Wada-Marciano’s (2012) *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age* as well as edited volumes such as Tanaka Kinuyo: *Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity* (González-López and Smith 2018) and *Female Authorship and the Documentary Image* (Ulfsdotter and Rogers 2018; Nakane 2018).

While Kawase has made a number of critically successful films since 2007, I have chosen to limit my analysis to her three award-winning works—all of which are set in Nara, Japan—in order to illuminate the significance of the international film festival apparatus in establishing and upholding the discourse of auteurism in relation to regional identity.⁵ Through my analysis I argue that Kawase has successfully negotiated this discourse through a strategy of self-promotion that emphasizes a “cinema of place” within the broader context of international film festivals such as Cannes. This ultimately allows her to rearticulate the meaning of female authorship by representing a new national cinema that challenges the structures and boundaries of Japan’s studio system, conferring a new framework for the auteur as a mediator between the local and the universal.

2. International Film Festivals

The role of international film festivals during the immediate Postwar period was extremely critical to the rehabilitation of the Japanese film industry. Indeed, as Yoshiharu Tezuka argues, in the final years of the US Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) when Kurosawa’s film *Rashōmon*, 1950 won the Golden Lion grand prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival, “it signaled both Japan’s return to the international community after the war, and triggered the internationalization of Japanese cinema” (Tezuka 2012, p. 3). Major film studios such as Daiei—who produced *Rashōmon*—swiftly took note of how international film festivals, much like the Olympic Games, provided opportunities for cultural diplomacy, as well as the reconstruction of Japan’s international image, and, just two years later, Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Tales of the Silvery Moon, 1953) won the Silver Lion at Venice with Teinosuke Kinugasa’s film *Jigokumon* (Gates of Hell, 1953) winning the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1954. During the post-World War two era, Cannes, Venice, and Berlin rose to the top as “A-festivals” with the power and prestige to anoint the next great cineaste. Cannes in particular became the “kingmaker of the festival circuit” establishing the auteur director model as the pinnacle of success (Elsaesser 2005, p. 91). Thus, the formula for many Japanese filmmakers working during the 1950s through 1970s began with the vetting process of winning an award at an international film festival and then parlaying this achievement into global box office recognition. Yet, these opportunities were primarily afforded to male directors and, before the mid-1980s, women received very little financial support from Japan’s film industry and other cultural institutions with regard to promoting and distributing their work both at home and abroad (Wei 2011, p. 41). However, since 1985, one of the major forces behind the promotion of Japanese female directors has been the Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival. Held bi-annually from 1985 to 1991 and annually, thereafter, the Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival is one of Asia’s most competitive festivals and, like its European counterparts, has become an important platform for promoting independent films as well as validating the reputation of its director as a potential auteur. Since its establishment, the Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival has provided women filmmakers with a greater number of opportunities to direct and showcase their work, and it has led to the emergence of a number of independent filmmakers during the 1990s and 2000s (Wei 2008, p. 59).

There is no denying the fact that Kawase’s ability to jump from documentary to feature filmmaking was the direct result of apparatus like the Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival and its support of independent women filmmakers. It was also the result of film producer Takenori Sentō’s efforts to restructure the independent sector of the Japanese film industry which, during the early to mid-1990s, he perceived as lagging behind Europe and the US (Davis 2006, p. 196).⁶ The decline of major studios as a training ground for emerging filmmakers coupled with a demand for the diversification of content in

⁵ These award-winning films have cemented her position as a highly sought after and internationally renowned filmmaker and a “festival darling” whose annual presence at major festivals such as Cannes is a given in spite of the fact that more recent features—not filmed in Nara—such as *Still the Water* (2014), *Sweet Bean* (2015), and *Radiance* (2017) have been met with mixed reviews by an international audience (Lee 2014; Lodge 2015, 2017).

⁶ Takenori Sentō was the producer for *Moe no suzaku* and Kawase’s husband from 1998–2001.

media such as television, documentary, commercial production, and illustration, created a space for new directors to seek their training elsewhere in art and film production programs (Wada-Marciano 2012, p. 18). Since the early 2000s independent filmmakers have become major players in Japan through their ability to produce films on smaller budgets and adhering to greater restraints put on them by investors unwilling to shoulder the risk. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano states that “... the defining characteristic of contemporary cinema in Japan is that it belongs to the post-studio condition” (Wada-Marciano 2012, p. 14). The resulting rise of the independent film sector, working with television producers on joint ventures, reached a critical mass and under the organization of J-Movie Wars, a low-budget television series begun in 1992 to make art house films. It was in this context that Kawase’s career as an independent director working outside Japan’s established studio system for the film *Suzaku* was launched (Davis 2006; Schilling 1999).

After winning the 1997 Camera d’Or for *Suzaku* at Cannes, Kawase was picked up by the production company Project J-Cine-X. Created in 1999 with the specific purpose of producing theatrical pictures aimed at an overseas market, Project J-Cine-X assembled and funded a group of young Japanese directors who had gained strong reputations at foreign film festivals. Modeling its production methods on those of Europe and the United States, Project J-Cine-X was acutely aware of the international exposure that European film festivals such as Cannes offered Japan’s film culture, particularly in its double role of branding auteur and nation. By moving away from samurai and jidaigeki genres (period dramas referring to feudal era stories pre-1868) and recalibrating Japanese popular film with more contemporary genres, companies like Project J-Cine-X sought to lay the foundation for the new face of Japanese cinema (Davis 2006, pp. 196–97). They capitalized on the category of “independent” cinema as a placeholder for Japanese filmmakers not yet confirmed as auteurs within a transnational context and geared the content of their films toward an international film festival audience (Elsaesser 2005, p. 92).

Thomas Elsaesser’s critique of the role of European film festivals as a space that is not only director-driven in its cultivation of the great auteurs of European cinema, but also sustains—as a distribution network—flourishing or small national film industries offers an interesting point of reference when attempting to understand Kawase’s promotion and development as a filmmaker within a Japanese context. When discussing the status of international film festivals such as Cannes, Elsaesser comments,

“The shift in selection process from country/nation to festival director also implied changes in the way the European cinema came to be perceived: while the smaller countries were able to come to international attention via the promotion of a new wave (with auteurs now representing the nation, instead of the officials who selected the national entry), the gold standard of the European festivals under the rules of Cannes became the auteur director”.

(Ibid., pp. 90–91)

This emphasis on the auteur director became an important marketing tool for companies like Project J-Cine-X, ones that sought to model themselves after Western cinematic modes of production. The alignment of nation and director in order to promote Japan’s national cinema, as well as boost production through low-budget art house films, was intrinsically linked to the achievement of Kawase at international film festivals such as Cannes. Indeed, as Patricia White argues, “although inclusion of women directors in competition at Cannes, Berlin, and Venice is still deficient, these events have played an important role in the emergence of women’s voices from outside Europe in the present-day sector [that is] referred to as global art cinema” (White 2015, p. 29). To be sure, Kawase is part of an elite group of women, such as Jane Campion, Lucrecia Martel, Samira Makhmalbaf, Sofia Coppola, Guo Xiaolu, and Li Yu, who have risen to the ranks of auteur director within global art cinema as a result of international film festivals and funding networks such as Cannes (Ibid., pp. 30, 225). Thus, selection by Cannes not only matters to the successful development of Kawase’s career, but also to the successful development of the independent film sector that is supporting her and the overseas image of Japan’s contemporary national cinema.

During a master class at the Museum of Modern Art in New York Kawase openly discussed the difficulties of working as an independent filmmaker in Japan and the importance of winning awards at Cannes in her relation to establishing her status as a filmmaker and making a name for herself within the industry.

“With *Suzaku* (Moe no Suzaku, 1997) I received the new directors award at Cannes, but before that of course the film had been released in Japan and I sent preview tickets to major Japanese media outlets but very few people attended the premiere. The domestic reception of my film was quite poor and even the people who did attend the Japanese premiere left immediately after the film ended and did not speak to me. However, after receiving the new directors award at Cannes, the next film screening of *Suzaku* in Japan was standing room only. The theater was overflowing with people trying to get in. This time, after the film ended, everyone was rushing to interview me. It was a completely different experience. That said, I don’t make films to receive awards. The award is just a tool. A means of getting as many people as possible to see my film. The award provides a reason. It creates buzz about my film without having the resources of a large studio advertising budget. It is a method that I use. It also makes it easier to solicit funding for the next film that I want to make”. (Kawase 2016)

Kawase’s remarks not only illuminate the difficulties that many independent filmmakers face while working outside Japan’s studio system, but they also speak to the particular challenges of inclusion that women filmmakers face in an industry dominated by men. Winning awards and gaining international recognition at film festivals such as Cannes is not only crucial to Kawase’s work being publicly acknowledged by Japanese critics and audiences, but also to secure funding for future projects.

Winning the Camera d’Or for *Suzaku* instantly legitimized Kawase’s international status as a director, creating numerous opportunities to collaborate with both Japanese and European film production companies. For instance, following the success of *Suzaku*, Kawase’s second feature *Shara* was coproduced by Japanese entertainment companies RealProducts and Nikkatsu, and then distributed internationally by the French company Pyramide Films. In the case of *Mogari*, Kawase partnered with the French film company Celluloid Dreams, which oversaw the production and distribution of her film culminating in a world premiere at Cannes and then was immediately followed by a straight to television release in Japan. Since making *Shara* in 2003, almost all of Kawase’s narrative features have been produced in collaboration with European film companies, premiered at major international film festivals, and circulated globally with only a selection of these works returning to Japan for domestic theatrical release.⁷ Yoshi Yatabe, the programming director for the Tokyo International Film Festival, argues that the reason for this is “[although Kawase] has a very high reputation on the international festival circuit, her films don’t really work in cinemas in Japan . . . In that way, she represents a contradiction within the Japanese film industry” (Yatabe 2014). At the time of Yatabe’s remarks Kawase’s feature *Futatsume no mado* (Still the Water, 2014), a coproduction between her film company Kumie, ARTE France Cinéma, and Spanish producer Luis Miñarro, had recently been selected to compete for the Palme d’Or at Cannes. This contradiction regarding how the concept of national cinema is created from outside of Japan and to what extent the West continues to define authorship is quite telling. While Kawase may be a household name in Japan, her reputation and recognition as a director has been largely shaped by an international film festival audience. Thus, the privileging of Kawase, as an auteur through a combination of international awards, media coverage, and ongoing collaboration and investment by European production companies, has created a concept of national cinema that does not necessarily align with Japan’s studio system or domestic audience.

⁷ Kawase has embraced this production/distribution model within her documentary work as well, having found financial support from the production company ARTE France Cinéma, which produced *Kya Ka Ra Ba A* (Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth, 2001) and *Tarachime*, 2006 that won her a special mention at the Locarno Film Festival (Wada-Marciano 2012, p. 63).

Prior to her international success, Kawase's recognition within the Japanese film industry began more modestly with her work as a documentary filmmaker. Before her arrival at Cannes in 1997, Kawase already had sixteen documentaries under her belt with the first film made in 1988 while an undergraduate at the Visual Arts College in Osaka. Kawase's documentary work is well known in Japanese film circles despite the fact that her status and practice as a documentary filmmaker has been criticized for being "too wrapped up in her own little world . . . without reference to society, [and] without engaging any political or social stance" (Nornes 2002, p. 40). While the previous generation of Japanese documentarians (mostly male) saw themselves as activists "who regarded documentary filmmaking as a political act" (Schilling 1999, p. 84), Kawase is representative of a new generation of documentarians less interested in politics and social justice and more interested in biography and identity associated with personal documentary (*shiteki dokyumentari*).

This sentiment is directly reflected in the autobiographical nature of Kawase's early work in which she received an "Award for Excellence" at the 1993 Image Forum Festival for *Ni tsutsumarete* (Embracing, 1992), a film that chronicles the search for and fraught reunion with her estranged father. She also won an "Award for Excellence" at the 1995 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival for *Katatsumori* (1994), which chronicles Kawase's relationship with her great aunt who raised her (Gerow 2000). Both documentaries focus on Kawase's relentless search for self as well as an attempt to deal with the dissolution of her nuclear family.⁸ In spite of these painful topics, Kawase's work is inflected with feelings of joy and wonder as well as an intimate connection with the natural world depicted through the rural landscape of Nara Prefecture where she grew up.

The domestic recognition Kawase received for her early award-winning documentary work, however, did not garner the kind of critical praise she was looking for. Rather Kawase's films were regarded as lacking in political gravitas or a specific ideology, and, ironically, some of her harshest critics were Japanese feminists who took issue with Kawase for appearing indifferent to the social problems that women face (Schilling 1999). Kawase has expressed her frustration at being targeted by the agendas of others, and stubbornly rejects their criticism: "I've had members of women's groups tell me I should make this type or that type of film, but I think it's strange—it becomes a kind of reverse discrimination . . . For me being a woman is like having a certain shoe size—it's a natural condition, not something I think about" (Ibid., p. 85).

Kawase's refusal to accept discourses of feminism, I argue, is due in part to an awareness of what Joan Kee calls the "inclusion versus exclusion binary opposition" for contemporary Asian women artists that comes with foregrounding their gender and nationality in an effort to achieve parity with their male counterparts as well as the European and American art worlds (Kee 2011, pp. 349–50).⁹ That is to say, whether through the lenses of gender or gender and nation, Kawase is not interested in further marginalizing herself and her work by embracing the mantle of feminism or self-identifying as a Japanese woman filmmaker only to confirm what this categorization ultimately sets out to refuse. Yet, in spite of her resistance to identity politics and the expectations of feminist critics, within this reinvention and repackaging of Japanese national cinema, Kawase's cinematic language has become representative of a specific articulation of Japan's postwar identity in what I call a "cinema of place".

⁸ The concept of the nuclear family model as opposed to the intergenerational family model became a hallmark of postwar Japanese culture and is a theme that a number of Japanese filmmakers, most notably Ozu Yasujiro (1903–1963), engaged with in their postwar films.

⁹ Joan Kee discusses this concept in depth when she asks the question, "Is the notion of a 'contemporary Asian women's art' necessarily feminist?" In her article, Kee seeks to complicate the thinking that "contemporary Asian women's art provides a way to approach the interpretation of artworks affiliated with a specific time, space, and gender" by considering the possible negative implications embedded with these lines of critical inquiry particularly in relation to feminist agendas (Kee 2011, p. 347).

3. Kawase's "Cinema of Place"

Born in 1969 in Nara prefecture, Kawase was raised by her great-aunt—whom she called “grandmother”—after being abandoned as a young child by her parents. Kawase graduated from the Visual Arts College, Osaka (formerly Osaka School of Photography) in 1989 and, while working as a lecturer at the school, she penned her first feature film *Suzaku*. All three of her international prize-winning features—*Suzaku* (1997), *Shara* (2003), and *Mogari* (2007)—are set in and around Nara, the ancient capital city of Japan. Kawase's focus on Nara underscores an important biographical component and authorial mark to her filmmaking style, emphasizing a strong level of spirituality and emotional self-awareness. The life force of close-knit, small, rural communities and their struggle to absorb the impact of Japan's postwar modernization as well as the tremendous tragedy and loss that accompanied it are ever-present in Kawase's work, reinforcing a specific image of the world in which she lives.

All of Kawase's films have been informed by and rooted to the environment in which she grew up and are predicated on certain stylistic, atmospheric, and aesthetic choices that speak to her position as mediator between her world and that of the audience's. When asked about what drew her to the medium of film as a narrative device—particularly when she grew up with little to no exposure to movies or television as a child—Kawase recalled the first time she used a camera

“ . . . It was an assignment during [high] school to go out into the city [Nara] and take pictures of things that we liked. Up until this point I had been on a steady path of going to school, studying, and getting good grades. Everything had been proscribed and that was the life I led. Then I was told to go out into the world and find the things that *I* liked. Initially that was very hard but eventually I felt as if the world were coming to me. I used the camera to click the shutter and take images and a few days later I developed these images and put together a film. What surprised me the most about [this experience] was that when I screened my film in the dark, this image of a tulip appeared. But there was something else that appeared with the tulip—it was me . . . That is to say, what I discovered was an image of myself as well as an image of time passing . . . In that instant I thought how wonderful images are. It [film] was like a time machine for me. Film makes possible a past or a future existence of yourself . . . After that I became completely immersed in having images from my world exist within the space of film”. (Kawase 2016)

Kawase's ability to both portray her world of Nara as well as the discovery of self within that world speaks to her fascination with making films based upon lived experiences—hers or those of others. Kawase describes her world as a place filled with “things that you cannot see, hidden memories that remain concealed from within . . . Nara is an ancient city where much of the architecture still remains and this creates an atmosphere of strangeness where unbelievable things can happen. It gets very dark at night and the stores close quite early. So you are left with a lot of time to come face to face with yourself” (Ibid.). Because Kawase views her films as “documentary but also fiction” (Ibid.)—in which she relies upon the dual existence of an objective and subjective gaze—her approach to filmmaking no doubt informs this mediating position, and, in some cases, her directorial style may be found within the slippage between documentary and fictional storytelling. For instance, *Suzaku*, *Shara*, and *Mogari* Kawase were shot on location in Nara prefecture and relied primarily upon locally recruited amateur actors. Kawase limited the professional actors to one or two people, and, along with the film crew, required them to reside within the local community for two to three months prior to the start of production. All of the scenes were purposefully filmed in chronological order—a technique known as *jundori*—with the goal of encouraging the amateur actors to feel as if they were not acting but living in the world of the film. Kawase explains, “Instead of forcing them to act in a certain way, I tried to create an environment in which they could perform” (Schilling 1999, p. 86).

Important to an analysis of Kawase's filmmaking style and status as an auteur is our understanding of her within the context of women's cinema and female authorship. While Kawase

would reject being categorized as “feminist” and resists the view that there is something undeniably feminine about her work, she at the same time acknowledges that being a woman director has allowed her a certain level of access that comes from being on the margins of the Japanese film industry. Kawase commented,

“It is extremely difficult for us to observe our own life, as it involves looking into the embarrassing or undesirable aspects of our lives. In a way, being a woman made it easier for me to look closely at my own environment. Women tend to be more intuitive and rely on their senses, or it might be due to gender status differences in Japan . . . Not being in the mainstream or the center, she can make new discoveries. In my case, I will create things from the sources within myself. I believe that at the depth of the personal there is something universal”. (Kawase 1999)

Teresa de Lauretis poses the question of aesthetics in relation to a female authorial voice when she asks, “What formal, stylistic, or thematic markers point to a female presence behind the camera?” (De Lauretis 1987, p. 131). While De Lauretis refuses to answer this question definitively by putting aesthetics in the framework of address, I believe that her posing it is generative, particularly due to the autobiographical nature of Kawase’s work that attempts to deal with issues relating to memory and loss.

In *Shara*, for example, Kawase slowly peels away the layers of human memory in an effort to express the painful mourning process of an inexplicable tragedy. On the day of the Jizo Festival in Nara, during the oppressive heat of mid-summer, twelve-year-old Kei Aso suddenly disappears without a trace. For the three remaining members of the Aso family (father, mother, and identical twin brother Shun) time seems to stop. Five years later, seventeen-year-old Shun remains caught between the present and the past as he is unable to concretely explain what has happened to Kei. Shun as well as his mother and father silently endure the painful emotions associated with memory that have no release.

Kawase underscores the mystery of Kei’s disappearance during the opening sequence of the film by aligning the handheld camera’s gaze with Shun. As the brothers run through the winding streets and alleyways of their eerily silent neighborhood, the camera unsteadily trails behind the brothers. Through the repetition of the boys’ bodies moving through similar spaces, Kawase creates a tension over and over between location and dislocation. The brothers’ familiarity with their running route grounds them within the context of the town. Yet, the seemingly endless passage along winding streets and narrow alleyways create a jarring sense of confusion and uncertainty.

As the temporal and physical distance between the two boys slowly widens, Shun lags a few seconds behind his brother who turns right down an alleyway next to the local Buddhist temple. When Shun rounds the corner, following the echo of Kei’s footsteps past the temple, he abruptly finds himself alone. Panning right and left, simulating Shun’s gaze, the camera searches for Kei. Yet, there is no visual or audible trace of him. The only sound that remains is Shun’s footsteps running up and down the alley, trying to find his brother. Shun retraces his steps back toward the temple and peers through the latticed window. He sees no one.

Shun’s sense of confusion and panic is subtly expressed through Kawase’s manipulation of profound silence. Time moves slowly for Shun and the stillness of the environment establishes a sense of foreboding. Not once during this sequence does Shun call his brother’s name nor does he verbally express his emotions. Instead, his anxiety is cloaked under a veil of silence that seems to suffocate the narrow space of the alleyway. It is only after Shun leaves the alley and finds his parents that he begins to speak. Even then, in response to his mother’s questioning, it is barely an audible whisper. The resulting confusion surrounding Kei’s disappearance is over-laid with the voices of anonymous villagers quietly whispering the question, “Where has the child gone?” In response to this question are the words *kami kakushi*—a mysterious disappearance or spiriting away.

For the Aso family and the villagers, *kami kakushi* is the only plausible explanation for Kei’s disappearance. There is no other way to describe this type of loss within such a close-knit community

where everyone watches out for one another and the tragedy of one's family becomes the tragedy of the entire village. In her discussion of *Shara* Kawase commented,

“ . . . I think ordinary people need far more strength to live than those who commit crimes . . . I also wanted to focus on their problems and the theme of fading away, on the fading away of a part of us. The town of Nara offered the perfect setting with its numerous alleys. When I walk around Nara in the summer heat, I always think to myself that it would be easy to disappear down one of those alleyways. The film's central theme isn't about absence or renewal. It's the story of each and everyone of us and on the loss of a part of who we are”.
(Kawase 2003)

Kawase's focus on the problems of ordinary people is made specific to a certain type of rural community that copes with personal loss by absorbing the impact of major changes rather than questioning or attempting to explain them. *Kami kakushi* becomes a means for the community to maintain a sense of spiritual harmony and continuity in the midst of shocking tragedy.

The loss of a part of oneself is further expressed through the inherent physical and emotional connection between identical twins, with Kei's disappearance symbolizing the literal loss of a part of Shun's identity. Because there is no way to explain Kei's disappearance concretely, Shun's ability to move forward is contingent upon his capacity to both remember and forget his life with Kei and a part of himself. Kawase's proficiency at playing with our perceptions of reality is articulated through intimate observation and quiet stillness in which she lets her camera linger on the characters as they go about their daily routines—particularly Shun.

Five years after Kei's disappearance, on the day before the Jizo Festival, Shun retraces the same route he and Kei ran. As Shun silently walks the streets and alleyways, passing the same Buddhist temple, the camera moves slowly in an effort to capture the stillness of his environment. The silence is punctuated by whispers and fragments of past conversations between Shun and Kei, Shun and his mother, anonymous voices of the villagers speculating about Kei's disappearance, and Shun's own emotional breakdown when he hears the news that his brother's body has been found in the construction site of a building under demolition. When Shun reaches the alleyway next to the temple and peers through the latticed window beyond which stands a Torii gate—demarcating the transition from secular to sacred space—the voices in his head stop. The camera remains motionless. Kawase provides a long take from the perspective of Shun, allowing his gaze to linger on the gate.

Shun's ability to remember his brother is realized through the creation of a life-size portrait of Kei at age seventeen. Shun's portrait of Kei is created using an image of himself, a projection of what Kei should look like based upon the physical reflection of his identical twin. It becomes the signifier of Shun's attempt at memorializing his own identity as well as Shun's search for solace, despite his sense of deep, personal loss. Upon the completion of the painting, during a rare moment of filmic dialogue, Shun's father remarks to his remaining son “ . . . in this world there things you can forget, there are things you have to forget, and then there are things you should not forget”.

The themes of fading away and the loss of a part of oneself are also explored by Kawase in *Suzaku*. Set in the rural mountain village of Shino in Nara prefecture, the film centers on the Tahara family, people who eke out a living, much like their ancestors, from the ancient cedar forests. The household, consisting of father Kōzō, his wife Yasuyo, his mother Sachiko, his three-year-old daughter, Michiru, and eleven-year-old nephew Eisuke, unravels slowly as its members are unable to maintain the life that they once had. Kawase also offers us a slow and lyrical glimpse into the close-knit logging community of Yoshino, whose industry and way of life is becoming a way of the past. Thus, parallel to the disintegration of the Tahara family, is that of the village in which they live. In an effort to revive the slumping economy, Kōzō proposes the construction of a railroad tunnel through the mountains. His plan is to connect Yoshino to the outside world. When the plan fails, due to a lack of government funding, he enters a deep psychological depression. Kōzō's depression is symbolic of the economic depression of the village and the loss of its communal identity that is intricately connected to the land.

The Tahara family's association with the rural landscape is inscribed through Kawase's long uninterrupted shots of the mountain village. Her sweeping panoramic views and tendency to quietly linger on the daily routines of the characters create a sense of melancholy and intangible sadness. In the opening establishing shots, Kawase cuts from lush green treetops swaying in the breeze to the interior of the Tahara's kitchen. With their backs to the camera Yasuyo and Sachiko silently prepare breakfast. Kawase cuts again to a view of the mountains and then pans the camera back illuminating the interior of the living room, and the open door, which frames this sublime view and underscores the connection between this household and the natural world. Throughout this series of shots, one hears the voices of children somewhere in the background. It is not until Kawase cuts again to a still shot of a mountain path that we first see Eisuke and Michiru, walking hand in hand, returning from school. Kawase's interchanging static camera shots between the landscape and the Tahara family serve to establish the close relationship of the children.

Kawase also plays with temporal space and memory in *Suzaku*. The shift in time is represented by an unspoken jump fifteen years forward. Rather than using editing techniques or narrative dialogue to convey this significant shift in time, as seen in *Shara*, Kawase quietly chooses to use Eisuke as the marker of change. As the rhythms of daily life continue, Kawase repeats the now familiar shot of Sachiko and Yasuyo preparing breakfast. The camera then cuts to the first-floor hallway with Eisuke, now a grown man, walking down the dark corridor toward the camera. His tall figure, initially unrecognizable, emerges from the darkness, integrating seamlessly into the morning routine of breakfast and chores. While Kōzō, Yasuyo, and Sachiko remain untouched by time, it is Eisuke and (in the next scene) Michiru, running out the door to school, who become the visual signifiers of change.

Silence is perhaps the most defining characteristic of this film. Through the use of gesture, body language, and blocking, Kawase conveys the power of nonverbal communication and the intimate language of a community that has existed for generations. As in *Shara*, there is very little dialogue. Our ability to understand the complex emotional relationships among members of the family depends upon the close observation of subtle and intimate moments of interaction. The rhythms of daily life are presented in the form of habitual repetition, sleeping, eating, cooking, and bathing, with the hub of village life centered around the Tahara's home.

The complicated relationship between Eisuke and Michiru offers the most obvious example of this intimate nonverbal language. Close since childhood, an unspoken romance develops between the two children as they grow older. Due to the absence of any kind of meaningful paternal presence, Michiru and Eisuke continue to grow closer until it becomes clear that their attraction goes far beyond familial affection. Kawase is at her best as she conveys the subtleties of this relationship through scenes that demonstrate the tension between playful affection and tender intimacy. One night, when Michiru is unable to sleep, she and Eisuke climb atop the roof of the house. Away from the rest of the family, cloaked in darkness, the two are in their own secret world playing games and seeking solace in each other. They run and laugh like children, but also stare longingly at each other like lovers. Dialogue is kept to a bare minimum. The most significant moment is at the end of the scene as they lie next to one another. Gazing up at the stars, Michiru comments, "it is beautiful".

The memory of Kōzō's failure is indicated by the departure of villagers from Shino. They leave because they are no longer able to continue supporting themselves off the land. Kōzō's continued depression becomes the emotional marker of struggle between the community and the land. Kōzō's disappearance, one afternoon while taking a walk in the forest, marks the end of both the family and the community. When Kōzō's dead body is discovered in the defunct railroad tunnel, he is clutching the family's Super-8 camera. Before Yasuyo and Michiru leave Shino, Eisuke screens the film footage found on Kōzō's camera.

This scene is the most stunning part of the film in terms of its content and camera work. Kawase seamlessly integrates real documentary footage of the villagers who live in Shino. This footage displaces the fictional narrative of the film with the reality of the disintegration of an actual community. By framing shots of the landscape, village, and young, middle-aged, and elderly villagers one after

another the images read like a memento mori of a vanishing people. Their shy smiles and direct gazes express a sense of self-conscious curiosity and melancholy nostalgia. Kawase's fusion of the 8-mm footage with shots of the landscape creates an aesthetic tension between the grainy unsteadiness of the handheld camera and the static panoramic 35-mm images that comprise the rest of the film.

The level of emotional intimacy that Kawase establishes between the villagers and the camera is paralleled with the departure of Yasuyo and Michiru at the end of the film. Now that Kōzō is gone, his family is unable to support themselves. Like many of the villagers before them, the Tahara family must leave their home in search of a new existence. Sachiko and Eisuke will move into the village to be closer to Eisuke's job at the inn. Yasuyo and Michiru will return to Yasuyo's childhood home to live with her parents. The dissolution of the Tahara family is symbolic of the dissolution of the village. The relationship between the people on the 8-mm footage screened in the previous scene and the final images of the Tahara family become all the more clear.

Like *Suzaku* and *Shara*, *Mogari no mori* is a film that deals with grief. Kawase's ability to portray the emotional immediacy of death, whether recent or decades earlier, is both haunting and uplifting. The film focuses on the relationship between an elderly man, Shigeki, and a young woman, Machiko. Shigeki is unpredictable and at times rough and feisty, battling with dementia and holding on to what memory he has left of his late wife Mako, who has been dead for thirty-three years. Shigeki takes an interest in Machiko—a caretaker in the nursing home where he lives. Like Shigeki, Machiko is also coping with the loss of a loved one, the recent death of her child. The two develop a friendship, finding in each other a source of healing and understanding. During a car trip, Shigeki wanders off on his own into the forest and Machiko follows, unable to stop him on a quest to find his wife Mako.

The word *mogari* signifies the period or place of mourning. Like Kawase's previous works, this one is set in the rural countryside of Nara prefecture. The association with a specific location is evident during the opening scenes that show a number of long establishing shots of the mountains, fields, and forests of Nara. Similar to *Suzaku*, *Mogari* opens with an image of lush green treetops swaying in the breeze. Here, more than ever, location and setting become important narrative devices. The natural world contains a spirit and life force that cannot be wholly understood. Kawase sets up a human connection with the landscape through extreme long shots of the rural countryside and human figures living and working within it. In many scenes, the figures are dwarfed by the lush green world that surrounds them. Kawase sends the message that humans must live in harmony with nature. Thus, it is Shigeki and Machiko's journey into the forest that marks the potential for a new beginning, and it is in the forest that both characters gain a sense of clarity. This clarity is based upon their ability to deal with the loss and grief associated with death. For both Shigeki and Machiko, this loss never goes away. It remains ever present like background noise, sometimes muffled, sometimes piercing.

Throughout the film, Kawase uses very few cuts or explanations, particularly in the forest scenes where the narrative drive is dependent upon the imagery and the range of emotions shared between Shigeki and Machiko. It is in the forest that the impact of Machiko's loss becomes ultimately apparent. While it is unclear how Machiko's child died, the overriding message is that the death was, in some way, her fault. Blindly following Shigeki on his quest for Mako, Machiko's role as caregiver is tested again and again. Lost and wandering in the rain, they arrive at a stream, which Shigeki attempts to cross. Calling after Shigeki, Machiko begs him not to continue, arguing that it is too dangerous. Refusing to heed her warning, Shigeki pushes onward. Suddenly, the water upstream comes rushing toward him. The current is strengthened due to the pouring rain. During this climactic moment, Kawase points the camera at the rushing water and holds a close-up of the stream. Over the sound of rushing water, all that is audible is Machiko's cries as she screams "No!" and "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry".

When the camera cuts back to Shigeki, he is holding onto a mossy rock, soaking wet but alive. As he cautiously returns to the edge of the stream and to safety, Machiko's cries become louder. She no longer looks at him but crouches on the ground, turning inward as her body convulses in tears. Machiko's repeated apologies of "I'm sorry," despite the fact that Shigeki is safe, suggest that it is

not Shigeki to whom she is speaking but rather her dead child, who had perhaps drowned. Shigeki approaches Machiko and says, “The water of the river, which flows constantly, never returns to its source”. His ability to recognize the pain of Machiko’s loss creates a window of access for the audience. Shigeki gently holds Machiko while she cries, aware of the painful memories that his attempted stream crossing has provoked.

Following this scene is another memorable moment in the film that speaks to the powerful bond between Shigeki and Machiko. Through the use of gesture, body language, and blocking, Kawase conveys the intensity of nonverbal communication. Wet and cold, Shigeki and Machiko prepare themselves for a night in the dark forest. In an effort to stay warm and dry, Shigeki builds a fire, but the heat from the blaze is not enough to fend off the hypothermia he experiences as a result of the rain. In an effort to keep Shigeki warm, Machiko begins to rub his arms and legs. Soon realizing that this is not enough, she takes off Shigeki’s shirt as well as her own and wraps herself around him, using her bare flesh to heat his water-chilled body. Covered in darkness, the two figures are only visible by firelight. The silence and static position of the camera angle de-emphasizes this as a sensual or sexual act. Instead, it symbolizes the intensity of their relationship in terms of mutual understanding and humanity. Regarding the relationship between these characters Kawase comments,

“I think the bond between Shigeki and Machiko is empathy. They share something one cannot control: the time they spent with the departed. But it’s certainly not only a sharing of sadness. In human existence, those who’ve experienced loss often become kinder to others. This only happens, however, if there’s someone who understands them . . . After the two enter the forest, the forest becomes the force that supports them. It watches over them, sometimes gently, sometimes more strictly”. (Kawase 2007)

The conclusion of the film is somewhat ambiguous. Shigeki and Machiko’s journey ends when Shigeki discovers the wooden tomb marker indicating the location of Mako’s body. Overjoyed, he pulls from his backpack stacks of journals—thirty-three in total—one recording for every year since Mako’s death. He also pulls out a small music box that belonged to his late wife. Spreading the objects around the wooden tomb marker Shigeki proceeds to dig into the soft earth. With Machiko’s help, he is able to create a small shallow grave in which to lie down. During their frenzied digging, the approaching sound of a helicopter can be heard. The camera follows Shigeki’s and then Machiko’s gaze upward toward the sky as she searches for the source of the noise, but all that is visible is the canopy of tree branches.

Curling into the fetal position and pressing his face against the soil, Shigeki announces that he is going to sleep in the earth. His apparent readiness for death symbolizes his ability to come to terms with the loss of his wife. Shigeki and Machiko tenderly thank each other for the help and support they have shared. The camera lingers on a close-up of Machiko’s dirty hand resting on Shigeki’s. As Shigeki closes his eyes, Machiko turns the handle on the small music box, and plays a sad and lonely lullaby. Through her tears, she tells Shigeki that everything is all right now. Machiko continues to play the music box, turning her gaze back toward the sky and raising her arms in the air. The gaze of the camera lingers on Machiko’s face, then it pans back moving to a panorama of the forest. The faint sound of the music box and her tears are all that remain.

4. Art Cinema as National Cinema

Kawase has been described as “ultra-arty” and more of a critics’ darling than an audience favorite (Schilling 2007b). This characterization speaks directly to her filmmaking style and has served her well within the international film community. She has earned three prestigious awards at Cannes, with *Mogari* beating out a celebrity field of male auteurs that included the Coen Brothers, David Fincher, Quentin Tarantino, and Wong Kar-wai (Schilling 2007a). While it is clear that Kawase’s aesthetic choices and narrative content avoid most commercial and formulaic considerations, the question that

remains is whether or not her work should be defined within the context of “art cinema”; and, if so, how does this definition of her work re-conceptualize Japan’s national cinema within a regional context?

The three main components of art cinema are realism, authorship, and ambiguity. Art cinema, “motivates its narrative by the principles of realism and authorial expressivity . . . and privileges stylistic devices for representing a realistic continuum of space and time” (Bordwell 1999, pp. 718–19). The stylistic devices utilized by Kawase in all three of her feature films clearly fall under the categories outlined by Bordwell. In terms of realism and authorship, the settings and themes of her works are defined not only by their connection to contemporary Japanese culture, but Kawase’s personal biography and background as a documentary filmmaker. Family dramas are set in and around the ancient capital of Nara. They deal with issues of death, loss, memory, and the relationship between humanity and the natural order. However, in all of Kawase’s works there is a spiritual element inscribed into the landscape which tends to blur the boundary between the living and the dead. We see this most clearly in *Shara* with Kei’s disappearance and the idea of kami kakushi. It is also present in *Mogari*, with the forest containing an intangible and somewhat spiritual force that supports and watches over Shigeki and Machiko.

While these films are not directly autobiographical, Kawase’s authorial inscription is structurally foregrounded in a number of ways. The recurring elements of memory, loss, familial, and close-knit communal relationships, the specificity of location to Nara prefecture, and stylistic devices used to drive the narrative, all contain a biographical component. In many cases, these components of her feature films have previously been explored in earlier documentaries such as *Ni tsutsumarete* and *Katatumori* where Kawase’s minimal use of editing, emphasis on silence, manipulation of temporal durations, loose narrative structures resembling real-life, and concern with reaction rather than action, all reference the author’s point of view in her films and unify the text. Rie Karatsu has argued that Kawase’s particular style—“her mixing of documentary and fiction, the autobiographical documentation and formal articulation” (Karatsu 2009, p. 169)—exposes the authorial role(s) that she plays both in front of and behind the camera. Karatsu states,

“In *Mourning Forest*, Kawase exposes these dual roles effectively without making herself appear like an actress in the film. Kawase makes her role as a director visible by deploying Wakako [a senior colleague of Machiko’s at the nursing home] as herself behind the camera and Shigeki as herself in front of the camera”. (Ibid., p. 175)

Karatsu maintains that Kawase uses the characters of Wakako and Shigeki as a form of authorial inscription—one that Kaja Silverman has termed a “second identification” (Silverman 1988, pp. 212–18)—in which the fictional characters stand in for the film’s director to express her views on filmmaking. For instance, the repetition throughout the film of Wakako’s line “there are no formal rules here” underscores Kawase’s approach to filmmaking that breaks from the conventions of documentary film (Karatsu 2009). Similarly, Kawase uses Shigeki as a foil to mediate on her own emotional output commenting that, “I think my personal view of life is reflected in the character of Shigeki and his living through the memory of his dead wife. But these factors aren’t autobiographical. The story of *Mogari* is rather a reflection of the emotions within me” (Kawase 2008).

Interestingly, however, in *Shara* Kawase’s authorial inscription through second identification extends beyond her position behind the camera by actually starring in the film as Reiko—Shun’s mother—thus reversing the role of loss that she herself had experienced as child when abandoned by her parents. In this case, Kawase plays a parent who has lost a child, and, during the second half of the film, her character Reiko—who is pregnant—gives birth to a baby boy. During the filming of *Shara*, Kawase herself was pregnant with her own child and played the role of Reiko with a profound sense of authenticity. One of the final scenes of the film depicts the birth of Reiko’s newborn son. Performing the role of a parent who has lost a child is not only an extremely painful form of self-inscription, but also a marker of Kawase’s ego and how tenuous the line between fiction and documentary can be. In this case, the duality of her roles in front of and behind the camera collapse into one and authorial inscription becomes part of both physical and textual realism of the film.

This is not the first time that Kawase utilizes this mode of authorial inscription in her work. We see it almost ten years earlier in a scene from her documentary *Katatsumori* in which Kawase, while filming, impulsively reaches out from behind the camera, allowing her hand to appear in the frame as she touches her grandmother's face. Kawase describes this impulse as the subjectivity of a daughter reaching for her grandmother, and the act of capturing this impulse on film as the objectivity of the artist/filmmaker documenting the act. "In that moment there existed two of me . . . In that one shot I came to realize that within myself I have this dual existence of the objective and the subjective" (Kawase 2016). This dual existence between the objective and subjective points of view in her work represented through acts of authorial self-inscription has become a defining feature of Kawase's work as well as an important means of narrative creation. It is this mode of filmmaking that allows Kawase to challenge the structures and boundaries of Postwar Japanese cinema by conferring a new framework for the auteur within an art cinema context.

But what, if anything, makes Kawase's authorial presence and/or gaze in all three of these films' distinctly female? Whose reality are we seeing? These questions directly engage with Bordwell's third component of art cinema: ambiguity.¹⁰ While there are significant aspects of ambiguity in the narrative of all three of Kawase's films, whether it be the mystery surrounding Kei's disappearance and death in *Shara*, the uncertain future of Shino village and the remaining members of the Tahara family in *Suzaku*, or the rescue of Shigeki and Machiko at the end of *Mogari*, there is also a level of ambiguity in terms of how to read Kawase's gaze or voice as distinctly female. Themes of loss, memory, and the dissolution of the family are not specific to Kawase (and she would be the first to make this point). Many of these themes are found in the works of her male contemporaries, such as Kore'eda Hirokazu who deals with a similar set of issues in the films *Wandāfuru raifu* (*After Life*, 1999) and *Dare mo shiranai* (*Nobody Knows*, 2004). In his analysis of Kawase's film *Shara*, Timothy Iles argues that Kawase's gaze is "inclusive"—neither male nor female in its visual presentation. Iles comments,

"Kawase has created a visual style capable of presenting both men and women with equal acceptance . . . No one character or gender becomes the focal point of 'visual pleasure,' to borrow the phrase from Laura Mulvey, of this film, just as the voice of no one gender becomes that through which the film 'speaks' its message". (Iles 2008, p. 61)

Thus, instead of looking for a female gaze or voice based upon thematic or narrative content, I believe that we must look for it in terms of Kawase's position as a mediator between her world and the world of her audience. This mediation strikes a balance between the objective and subjective in her work. Her unrelenting search for self is expressed through a visual articulation of emotion that drives the form of narrative creation. Kawase's own "voice" is expressed through the sensitive and close observation of the community to which she belongs. It is her regional specificity and attention to the subtle yet complicated stories and relationships among ordinary people, which are typically ignored or forgotten, that makes her work so distinctive. It is the combination of self-reflection, story-telling, and personal exploration that drives Kawase's aesthetic and foregrounds her viewpoint—this simultaneous objective and subjective "gaze"—as feminine.

Kawase's self-promotion as an auteur within the context of art cinema is directly aligned with the promotion of Japan's national cinema. In his article, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s" Stephen Crofts argues, "underpinning First World approaches to national cinema is the master antinomy of self vs. other . . . National cinematic self-definition, like national self-definition, likes to pride itself on its distinctiveness, on its standing apart from other(s)" (Crofts 1994, p. 47). More recently, in the case of Japan,

¹⁰ According to David Bordwell, "When confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality we first seek realistic motivation. (Is a characters' mental state causing the uncertainty? Is life just leaving loose ends?) If we're thwarted we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being "said" here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) . . . When obvious uncertainties persist, read for maximum ambiguity. With the open arbitrary ending, the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art". See (Bordwell 1999, p. 721).

definitions of “self” have moved away from traditional and stereotypical versions articulated in filmic genres such as samurai and yakuza, toward ones that focus on a more specific and local identity within a contemporary global context. Kawase’s cinema of place seeks to do just that by foregrounding the regionality of Nara’s landscape, people, and language, while also attending to the “particular tendencies of European art cinema, such as Jeane-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s films,” which Wada-Marciano argues “places her regional work within a global cinematic context” (Wada-Marciano 2012, p. 56).

Kawase’s award-winning films attest to these new definitions of self by successfully capitalizing on the demand for art cinema whose content embraces the varied aspects of Japan’s regional identities and communities. They also demonstrate her ability to cultivate a space for filmmakers and audiences alike who are interested in engaging with a cinematic vision of postwar Japanese culture and society defined by a specificity of place. In 2010, just three years after winning the Grand Prix for *Mogari* Kawase founded the Nara International Film Festival (NIFF), which is a biennial festival that seeks to provide opportunities for young independent filmmakers working outside of Japan’s studio system. As part of the festival, NIFF also developed a program called NARAtive, which invites emerging directors from around the world to come to Nara, Japan and make a film set in the region. Supported by NIFF staff and local film crews, these international filmmakers are tasked with creating a narrative film that represents the peoples, environments, and histories of the Nara region. These films make their debut at NIFF and then travel to other international film festivals with the goal of promoting NIFF as well as the work of these young filmmakers.¹¹ NIFF not only allows Kawase to act as a mediator between her world of Nara and that of her audience, but it has created a platform for her to promote and market a new brand of national cinema that takes pride in its hometown/local identity through filmmaking and film viewing.

This is perhaps most evident in her 2012 TEDxTokyo talk: “The Value of Movies”. Part autobiography, part manifesto, and, most significantly, publicity content for NIFF, Kawase argues for the importance of cinema as well as the apparatus of the international film festival to transcend the structures and boundaries of geographic and temporal space. “Films,” Kawase declares “can overcome boundaries . . . Films can overcome oceans and they let us share our emotions with one another. I believe there is nothing stronger than the emotions we share . . . The international film festival is not just for watching movies but it can become a bridge that connects people through their shared love of cinema” (Kawase 2012). Yet, this bridge that Kawase speaks of is one she has designed specifically to connect her cinema of place with the rest of the world.

5. Conclusions

The expression of Japan’s national character as both unique and separate from other nations within, as well as outside of, Asia has always been at the forefront of modern Japanese visual culture. Kawase’s films—*Suzaku* (1997), *Shara* (2003), and *Mogari* (2007)—provide the level of difference necessary for the distinction of an authentic Japanese “self” separate from the “other” in terms of the nation’s geographic as well as cultural specificity—ancient capital of Nara, Japan, Shinto, and Buddhism, daily habits, and routines of a close-knit community—while, at the same time, themes of loss, memory, death, and the dissolution of the family remain accessible on a universal level. Kawase’s dualistic mode of storytelling authorizes both a national and international meaning of the modern Japanese identity. Because of her independent status from Japan’s studio system, in the creation of these films—frequently shooting on-site (far away from filmmaking centers like Tokyo and Kyoto) and with amateur actors—Kawase is able to avoid the commercial and formulaic modes of filmmaking that

¹¹ Since NARAtive was founded in 2010 a total of five films directed by international filmmakers have been produced in Nara Japan, premiered at the Nara International Film Festival, and distributed worldwide: (1) *Last Chestnuts* (2010) dir. Zhao Ye, Kashihara City, Nara Japan; (2) *Inori* (2012) dir. Pedro González-Rubio, Totsukawa Village, Nara Japan; (3) *A Midsummer’s Fantasia* (2014) dir. Jang Kun-jae, Gojo City, Nara Japan; (4) *Wolves of the East* (2016) dir. Carlos M. Quintela, Higashiyoshino Village, Nara Japan; and (5) *Nikaidos’ Fall* (2018) dir. Ida Panahandeh, Tenri Village, Nara Japan.

serve to undermine the aesthetic and cultural specificity associated with her “cinema of place”.¹² The alignment of director and nation, in order to promote Japan’s national cinema uniquely separate from the West and to boost production through art cinema, is intrinsically linked to Kawase’s achievements at international film festivals such as Cannes, which have enthusiastically embraced her discourse of auteurism defined by regional identity. Thus, within the international film festival framework, Kawase has successfully branded herself and her films with the double status of auteur and nation. The unification and promotion of these two categories by Kawase and, subsequently, the Japanese film industry, places her squarely within the realm of auteur director.

So where does this leave us in regard to Kawase’s claim? Does she have the potential to become the next internationally known name among this generation of Japanese filmmakers? While Kawase has yet to win the coveted Palme d’Or, she has certainly established herself as a filmmaker who, depending upon the context, represents not only Japanese national cinema, but women’s cinema as well as independent and art cinema. It is also clear that Kawase understands the burden of representation that comes with being one of the most successful contemporary Japanese female filmmakers. While she rejects the expectation that her work must specifically exemplify women or women’s issues, she openly acknowledges that her marginal status of being a woman director allows for greater levels of access, mobility, and risk-taking in her work. Kawase’s “female exceptionality” has provided her with the freedom to make new aesthetic discoveries and cultivate a specific filmmaking style—a dual existence of the objective and subjective gaze—that draws upon a combination of personal experience and geographic specificity to articulate a “cinema of place”. Whether or not all of her films are critically and commercially successful, Kawase and her work have certainly captured and will continue to capture international attention.

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¹² This is especially true within the context of Kawase’s personal documentaries. As Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano observes, “. . . without any sponsors and thus without any artistic restrictions, Kawase is free to disengage herself from the reliable meaning of images that constrains the ‘rules’ of documentaries. Kawase’s personal films are promoted through international film festivals as the work of an auteur and are sold directly from her official Internet site”. See (Wada-Marciano 2012, p. 66).

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