

"100% Sadist": Violence Is Sex in Takashi Miike's *Ichi the Killer*

Lindsay Hallam

Takashi Miike's cult film *Ichi the Killer* has become renowned for its audacious and extreme depiction of violence. A gangster film set in the world of the Japanese yakuza, it distinguishes itself by commenting directly on the genre's inherent sadism. Through an excessively graphic style, the film highlights not only that the act of violence is central to the genre, but also that violence can be a source of pleasure. Thus, I will argue in this analysis that Miike's *Ichi the Killer* represents violence not only as a highly erotic activity, but as replacing sex as a means of bodily pleasure. In this film Miike foregrounds the transgressive elements contained in representations of sadism, which highlight a radical crossing of the boundaries of sexuality, through the incorporation of pain, masochism, and the sexualization of previously "non-sexual" acts, objects, and body parts.

Takashi Miike is at the forefront of a wave of Japanese directors whose films utilize extreme graphic violence. What is interesting about these films is that they do not deny the sexual aspect of this violence, demonstrated by the prevalence of rape imagery throughout. This illustrates that the forces of sex and violence hold a strong allure. Directors such as Miike, Shinya Tsukamoto (*Tetsuo, Tokyo Fist, Snake of June, Vital*), Hisayasu Sato (*The Bedroom, Naked Blood, Abnormal Ward: Consultation Room of Sadism and Masochism*), Takashi Ishii (*Gonin, Freeze Me*), and the *Guinea Pig* series of films¹ all depict scenes of violence, with extra detail paid to its effects on the body — as well as also incorporating a sexual aspect to the violent scenes. Like the European erotic horror films made in the 1960s and 1970s by directors such as Jesus Franco and Jean Rollin, these filmmakers work with low-budgets, in genres that are considered "low culture" (such as the adult "pink" film genre and the yakuza gangster genre). However, as with the makers of European erotic horror, these filmmakers imbue their films with elements of high culture and the avant-garde. *Ichi the Killer* is an example of this, as it presents graphic violence and sadism while also self-reflexively analyzing its use in genre films. The elements of sadism and masochism that are inherent in the genre are brought to the surface, becoming the main driving force of the narrative.

Ichi the Killer follows the exploits of a gangster, Kakihara, who indulges in masochistic games with his boss, Anjo. When his boss vanishes, it appears that he has been killed by Ichi, an unknown assassin who is notorious for the extreme fashion in which he eviscerates his victims. Kakihara then sets out to find Ichi, not only in order to find out what happened to his boss, but also in

anticipation of the potential pleasures that may come from meeting someone who is "one hundred percent sadist." The narrative is driven by Kakihara's search for the ultimate sadist and for his own ultimate sexual climax.

The film's own inherent sadism is illustrated in its opening scene. After the bodyguard Kaneko asks where Boss Anjo is, the camera cuts to a freeze-frame of a man, unfreezing as his fist flies toward the camera. An edit then reveals a young prostitute, Sailor, falling back from the punch, with a close-up showing her bloody, beaten face. After punching the young girl, the man, who happens to be Sailor's pimp, proceeds to have sex with her. Intercut with this are shots of a young man who climbs to a window and watches the scene. He wears a black outfit reminiscent of a superhero costume, with the figure "1" emblazoned on the back ("Ichi" is Japanese for "one"). Yet, instead of saving the girl, he just continues to stare. When the Boss checks outside the window, the man flees, leaving behind a trail of semen dripping from a pot plant. From the pool of semen on the floor rises the film's title, *Ichi the Killer*. This image directly represents the proceeding film's intermingling of sex and violence, desire and death: semen will only be produced through the act of murder.

In the world depicted by the film, violence and sex are inseparable. Sexual acts always become violent, while scenes of violence are so extreme as to become almost pornographic. It is fitting then that the words *Ichi the Killer* — a reference to the title character's propensity for murder and violence — should rise up out of a puddle of sexual fluids. For Ichi, taking life in an extreme and brutal fashion is an expression of sexual desire. In fact, for most of the film's characters, violence has replaced sex, so much so that sadism becomes the primary form of sexuality represented. It is only through the violation of another's body that these characters are able to feel pleasure in their own body.

The film's opening scene also demonstrates how generic expectations will be consistently frustrated. In this scene, Ichi arrives dressed like a superhero with a number one on his back, just as a girl is being molested. He frustrates expectations by not stepping in and rescuing the girl. He also fails to live up to his superhero image by fleeing from the scene, having masturbated like a pathetic Peeping Tom (although a later flashback will reveal that Ichi does return). As the film progresses, Ichi, whose name has become legend in yakuza circles due to the brutality of his work, is revealed in daily life to be shy, submissive, and over-sensitive (this is similar to the representation of the sadist Asami in Miike's previous film *Audition* [2000], which will be discussed further below). It is also revealed that he is under the control of Jijii, an older man who uses hypnosis and false memories to get Ichi to carry out hits on yakuza, in order to increase his own power and financial gain. Ichi's submissiveness is balanced out by the character of Kakihara, who seeks the ultimate masochistic pleasure, yet conducts his business with extreme sadism.

Playing with genre expectations and representing extreme violence are typical features of Miike's approach to storytelling. Many of his films are characterized by fast, frenetic editing, lots of flash and color, and extreme, even gratuitous violence. His style, simply put, is that of excess: even the sheer volume of Miike's output (over 50 films in just ten years) suggests an excessive nature. This propensity to excess is demonstrated in the scene in which Ichi murders Sailor's pimp. After the pimp has sex with Sailor, who remains semi-conscious from the beating she received, he sees Ichi outside the window and drags him inside. At first Ichi stands submissively, cries and says: "I'm sorry." Yet, as the pimp begins to slap him around, a blade in Ichi's shoe snaps out, and in a flash Ichi kicks up his leg and slices through him. A close-up of the stunned pimp shows his head beginning to split in half, and as it breaks apart, the insides of his head are visible. A wider shot sees his body also split open, and then a cut to a mid-shot of Ichi through the pimp's legs sees his internal organs slide out of his body and fall to the floor in the foreground of the shot, with Ichi watching. A close-up shows Ichi grab his crotch, and the camera tilts up to show he is grinning, thus illustrating the sexual release that Ichi feels after the kill. The extremely graphic shot of the pimp splitting in half (a computer generated effect) may be understood as pornographic in that it shows, overtly and in great detail, hidden parts of the body. Indeed, the "porno-graphic" character of this scene signifies the sexual and the violent as closely linked.



Fig.1. The aftermath of Ichi's rampage. *Ichi the Killer*.

Scenes in *Ichi the Killer*, such as the one described above, leave out no detail, so it is the excessiveness of these details which evokes a visceral response. Thus, Miike relies on the repetition of violence to arouse an effect: excess itself is erotic. As a result, the violence in Miike's films can be understood as becoming erotic through this excessiveness of representation, with the characters gaining pleasure from consistently and repetitively engaging in violent activity. However, at the same time, excess can also create the opposite effect, causing a numbing of sensation. In his study of Miike's cinema, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*, Tom Mes explains that:

[F]or all the director's expert manipulation of the medium of cinema, the approach he takes runs one risk that can undo the effect he's trying to achieve: boredom. The violence in *Ichi the Killer* is omnipresent and therefore potentially repetitive. The repetition of violence is very much a part of the director's intentions, since it underlies its futility" (Mes, 2003:243).

Miike's excess leads only to negation and apathy and, as Mes notes, this can be experienced both by the audience and the characters. At several points during the film, Kakiyama expresses disappointment, as his experiences never quite live up to his excitement and anticipation. But, despite this, Kakiyama remains locked in a cycle of repetition, never giving up his search for the ultimate sadist.

Consequently, for Kakiyama, pleasure is to be found in an excess of sensation, and since pain exposes the body to such an excess, it then becomes a great source of pleasure. Sexual satisfaction may, as a result, be gained from activities that do not seem to be sexual in nature, such as being cut or beaten. However, despite the fact that Kakiyama professes to be a masochist, he is seen throughout the film participating primarily in sadistic torture. Thus, Kakiyama demonstrates that the boundary separating sadism from masochism is very tenuous and can be transgressed. This is further demonstrated by the fact that in many scenes, Ichi, the "ultimate sadist," is completely dominated, even abused, by others around him.

This portrayal of the sadist is similar to how another sadist is depicted in *Audition*, one of Miike's previous films, where the sadist is again portrayed as someone who in everyday life is timid and submissive. In *Audition*, a middle-aged widower, Aoyama, works in television and stages a phoney audition for a film (at the behest of a close friend) in order to find himself a potential wife. He meets Asami, who personifies the ideal of the quiet and submissive young Japanese woman. She is described as "beautiful, classy and obedient," and is always dressed in virginal white. Yet, after Asami disappears after the first time she and Aoyama make love, he soon finds that people from Asami's past have disappeared or been murdered. When Asami finally arrives back in his life, it is to exact revenge on him for his exploitation of her and other women at his audition.

Although Asami is motivated by revenge, the form of her punishment suggests that she has a sadistic nature. That Asami is a sadist is also highlighted by what is revealed to be in the large sack that has been glimpsed in Asami's apartment. Inside is a man that she has held captive for a year. His tongue, an ear, and three of his fingers have been removed. His identity is not revealed, but it is likely that it is a music executive that Asami claimed to know, and who Aoyama finds out has been missing for some time. The contents of the sack are kept a secret through most of the film, and when the man finally crawls out he is hardly human anymore. He is kept mostly in the shadows, but there is enough light to reveal his deformities, which have been inflicted upon him by Asami. To have kept him for so long implies that Asami enjoys torturing and holding him captive. When Asami breaks in to Aoyama's home, she brings the man with her, and gives him a bowl of her own vomit so he can lap at it like a dog. This represents that the man has been systematically degraded to the status of trapped animal — a preview of what Asami has in store for Aoyama.

After having his drink drugged, Aoyama awakens to find Asami in his house, a black leather apron worn over her usual white clothes. The apron, along with her black leather boots, is like the black leather clothing worn by those who participate in sadomasochistic sex play. As Aoyama lies on the floor unable to move, a wide shot shows Asami methodically preparing for her torture, laying Aoyama on a plastic sheet and then cutting open his shirt. She tells Aoyama: "Words create lies. Pain can be trusted." She also mentions that by feeling pain "you can study about the human body as well." She carefully inserts tiny needles into certain points of Aoyama's flesh (the stomach and under the eyes), places where she knows he will feel the most pain. As she does this she repeats, "Deeper, deeper, deeper" as though it were a mantra. Throughout this scene of torture, Asami maintains a level head, treating the assault as though it were an experiment. To her, men are so deceitful that it is only through the administration of pain that they begin to tell the truth: "You only realize what kind of man you are when you feel pain. Then you understand." Trust and intimacy are gained only through violence.

Yet, while Ichi and Asami share the same quiet and submissive demeanor, in contrast to Asami's cold and clinical foreplay, Ichi massacres his victims in an uncontrolled frenzy, with his semen flowing as freely as his victims' blood. Miike employs different techniques to portray their sadism. In *Audition*, the torture is depicted in the same methodical manner that Asami carries out her assault. There is no background music, with many long takes used which observe Asami's meticulous process. While the scene is graphic, with Aoyama having needles stuck into his skin and his foot removed with piano wire, Miike actually spares the audience a lot of detail. When inserting needles underneath Aoyama's eye, the shot is done from Aoyama's point of view, with the needles being put in just below the frame. The next shot then shows



Fig. 2. Asami prepares her sadistic revenge. *Audition*.

Aoyama with the needles already in his flesh. As to the removal of the foot, while there are brief close ups of the act, what makes the scene horrifying are the sound effects and the length of time it takes for the foot to come off. During the act, the most predominant shot is of Asami pulling the wire, again with the foot out of shot below the frame. This is intercut with flashbacks from Asami's childhood, where it is revealed that her ballet teacher was also her stepfather, who used to abuse Asami by applying burning hot sticks to her inner thigh. This flashback illustrates the linking of sex and violence, which Asami has carried into her adult life. The ballet teacher crawls along the floor, as the child Asami sits with her legs apart. As he comes toward her, he holds out the two burning sticks and burns her inner thigh. The stance of Asami, with her leg spread open, and the phallic shape of the sticks suggest rape, with close ups showing the bloody wounds on Asami's inner thigh, which is next to her genitals. As Asami cuts off Aoyama's foot, a flashback shows the ballet teacher rubbing his crotch — he is expressing sexual desire as Asami commits a violent act — yet the cutting of the foot suggests castration, an act of revenge on the men who have exploited her sexually. For Asami, sex and violence have become confused, with her revenge taking the form of a torture that is also a sexual release for her.

Sexual release through torture is also a recurring theme in *Ichi the Killer*. The character of Kakiyama is a perfect representation of the excess found throughout Miike's films, a flamboyant counterpoint to the shy Ichi. While Ichi's black costume, which he wears when he commits murder, helps him to

hide in the shadows, Kakihara's outlandish and colorful suits, by contrast, are complemented by his peroxidized blond hair and body piercings. His face has deep, clean scars that have obviously been deliberately cut into his skin for aesthetic, and erotic, purposes. His body modifications express his fascination with pain, and his penchant for excessive behavior. He has cut and scarred his own face in order to feel pleasure through pain. While Kakihara never participates in sexual intercourse in the course of the film, he constantly seeks sexual satisfaction, which can be satisfied only through violence. Furthermore, Kakihara searches for sexual pleasure that can be felt throughout the whole surface of the body. And since this can only be achieved beyond a focus on the genitals, it is pain which causes the greatest sensations.

However, despite this area of transgression, there is still a clear distinction between sadism and masochism, as both are motivated by different wants and desires. Kakihara's sadistic actions, for instance, are solely motivated by his quest for the ultimate sadistic partner who will drive him to his own ecstatic levels of pain. After Boss Anjo goes missing, Kakihara, refusing to believe that he is dead, becomes obsessed with finding him. This obsession is fuelled not by loyalty to his gang boss, however, but by his fear that he has lost the one person who successfully satisfies his masochistic desires. It becomes apparent that Kakihara and Anjo have a sexual relationship: Anjo beats Kakihara in order for both to feel sexual pleasure. While both Anjo and Kakihara are represented as heterosexual, they nevertheless find the perfect sexual symbiosis in the violent encounters they shared with each other. As Kakihara searches for his boss, several characters remark that he had a "crush" on Anjo, with one of them adding that this is "[n]ot because you're queer or you admired his balls. It was because you relished the pain that he inflicted when he beat you up."

This is illustrated by Kakihara's attempt to establish a relationship with Karen (who was previously Anjo's girlfriend before he was killed). Karen becomes Kakihara's woman after she gleefully joins in on his tormenting of a restaurant owner. Having been refused entry, Kakihara grabs the owner's cheek and begins to pull and stretch the skin. The owner pleads to Karen for help, but she instead joins in, moaning with pleasure as close-ups reveal the stretched skin. The next scene in which they are together is in a dungeon setting, with both in SM costumes. Kakihara is in chains as Karen punches him repeatedly. Kakihara coaches her, saying: "When you're hurting someone, don't think of the pain that he feels. Only concentrate on the pleasure of causing him pain. That's the only way to show true compassion for your partner." Kakihara advocates a completely selfish sexuality in which all the focus is on one's own pleasure. Thus, Kakihara is able to have partners of either gender because the partner is actually irrelevant — the only thing that matters is the sensations that the partner causes him to experience. As a

result, although Karen is represented as strong, intelligent, beautiful, and vicious, her inability to beat Kakihara with the level of ferocity that he desires leads him to tell her that, "The boss was a lot better at this.... You let me down." His disappointment with Karen causes Kakihara to become fixated on finding Ichi, whose sadistic killings inspire amazement in him: "There's something inhuman to this carnage. Most people have a touch of both sadism and masochism inside them, but this Ichi is one hundred percent pure sadist. I can't wait to meet him."

Yet, Kakihara's statement is only partially true, as Miike portrays his characters as being capable of both sadism and masochism. In fact, although he seeks masochistic pleasure, Kakihara commits sadistic torture. After he is set up by Jijii into thinking that a rival gangster, Suzuki, is responsible for Anjo's disappearance, Kakihara has Suzuki kidnapped, and enacts an elaborate and prolonged torture upon him. A close-up shows Suzuki coming to consciousness, and a high-angle long shot reveals that he is naked and suspended in mid-air by metal hooks through his skin. As Suzuki screams, Kakihara comes over to him holding a long, sharp skewer. As Suzuki pleads ignorance to the claims made against him, Kakihara rams the skewer through his cheek, and then pours boiling oil over his back and head. All of this is shown in close-up, intercut with shots of Kakihara smiling madly at his work. In fact, throughout this torture scene, almost every conceivable angle is used, with everything shown in great detail. In this scene, we see the body of Suzuki transformed through torture. Close-ups and long shots show the hooks through Suzuki's back, the skin being punctured and stretched. In conjunction with the large yakuza tattoo that covers his back, the camera's focus on the tortured flesh makes it clear that Suzuki's body has been largely modified through pain.

Ichi the Killer reveals how the gangster plays with the body, testing and exploring its limits and possibilities. By definition, the gangster is a violent type, and this film confronts the sexual aspects of his violence, which he uses to attain power, and through this power, pleasure. Yet Kakihara turns this power and violence back onto himself, even though he relishes the violence he inflicts upon others, which is an essential part of his job. As he pours boiling oil on Suzuki, a close-up shows the scorched and tattooed skin as it begins to burn and blister, becoming almost unrecognizable as human flesh. The unrelenting sadism of Kakihara's behavior even shocks other members of the yakuza, who enter the room and demand an explanation, to which Kakihara replies: "just a little torture." Several other scenes show that Kakihara, who claims to be seeking masochistic pleasure, is capable of, and seems to take as much pleasure in, extreme sadism.

The portrayal of sadism in this film diverges from the idea that sadism and masochism are two different forms, as Ichi and Kakihara show tendencies

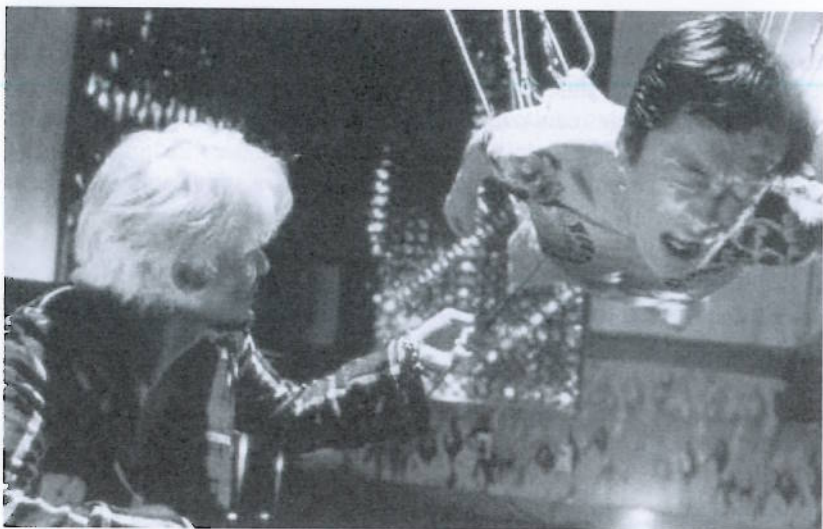


Fig. 3. The masochist Kakihara also delights in sadistic torture. *Ichi the Killer*.

toward both. Kakihara's behavior certainly expresses this. For instance, after torturing Suzuki, he is reprimanded by his yakuza superiors. As a result, Kakihara offers an "apology," which involves cutting off the tip of his tongue with a knife. An extreme close-up shows the knife cutting through the tongue, and then in mid-shot, a blood-soaked Kakihara holds the piece of flesh toward the camera, offering it to his superiors (and the audience) as he groans incoherently. A deep-focus wide shot reveals that everyone at the meeting is staring at Kakihara in disbelief. In the foreground, one of the yakuza sways back and forth as though he is about to faint. This episode illustrates that Kakihara does not see pain as punishment, and in fact, relishes any opportunity to undergo painful treatment. He indulges in sadistic behavior in order to find the person who will kill him in the extreme fashion that he feels he deserves. But perhaps Kakihara is really in fact looking for himself: in a perverse reversal of the Christian principle, he is looking for one to do to him exactly what he does to others.

Therefore, Kakihara's eventual meeting with Ichi is inevitably a disappointment. When it becomes apparent that they are both in the same apartment building, Kakihara giddily remarks: "I'm scared of myself. All this anticipation.... The few times I've felt this I've been let down." The action periodically goes into slow motion when both see each other on the roof and run after each other, a device used to increase suspense. They are joined by Kakihara's bodyguard Kaneko, who Ichi has been brainwashed into thinking is his long-lost brother. Ichi is therefore more preoccupied with establishing

a bond with Kaneko. After Kaneko shoots Ichi in the leg, Ichi in self-defense kills him by slashing his neck. When he realizes what he has done, he falls to the floor and weeps uncontrollably. He is then kicked while he is down by Takeshi, Kaneko's son, who has witnessed the scene. Kakihara sees his "one hundred percent sadist" on the floor, crying and being kicked by a child. Kakihara pleads with Ichi to get up: "How can we have our challenge match if you keep acting this way?"

For Kakihara has imagined Ichi to be the provider of pain of such intensity that he will achieve the ultimate orgasm, from which he will never recover. This scene reveals that Kakihara's masochism is actually a death wish: both his torturing of others and relishing of his own pain signal that he no longer fears death — in fact, he courts it. Kakihara's fascination with violence is thus in reality a fascination with death. Once he realizes that Ichi will not grant his death wish, he takes a skewer in each hand and raises them to his ears. In extreme close-up, the skewer is shown as it passes through his ear canal; and in a close-up of his eyes, sound becomes silence. Suddenly the picture is over-exposed, as Kakihara fantasizes his own ultimate death. As Ichi runs toward him, he stops Ichi's foot-blade just as it is about to enter his head, which leaves a straight wound on his forehead. But Kakihara is pushed back against a stair rail and falls back over it. As he falls, he says, "This is amazing!" Kakihara ultimately finds fulfilment in fantasy: excessive behavior leads merely to apathy, it is only in the mind that one can find the ultimate pleasure.

The sadism inherent in the gangster film becomes the plot's driving force in *Ichi the Killer*. The politics within the yakuza gangs, of which both Ichi and Kakihara are a part, becomes secondary to Kakihara's quest for sexual and existential fulfilment. The sexualization of violence is also highlighted by the film's graphic visual style, with acts of sadism being depicted in almost pornographic detail. These acts of sadism can be understood as transgressive, in that they incorporate all parts of the body, sexualizing formerly non-sexual body parts and activities, as well as placing pain and violence as the central elements of sexual desire and pleasure.

Endnotes

- 1 The *Guinea Pig* series is one of the most controversial series of films ever created. The brain-child of producer Satoru Ogura, they were designed to deliver the hardest, and most graphic, scenes of sadistic murder ever committed to film. Presented in the form of fictional snuff films, each entry in the series details the graphic and prolonged torture and murder of a young woman. There is no plot or character development. The second entry, *Guinea Pig: Flower of Flesh and Blood*, was even investigated by the FBI after a

report was made (by actor Charlie Sheen) that it was actually a real snuff film.

References

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Distant Voices, Still Lives: Love, Loss, and Longing in the Work of Makoto Shinkai

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Within the hallowed ranks of Japanese anime, the label of “new Miyazaki” is something that is at once both too difficult and too easy to bestow on new directors: too difficult because the Studio Ghibli luminary is as distinctive a figure as is currently working in Japanese cinema; too easy as a great deal of our current Anglophone critical establishment seems only able to valorize promising new directors by relying on lazy comparisons to great filmmakers of past generations. Discourse on Kitano Takeshi in particular exemplifies this trend. By the time of his own international breakthrough with *Hana-Bi* in 1997, he was being variously compared to Ozu, Kurosawa, and Oshima in Japan; elsewhere to Martin Scorsese, Buster Keaton, Jean-Pierre Melville, Robert Bresson, John Woo, Sam Peckinpah, and Quentin Tarantino.

That Shinkai Makoto has been championed and indeed sold (certainly internationally) as the “new Miyazaki” is thus as dispiriting as it is predictable. Moreover, it is also entirely misleading. In the films Makoto has thus far directed (in fact only three shorts and two features), the most striking aspect has been precisely the singularity of voice and vision he has demonstrated. Unless one is content to compare him with Miyazaki on the strength of their respective acclaim and commercial success,¹ or on a perceived comparability of status as respective anime prodigies, there is little real scope for a productive contrast. Nowhere in Shinkai is there the environmental concern or emphasis on families one finds in Miyazaki (and, for that matter, in Takahata Isao, Ghibli’s other key director); nor does Shinkai hold any store in magical childhood adventures or scrupulously avoid, as Miyazaki does, the face of modern Japan.

Ignoring for a moment the question of genre, if Makoto does share commonalities with any directors at Studio Ghibli, one could more readily point to such marginal directors as sometime animator Yoshifumi Kondo (and his only directorial effort before an untimely death, *Mimi o sumaseba/Whisper of the Heart*, [1995]) or Mochizuki Tomomi (the TV production *Uma ga kikoeru/ I Can Hear the Ocean*, [1993]). The adolescent love stories at the heart of these films resonate with Shinkai’s own pervasive interest in the vagaries of lost love, longing, and loneliness, and with the often corrosive power of memory. His short, fledgling filmography is composed entirely of variations on these themes: from the award-winning short *Kanojo to kanojo no neko (She and Her Cat)*, 1999, which features a kitten’s melancholic musings on its owner’s seemingly unhappy life, to his breakthrough *Hoshi no koe (Voices of a Distant Star)*, 2003 and its story of the increasing distance between two high-school students (Mikako and Noboru) when the former is sent far across