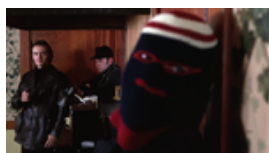




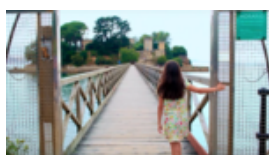
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## **Gods and Monsters: Murakami Goes to the Movies**

**By Glen Helfand**



In contemporary art, the feature film is a pinnacle form. It offers abundant possibilities to tell stories, address themes in a nuanced, durational manner, create carefully art-directed universes, and reach audiences much larger and more diverse than those at any gallery or museum. So for Takashi Murakami, an artist known for his ambitious multimedia practice, international scope, and brand-name recognition, feature film was inevitable. Since the 1990s, his work has grown to encompass a staggering range of media—from large-scale painting and sculpture to Louis Vuitton bags—taking on the vast subject of the Japanese pop psyche on a global stage.

It's clear why an artist of Murakami's stature would attempt the medium of film, but there was no guarantee that his gallery reputation would translate to success in cinema. The scale of a film requires a collaborative component—the cast and crew—that doesn't jibe with the traditional idea of the artist alone in the studio creating a thoughtful masterpiece. But Murakami has the infrastructure and temperament for the medium. He has his own production company, Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., with fully staffed outposts in Tokyo and New York that can produce projects in any medium, at any scale. He conceptualizes and carefully oversees each endeavor; his role is that of an aesthetically inclined CEO, something that seems a lot like a film director.

His first feature, the deceptively playful *Jellyfish Eyes* (2013), emerges as a hybrid of Japanese popular entertainment and his overarching conceptual project. It doesn't immediately look like an art movie—its surface form is a science-fiction action adventure for kids—but it positions Murakami as an artist-auteur with grand vision.

It's not surprising that, historically, the more successful artist-filmmaker crossovers have been ambitious and extroverted sorts. The flamboyant Salvador Dalí was perhaps the first of these, in his collaborations with Luis Buñuel, and later with his work in Hollywood, which fueled his celebrity-artist persona. Andy Warhol remains the artist most deeply associated with the medium. He was inspired by the glamorous mythos of Hollywood, and it inspired both static works and film projects. While some of the latter received broad movie-audience recognition as novelties, they were never intended to compete with major productions of the day—projects like his 1964 *Empire* were formal experiments that somewhat passively turned the camera on existing action, and while they made bold artistic statements, they were butt-numbing Art Films more known for their conceptual conceits than they were actually seen. The more audience-friendly narrative works associated with Warhol, such as the 1974 *Blood for Dracula*, were directed by Paul Morrissey and “presented” by Warhol. Julian Schnabel, known for his outsize personality, has made powerful films—drawing from a painterly romanticism and focusing on characters facing extreme physical conditions—that have clearly aimed at breaking out of the art world, and succeeded. But he, too, isn't exactly courting popular tastes. It's worth noting that while Cindy Sherman is highly revered as a visual artist, her sole foray into feature filmmaking, *Office Killer* (1997), is considered an oddity; perhaps solitary and

introverted methods don't jibe with the director's chair.

Murakami's position among these artists is notable for his interest in, and success at, producing something that can compete in a wider arena. On one level, *Jellyfish Eyes* is a remarkably capable genre work, a creature feature—or *kaiju*, the Japanese giant-monster category that Godzilla lives in—with impressive CGI effects and the heartwarming outsider-kid-meets-alien narrative trope of Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* The merging of Japanese and American classics is hardly accidental. All of Murakami's work addresses complex ideas about Japanese tradition and national identity, as perceived globally and at home. As a postwar child—he was born in 1962—he was influenced by the cultural shame and the infantilized position of a defeated power faced with sanctions. Murakami has curated exhibitions and created many works that theorize about how the Japanese psyche is expressed visually in popular culture. The core of his ideas has been expressed in a trio of manifesto-like group exhibitions, including *Superflat*, a 2001 show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, which focused on a history of visually flattened perspectives—think Japanese woodblock prints—that has carried through to contemporary anime and manga. (He views curating as an integral part of his practice and continues to organize exhibitions that highlight aspects of contemporary Japanese art.) Those forms are cultural exports that may not be totally understood by Western audiences, perhaps in the same way that *Godzilla* lost something in translation when recut and dubbed into English.

Murakami also works with the idea that the Japanese see fewer distinctions between high art and popular forms, like manga, that Westerners view as lesser mediums. In his culture, highly polished surfaces and technical proficiency are valued more than concepts. Artists who draw graphic novels can be as revered as those who make exquisite lacquered furniture. While Murakami is well trained in traditional Japanese technique—he did postgraduate studies in the *nihonga* painting style, formally codified in the nineteenth century as a means of distinguishing itself from Western aesthetic influence—he is also a brilliant conceptualist who uses ideas and social structures and business models as integral parts of his work. In his own practice, a Louis Vuitton handbag is as meaningful as one of his giant stylized Buddha sculptures, or a feature film.

*Jellyfish Eyes* is particularly Japanese in its flavor, drawing upon *otaku*, a fanboy culture of comic-book aficionados, as well as *kawaii*, a term that refers to the meaningful deployment of cuteness—as in the way that Hello Kitty is designed for maximum relatability. *Kawaii* is seen in *Jellyfish Eyes*' fantastical creatures (some of which have actually been produced as collectibles). *Kawaii* also functions as a means of putting a happy face on something troubling. In the case of the film, that would be environmental and social issues—specifically, the massive 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and ensuing Fukushima nuclear disaster—as well as the insidious effects of technology on human relationships.

The plot centers on Masashi, a youngster who has lost his father, who operated a seafood plant, to a rainbow-hued tsunami. Dad haunts Masashi's dreams, and his death has Masashi's mother tearful and distracted (as are most parents in the film's kid-focused universe) as she and Masashi move to a new town. Masashi almost immediately discovers a hungry creature lurking among the boxes in their empty apartment, pigging out on a plastic-wrapped processed cheese-and-fish-cake snack called Chee-kama. The gleaming white creature resembles a cross between a jellyfish and a toadstool, with radiant green eyes. The child calls it Kurage-bo, and it quickly becomes his pal and protector. The boy's concerned uncle Naoto, a J-pop handsome researcher in the town's ominous laboratory, silently notes Kurage-bo's presence, knowing its creators are a black-cloaked quartet of less-than-benevolent young scientists.

As a species, the creature is a F.R.I.E.N.D.—“life-Form Resonance Inner Energy Negative emotion and Disaster prevention”—and when Masashi is at school, it appears that they're a tweener trend—his classmates all have one too. Whereas Masashi communicates humanly with his, the others are controlled with spiffy electronic devices that look a lot like smartphones. There are scenes where the kids are in the classroom texting frantically on their devices to allow their F.R.I.E.N.D.s to express their ids each moment their powerless teacher's back is turned. The room is populated with aggressive creatures of various stripes, from jewel-encrusted baubleheads to snarling, slimy hyena hybrids—characters that could have jumped out of one of Murakami's paintings. This conceit is a not-so-veiled spin on cultures overdependent on technology and social media as an illusory form of connection. Masashi endures the sometimes physically violent taunts of bullies and relies on his adorable F.R.I.E.N.D. to navigate conflict, as well as find young love and empowerment.

While this seems to be a tale of triumph, the narrative is tempered by darker tones, particularly in the way the evil technologists harness the negative energy of children as a source of power. This is done, fittingly, on a battle stage featuring prominent yin and yang symbols, to create a monster F.R.I.E.N.D. of Godzilla-esque proportions, a character

called Oval, who is both potatolike and ferocious. That scenario provides the visual climax of the film, with virtual creatures and kaleidoscopic tornado swirls. These are the sequences with the most visual panache, the ones most easily associated with Murakami's art pedigree.

Murakami's national identity is an explicit theme in all his work, and yet his art has been far more successful outside his home country. He has even stated that he strategically launched his career in the West in order to bring it back to Japan with the cachet of a cultural import. In the illuminating production notes for the film, the artist/director says he is particularly influenced by Peter Jackson, first for the fact that Jackson is able to make Hollywood films in his native New Zealand, and second for Jackson's showcasing of creatures. He also cites Hayao Miyazaki, of Studio Ghibli fame, as a profound influence, for the animator's emphasis on creating artful entertainments with socially critical reference points.

Ever self-aware, Murakami deploys culturally specific references that may elude international audiences, using the blur as part of the meaning. As he states in the production notes: "The most important part of Murakami art is misunderstanding, miscommunication, or trans-culture—that is, the idea that one thing transforms into something else entirely through a series of misunderstandings." So the idea that aspects of the film seem opaque to non-Japanese viewers is as deliberate as its curious denouement, where good and evil merge and evolve into something engagingly thorny.

*Jellyfish Eyes* is best viewed through this transcultural lens. It is another means of the artist's flattening his reference points. The film appears to be a familiar package, but it exists in between artistic and geographical territories. That is, it is deeply embedded in the ever-expanding Murakami universe.

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