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***KITANO TAKESHI: AUTHORSHIP,  
GENRE & STARDOM IN JAPANESE  
CINEMA***

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## Note on Romanization

The system of romanization used in this thesis is the British Standards Institute Specification for the Romanization of Japanese, which is essentially the same as the widely-used 'Modified Hepburn System'. When the names of Japanese people, places, production companies, etc, are mentioned in the text they are not italicised, and long vowels are not marked. Thus, it is Oshima rather than Ōshima, Osaka rather than Ōsaka, and Shochiku rather than Shōchiku. Familiar words such as *yakuza*, *manga* and *ronin* are treated in the same way (the only exception is that 'Nō' has been preferred to 'No' or 'Noh'). Titles of films and books, both Japanese and English, and less familiar Japanese words such as *giri*, *ninjō* and *bōsōzoku*, are italicised and long vowels are marked with macrons (ā, ī, ū, ē, ō). Where English titles include Japanese words long vowels are not marked. Thus the Japanese *Zatōichi* is given in English as *Zatoichi*, the Japanese *Kikujirō no natsu* in English becomes *Kikujiro*.

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# Introduction

## Problems of Definition: Kitano(s) Takeshi(s)

**‘That the (Japanese film) industry managed to survive at all in the Western perception is entirely due to one man-Takeshi Kitano<sup>1</sup>’.**

Kitano Takeshi is, quite simply and inescapably, unlike any other artist at work in the world today. In his native Japan he is one of the most popular and enduring entertainers of the last thirty years. Under the stage name Bīto (Beat) Takeshi he is famous as a stand-up comedian, a film actor and a television personality. With up to seven shows every week on Japanese television, he is a perennial, ubiquitous figure: someone who can move from vulgar comedy to talk shows about the Japanese economy or about the Japanese themselves and back with apparent ease. Elsewhere (most often under his real name) he is or has been variously known and acclaimed as a painter, novelist, singer, poet, critic, radio host, newspaper columnist and magazine essayist: and latterly has been the driving force behind his own production company, Office Kitano.

In addition to this, Kitano also has what he self-deprecatingly (and somewhat disingenuously) calls a ‘hobby<sup>2</sup>’. He is a filmmaker - a writer/director of world-renown, arguably the most important and celebrated Japanese director of his generation and almost certainly today the most famous on the world stage. Indeed, if his status as the

foremost TV personality in Japan over recent decades is beyond doubt (among others accolades, he was named in a national poll as the country's favourite television celebrity for six consecutive years), so too is his importance within the Japanese film industry of the 1990s and thereafter.

Despite his curious absence from certain discourses on contemporary Japanese filmmaking, Kitano's centrality to his country's cinema cannot be overstated. Domestically, he was instrumental in shaping the direction that mainstream filmmaking took in Japan in the 1990s. Along with Tsukamoto Shinya's *Tetsuo (Tetsuo: The Iron Man, 1989)*, Kitano's first film *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki (Violent Cop, 1989)* re-introduced violent genre material onto Japanese screens more than a decade after the last heyday of the Yakuza film (with Fukasaku Kinji and Ishii Teruo) had ended. Like Fukasaku, director of the Yakuza films series that revolutionized the genre in the early 1970s, Kitano's early innovations in the Yakuza and Cop film indelibly transformed what had since the 1970s become staid and antiquated generic forms, and brought about a popular revival in line both with contemporary social malaise and with a detailed stylistic revision and transformation of narrative technique.

These innovations in turn influenced a new generation of young directors: and it is in this regard that Kitano emerges as a truly significant, even seminal figure. One could, indeed, make the case for him as an Oshima Nagisa figure for the Japanese New New Wave of the 1990s. The comparison between Kitano and Oshima is far more marked than has generally been allowed, with many critics preferring to pursue (admittedly tangible) links between Kitano and the likes of Ozu and Kurosawa. There is an obvious point of contact between Oshima and Kitano in the two films of the former in which the latter has

starred: *Furyo/Senjō no merī kurisumasu* (*Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, 1983) and *Gohatto* [1999]. However, these are merely surface manifestations of a fundamental cinematic kinship that extends to thematic concerns, career development and, crucially, patterns of reception that elucidate not only notions of authorship in general, but those specific to Japanese cinema and the often marked dichotomy between domestic and international acclaim (or otherwise). One may, in other words, map the trajectory of Kitano's career onto that of Oshima's. And in so doing it is possible to discern two major factors of confluence (that in turn open up further areas of contrast) that can shed light on both specific artistry and respective industrial and sociological norms.

### **Kitano Takeshi and the New New Wave**

**'Kitano's influence is very visible. The more action-filled sequences of...Aoyama Shinji and Iwai Shunji indicate this, and it is often seen in the many films of...Miike Takashi<sup>3</sup>'.**

Donald Richie

It has become a commonplace in commentary on Japanese cinema in recent years to discuss the Japanese film industry's poor state of health. Whilst true of the country's major studios and their commercial imperatives, what is often implicit in such discourses is that this mainstream of Japanese filmmaking is the whole of the industry. Alex Kerr, for example, in his diatribe against modern Japanese cinema entitled *Dogs and Demons*, concentrates almost exclusively on the major studios and their monopolistic practices, on what he terms their 'dead hand of bureaucracy<sup>4</sup>'.

It is true that the big studios were barely solvent at the end of the 1980s. The three that remained - Shochiku, Toho and Toei - were by this time concentrating almost exclusively on distribution, leaving production to television networks and trading houses that saw film as purely a business interest, a PR tool or even a tax write-off. The films they handled were almost all pre-sold fare, endlessly recycled genre material or series pictures with tried-and-tested formulas that appealed to a narrow niche audience. Indeed, but for the practices of selling tickets in advance and block booking, which had proved so effective in 1990 when producer Kadokawa Haruki printed nearly five million advance tickets for his epic *Ten to Chi to (Heaven and Earth, 1990)*, thus making his film the year's second biggest hit, these studios might well have followed their one-time counterparts like Nikkatsu and Daiei into bankruptcy and dissolution.

However, as a result of this malaise in the industry, there was a significant change in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s. As Nakata Hideo has noted:

**'The '90s was the decade of starting over for the Japanese film industry...starting over in the '90s also meant the end of traditional studio filmmaking'<sup>5</sup>**

Among the most marked arbiters of this change was the development of the independent sector of filmmaking in Japan. Although it is accurate to note, as does Alex Kerr, that 'Independent art films do not a cinema industry make'<sup>6</sup>, it is also true that in the wake of *Violent Cop* and the emergence of Kitano the director, independent filmmaking in Japan has achieved something it conspicuously had not when independent companies had first been allowed to form in the early 1960s or when they had emerged in the 1980s: a near

hegemonic position within the industry. Consequently, the independent sector of the 1990s can no longer be considered simply marginal. And in contradistinction to Kerr's correlation of independent with art cinema, it can no longer be equated simply with anti-mainstream works, as all the directors of note to have emerged in the wake of Kitano have done so (been, in truth, all but obliged to) by working within the framework of commercial genre filmmaking.

There was another significant development within the Japanese film industry in the 1990s. As a direct result of the above growth of the independent sector, new young filmmakers who had not taken the tried and tested route to becoming directors began to get the chance to direct their own films. Traditionally, Japanese filmmakers had been obliged to work their way up through studios before finally working as assistants to established directors and then becoming directors themselves. However, in the 1990s new directors began entering the industry from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, with Kitano once again pointing the way forward. With no prior experience (or even interest) in filmmaking, he simply stepped into the director's chair when it was vacated by Fukasaku Kinji part way into the production of *Violent Cop*, and this proved a prophetic move. Several filmmakers and companies had been able to produce films independently in the 1980s, especially in the fields of documentary filmmaking (Hara Kazuo and Takemine Go) and animation (Katsuhiro Otomo with *Akira* [1988]). But with few exceptions, such as Otomo and *Akira*, they remained marginal figures, and as such made little inroads in the industry. Itami Juzo is a key figure in this regard. Like Kitano, he had been an actor long before he became a director, but he was obliged to finance his first film, *Osōshiki* (*The Funeral*, 1984), entirely by himself, and it was only later in his career

that he was able to establish beneficial distribution and production ties with a major studio, in his case Toho.

Kitano is instructive with regard to independent filmmaking in the 1990s and the New New Wave precisely because his early works were produced at a major studio, not independently. This situation overtly echoes that of the first New Wave of the 1960s. The major directors of this movement, including the filmmaker most often heralded as its instigator and central figure, Oshima Nagisa, began with films produced at major studios. Oshima's first four films, from *Ai to kibō no machi* (*A Town of Love and Hope*, 1959) to *Nihon no yoru to kiri* (*Night and Fog in Japan*, 1960), were all made at Shochiku, as were the early films of Shinoda Masahiro and Yoshida Yoshishige. Conversely, Imamura Shohei's first seven films were produced at Nikkatsu (with a further six having production ties with various other majors).

*Violent Cop*, like Kitano's three subsequent films and those of the majority of the New Wave filmmakers, was made at Shochiku studios, and under a similar initiative as his New Wave progenitors. Shochiku had traditionally been the most conservative and least willing to experiment of all the major Japanese studios and the most reliant on generic, pre-sold formula works (such as its flagship *Otoka wa tsurai yo*, or *Tora-san*, series, with forty-eight films officially the longest running film series ever). However, this has led at certain historical junctures to its somewhat self-consciously trying to improve its ailing fortunes by allowing new young directors the chance and the freedom to make their own films. This was the case when Oshima Nagisa was quickly promoted from assistant director to make *A Town of Love and Hope* under a rushed new policy designed to halt

the studio's declining fortunes after they had failed to capitalise on the new boom in youth and action pictures.

Oshima's early films, then - both those made at Shochiku's Ofuna studio (his first four) and those made independently - directly influenced the first New Wave of the 1960s. Similarly, Kitano's first films (again, both studio products and otherwise) had a comparable impact on what has been termed the 'Japanese cinema after Mr. Pink generation' (in reference to their collective idolatry of the films of Quentin Tarantino). Within the industry, the fact that Kitano attained a measure of (predominantly critical) success as a filmmaker with no prior experience, and without having taken any traditional route to directing (such as working as an assistant director or directing for television or video), paved the way for younger, inexperienced directors to get films made, both within and outside the major studios. In Japan, as in many countries, there had been a steady but marked decline in the fortunes of the domestic film industry for several decades dating from the 1960s. This fact is underlined in the desperate statistics that the number of Japanese films released in Japan fell from 547 in 1960 to a seemingly meagre 249 in 1998<sup>7</sup>.

As the 1990s progressed, the independent sector of Japanese cinema grew substantially. This is precisely where the contrast with the first Japanese New Wave becomes most telling. As noted, Shochiku had produced the early work of Oshima Nagisa and his contemporaries primarily as a means of overturning their hitherto conservative policies and productions and capitalising on current, divergent trends in Japanese cinema. Kitano's early work was made at the same studio: and in a repeat of their initiative with Oshima of 1959, they would subsequently proceed, as *Japan Times*

critic Mark Schilling has noted, to make ‘strenuous efforts to reach beyond formula fare and revitalize its line-up<sup>8</sup>’. This led to a number of fresh approaches and ventures. Young and independent talent was, again, a priority, especially with the launch of the (short-lived) *Cinema Japanesque* project intended to produce and distribute indie films through Shochiku’s theatre chain.

Kitano’s early success, then, figure-headed, and to a certain degree facilitated, this new generation of directors. It was his success in becoming a director, along with the industrial reforms attendant upon significant social and cultural determinants, which allowed them to follow their progenitors and namesakes in both Japan and France and break into filmmaking. Other studios followed Shochiku’s lead. Chief among these was Toho, who established funding for low-budget films by young and first-time directors in a project called YES (Young Entertainment Square). This industrial initiative produced works by Hashiguchi Ryosuke among others, and in fact became symptomatic of Toho’s desire to distribute and exhibit independent films rather than produce their own.

In point of fact, in the wake of Kitano, many of the most widely acclaimed filmmakers of the 1990s, including those like Kurosawa Kiyoshi who were not centrally attached to the New New Wave, were independent directors. As Miike Takashi has told Mark Schilling:

**‘Kitano started as a comedian and still is one. He’s not making films as a professional but as an artist. Ishii (Takashi), who was originally a *Manga* artist, is the same way...the directors who are being praised at foreign film festivals are from outside the film industry here...the people who are proud of having built the formerly first-rate Japanese film industry rarely leave Japan<sup>9</sup>’.**

Moreover, the first tide of European acclaim that greeted the release of *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993) and, later, *Hana-Bi* [1997]; indeed, the very fact that Kitano seemed to be more successful in the West than in Japan, helped to re-open a once-lucrative international market for Japanese cinema. After a period of foreign invisibility dating back to the 1980s, Kitano (along with Tsukamoto Shinji) paved the way for a return to prominence of Japanese films and filmmakers in the West, and for the discovery of directors such as Miike Takashi, Nakata Hideo and Kurosawa Kiyoshi.

This, in turn, had significant ramifications. The most important independent producer of the 1990s was Sento Takenori, who had a track record of involvement with committed independent production in his *J Movie Wars* series, which had produced work by, among others, Ishii Sogo and Nakata Hideo. In late 1998, he established a production unit with Japan Satellite Broadcasting called Suncent Cinema Works; whilst in April 1999, he began New Project J-Cine-X, which he said was specifically designed to make films aimed at the overseas market, and to introduce Western methods of production in order to revitalise the Japanese industry<sup>10</sup>. These are important developments with regard to perceptions of a turnaround in the fortunes of Japanese cinema. In 1997, Kitano won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival with *Hana-Bi* and cemented Japan's return to prominence in world cinema. In the same year, Imamura Shohei's *Unagi* (*The Eel*, 1997) won the Palme D'or at the Cannes Film Festival, Sento's then-wife Kawase Naomi's *Moe no suzaku* (*The God Suzaku*, 1997) won the Camera D'or at the same festival, and Masayuki Suo's *Shall We Dansu?* (*Shall We Dance?*, 1996) became the highest grossing Asian film ever in the US.

A further point of comparison with Oshima requires brief elucidation at this point. One particular tenet of cinematic authorship, derived in large part from literary criticism, is a biographical approach to the study of a director's body of work. As an academic discipline within film studies, this has arguably been as marked in discourse on Japanese cinema and Japanese directors as anywhere (as Robin Wood's<sup>11</sup> work on Ozu can attest). Oshima is perhaps the paradigmatic figure in this regard. He has produced his own autobiographical essays and reflections, as well as published diary extracts<sup>12</sup>; Louis Danvers and Charles Tatum, Jr. wrote a monograph in France in 1986 that explicitly foregrounded the presence of Oshima himself in his work<sup>13</sup>; whilst Maureen Turim, in the introduction to her book on the director, elucidates at length the pre-eminent 'myths' that have informed Oshima's work and, significantly, perceptions thereof, especially by international commentators<sup>14</sup>.

Kitano is, if anything, an even more interesting case study in this regard than his progenitor. He has, like Oshima, written extensively about his own life, in particular his childhood, in the autobiographical texts *Kids Return*, *Asakusa Kid* and *Kikujirō and Saki* (the names of his father and mother). As 'Beat' Takeshi, the television celebrity and the actor, his persona has become inextricably linked with a perceived, perhaps hypothetical real self: his personal stories and recollections often informed his comedic radio and television work, whilst several of his performances in films (both by himself and by other directors) have traded heavily on the figure of Kitano Takeshi. Most prominent in this regard is Fukasaku's *Batoru rowaiaru* (*Battle Royale*, 2000), in which the name of his character (the tyrannical teacher behind the film's central conceit) was changed to Takeshi Kitano.

A number of Kitano's own films have, then, been perceived to be autobiographical in a very direct way, and it is necessary at this stage to sketch a (cursory) biography as a means of laying the foundations for this important aspect of Kitano's oeuvre. Kitano Takeshi was born in 1947, a child of post-war Japan and, ultimately, its miracle economy and unparalleled industrial expansionism. However, his early years in the Adachi-ku ward in the then impoverished Senju district of Tokyo tell a different story, a typical tale of deprivation and hardship amid the ruins of US-occupied Japan. Kitano was the youngest of four children (two brothers and a sister), and what was an already difficult life in the tiny one-room house in which his family lived was exacerbated by his craftsman father Kikujiro's lack of steady employment and nascent alcoholism.

That Kitano was well educated and, at the age of 18, in a position to pass the entrance exam to the prestigious Meiji University and begin a course in engineering, is down to the studiousness of his mother, Saki. Desperate that her children avoid the sorry fate of their father, Saki devoted herself to their education and social betterment. However, Kitano almost immediately lost interest in his studies when his university course began. A little over a year later, at the age of 19 and after a period in which he had begun regularly to skip lectures in order to pass the time in jazz cafes listening to Charlie Parker and debating French literature, he left home.

After formally abandoning his studies shortly thereafter, Kitano moved to the entertainment district of Asakusa to pursue embryonic dreams of success as a comedian. He began working as a lift attendant at a club called France Theatre, and over the course of more than two years he worked on routines and served a tentative apprenticeship to an established comedian and master of ceremonies, Fukami Senzaburo. Eventually, after a

fashion of successful double-acts of the time (such as *Hiro Pichiku Pachiku* and *Columbia Top Light*), Kitano decided to concentrate more on something he had hitherto only abortively attempted - teaming with another comedian.

All of which led to a partnership with Kaneko Kiyoshi. But initially their act had failed to gel and to find an audience - not least because of Kitano's disdain for the traditional Manzai dynamic of the joke-teller (*tsukkomi*) and fall guy (*boke*). In place of this, and inspired by a foul-mouthed comedian in an act called B&B, Kitano refined the format of Manzai to cast himself as a vulgar, obscene city-dweller who would terrorize his partner (and often his audience) with rapid-fire expletives and an irreverent approach to serious social subjects and people (women, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, the ugly, all were mocked alike by Kitano's aggressive routines). This double-act, christened '*The Two Beats*' after Kitano's love of jazz, was an instant sensation. Beats Kitano and Kiyoshi began playing to sell-out crowds both in Tokyo and elsewhere, and a move onto television followed in 1976.

By the early 1980s, Kitano had moved beyond what he was increasingly regarding as the confines of '*The Two Beats*'. He had been given his own radio show, '*All Night Nippon*', in 1981, and had become an idol to adolescents the nation over for his irreverent, vulgar humour and personal, very revealing and embarrassing stories. Many began to frequent the radio station, and would go on to become the famed '*Takeshi Gundan*': an army of followers who starred with their mentor on television, performing outrageous acts for his edification. It was also in 1981 that Kitano began appearing on talk shows and game shows that capitalized on his by-then notoriously vulgar 'Beat'

Takeshi persona, and in a very few years his regular mainstay of various television shows had more than doubled.

One of the pre-eminent features of Kitano's career, in both film and television, is that of a restless, endlessly self-challenging artist with a marked propensity for constantly re-inventing himself. He had in fact been appearing in films since 1980, but soon grew tired of the cheap comedic roles he was being offered. Through an acquaintance with Oshima he was offered the role of Sgt Hara Gengo in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, a performance that led to Kitano playing several dramatic roles in both television dramas and films. In turn, this accretion of serious acting work, particularly as crazed yakuza and other variously damaged criminal figures, fed into the offer to star in *Violent Cop*. Kitano went on to direct the film when the original director, Fukasaku Kinji, dropped out, and although it was only a modestly successful film, Shochiku studios were nonetheless eager to produce more Kitano pictures.

One can see, even from the rudimentary biographical details included here, that several of Kitano's films seem to draw very much on the director's own life. *Kizzu ritān* (*Kids Return*, 1996) features two characters attempting to make the grade as a Manzai comedy double act, whilst *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1999) features the title character of a selfish yakuza named after Kitano's own father. Furthermore, a near-fatal motorcycle accident in which Kitano was involved in 1994 has fed directly into his work. *Hana-Bi* features a character attempting to recuperate from a life-threatening incident, and (as Kitano did) taking up painting to that end. Similarly, one of the stories of *Dōruzu* (*Dolls*, 2002) has a famous, idolized celebrity involved in a near-tragic accident and retreating

from the world thereafter, away from the incessant consumption of her image and fragmentation of her mind.

This biographical approach to authorship is of particular importance as it underlines Kitano's status as a figure for who the study of the auteur is especially meaningful: someone around who debates on authorship can productively orbit rather than just an auteur. The notion of biography alludes succinctly to the multitude of conceptions of the auteur than have successively defined the theory since its inception, specifically those associated with post-modernity and structuralism. And it is with Kitano that such notions can best be mapped out and assessed.

In the West Kitano's success was highly significant. It was fundamentally different, and arguably more important, than Tsukamoto, because he was (somewhat erroneously) regarded as a more specifically Japanese artist, working in recognizably Japanese generic forms. The chief influences on Tsukamoto in creating the fusion of man and metal for his titular iron man in *Tetsuo* [1989] had been Western: H.R. Giger's design of the creature in Ridley Scott's *Alien* [1979] and the melding of man and insect in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* [1985].

Kitano, in contradistinction, returned specifically Japanese genre filmmaking and personal authorship to the attention of the world. The success of *Sonatine*, which like *Tetsuo* won a festival prize in Italy, was due to Kitano's reliance upon and subversion of its generic Yakuza framework, as well as Kitano's distinctive presentation of violence at the height of euphoria over Tarantino and the discovery of Hong Kong cinema and particularly John Woo in the West. If one looks at the Japanese filmmakers who have been canonized in the West in the wake of Kitano - most notably Miike Takashi, Aoyama

Shinji, Nakata Hideo, Shimizu Takashi, Kitamura Ryuhei, and even older directors such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Mochizuki Rokuro - almost all are fundamentally genre directors who have built on either Japanese generic material (Miike, Aoyama, Kitamura) or specifically Japanese reflections of and responses to other genres (Nakata and Shimizu's horror films, and Kurosawa's slasher and serial killer pictures).

This use and subversion of genre, particularly the Cop/Yakuza genre, as a point of departure in his work is arguably the chief way in which Kitano's influence is discernible on Japanese cinema in the transformational decade of the 1990s. As such, this aspect of his cinema is worth highlighting here, as it feeds directly into relevant debates on film authorship and his reception as an auteur, a subject that will occupy much of this study. The initial conception of authorship as it was proposed and developed by the young critics and would-be Nouvelle Vague directors was of a contract director who didn't so much initiate and develop projects (as the giants of European art cinema would do) as personalise their work in realization. This is why, in the writing of Godard and Truffaut, and later by Robin Wood and V.F. Perkins in the British journal *Movie*, an emphasis was placed on *mise-en-scène*. It was through this avenue that an auteur could stamp his or her authority and artistic individuality on a film, and in so doing exploit what was unique in their medium, what was singularly cinematic.

In Japanese cinema, this model of authorship is not Kitano's. Kitano-as-author - as writer, director, producer, editor, sometime actor and someone who has collaborated many times with a very select number of the same key creative personnel - adheres far more markedly to European models of high-art cinema. As such, he has been readily received into an almost predetermined structure of thought on this subject. The fact that

art-cinema luminaries such as Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini and Rainer Werner Fassbinder made use of pre-existing (predominantly genre) frameworks, at least in their early work, only strengthens the supposition that Kitano's position is, fundamentally, one of alterity within Japanese cinema: that his method of subverting genre filmmaking places him in opposition to his country's mainstream industry.

As noted above, Kitano first experienced considerable success in Europe, with many of his films premiering and receiving acclaim and awards at the major festivals. *Sonatine* opened the door with its award in Italy, and *Hana-Bi* went on to become only the third Japanese film ever to win the Golden Lion at Venice. In America - where he was heralded by the likes of Tarantino and John Woo (though not entirely to his benefit) - the success of *Hana-Bi* led to the release of several of his earlier films in quick succession, and ultimately opened the door to subsequent Japanese films and filmmakers in a manner comparable only to *Rashōmon* [1950] (the first Japanese recipient of the Golden Lion at Venice and the film credited with introducing Japanese cinema to Western audiences). Kitano has since become enshrined as one of the pre-eminent auteur figures in contemporary world cinema.

One may thus say that Kitano was to Japanese cinema of the 1990s what Kurosawa had been in the 1950s: namely, its most famous and revered director on the international stage, one of a select band of canonized filmmakers whose name alone could guarantee serious art-house interest, and the barometer by which popular perceptions of Japanese cinema itself were measured and against which other national filmmakers were contrasted. As Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp have said, he is 'the dominating representative of Japanese cinema abroad'<sup>15</sup>.

This juxtaposition with Kurosawa also touches on another reason to consider Kitano an important modern director in Japan: the fact that he collates and appropriates the industrial and artistic paradigms of a number of pre-eminent and already-canonized Japanese directors. His significance in generic innovation and returning the Yakuza genre to prominence echoes Fukasaku Kinji; whilst in films such as *Hana-Bi* a flavour of Ozu is manifest in Kitano's use of interstitial still-life shots and his facilitating of a contemplative distance by which the audience are made to observe the world of the film and its characters.

Furthermore, in addition to the aforementioned comparison, Oshima also offers an illuminating contrast when examined as a direct forebear of Kitano. The latter's use and manipulation of a generic base in several of his earlier films recalls Oshima, as does the fact that both filmmakers' characters remain on the fringes of society: they are alienated from, and (unlike Kurosawa's protagonists) unable to gain self-definition against, what is typically presented as mainstream Japan's formal, ceremonial rigidity. These characters then find themselves in transit through and rebellion against a social structure that has already predetermined their acts of defiance as nothing more than howls of criminal outrage, cruel stories that most often end in protracted (self)-immolation.

Kitano, whose emergence as a director coincided directly with the onset of Japan's current economic slump and social regression, has not generally been allowed any measure of social significance in his work. But one may argue that the absence of any dynamic sense of a tangible society in his work, even the variously disintegrating social scenes of Kurosawa and Oshima, is not an evasion. One can think about Kitano's films as presentations of Kurosawa's and Oshima's societies several decades hence: as, in other

words, a society that has already burned itself out, in which the site of conflict and transgression is located on the body and in the self in lieu of any viable social body against which to react or rebel. Action in opposition to any entity larger than the individual is, in Kitano's work, generally pre-determined, one may say, pre-negated<sup>i</sup>. These are not examples of mere homage in the way Brian De Palma in America lionised Hitchcock. Rather, as directors such as Ozu recede from the face of mainstream Japanese cinema, Kitano preserves something of the specificity of their art and negotiates a complex cinematic dialectic between past and present even as his narratives make it plain that Japan as a country has severed its ties with this same recent past.

One difference between Kitano and his outstanding progenitors, though, is that he has not had a commensurate level of academic treatment. Unfortunately, this is due to a curious lack of academic treatment in the first place. For a director counted by many in the West as among the major figures in contemporary world cinema, there is an astonishing paucity of serious discourse on his work in the cinema. Excepting (reasonably frequent) features in both British and US journals such as *Sight and Sound* and *Film Comment*, there is available in English a collection of short reviews and broad essays entitled '*Beat Takeshi Kitano*', and a translation of a useful book by a Japanese critic, Abe Casio (Kashō). This text, as its title (*Beat Takeshi vs Takeshi Kitano*<sup>16</sup>) suggests, takes as its subject the way in which Takeshi Kitano the filmmaker has manipulated and overcome the specificity of his popular television persona (something that will be returned to and challenged in the first chapter of this study). More recently,

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<sup>i</sup> Kitano may also be aligned with Kurosawa and Oshima in a more direct way: with regard to individual films. *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi* (*A Scene at the Sea*, 1991) has an almost prototypical Kurosawan existential trajectory, whilst, of all films, *Dolls*, presents a very stylized, Oshima-esque, narrative portrait of a commodified, plastic and artificial Japanese society within which the characters are literally puppets on a string.

Aaron Gerow has published a book on Kitano as part of the BFI World Directors series<sup>17</sup>, the first to deal with all his films in depth.

To wit, this study will not simply trace Kitano's directorial output film-by-film, from *Violent Cop* to *Takeshis*' (as Gerow's does) or collate existing features on separate films (as does Casio). Rather, it will be divided into chapters that break up the Kitano canon a-chronologically, and consider what may be thought of as both minor and/or disparate films together with a view to challenging and reconfiguring the boundaries of debate on this most idiosyncratic filmmaker. These particular arrangements will be based on subject matter and thematic commonality, generic contiguity, comparable tonal modulation and philosophical approaches, films that challenge and extend Kitano's art and authorship and Kitano's use of himself as performer (as this relates both to films and to his televisual 'Beat' Takeshi persona).

Throughout the thesis, aspects of Kitano as auteur will be considered, those features of style and theme that unite otherwise disparate and diverse texts. But Kitano also presents a challenge to conventional assumptions of authorial canonization, and offers a model of authorship that differs markedly from a majority of other contemporary Japanese (including many New New Wave) directors. As such, the emphasis will often be on Kitano as a point of departure in examining authorship. That is, it will less about the detailed exposition of an authorial canon than the use value of the same in contemporary Japanese (and world) cinema: the ways in which a singular (and singularly self-aware) artist such as Kitano can be said to both efface and confirm his own status as auteur, and the meanings attendant upon this for discourses on filmmaking and authorship.

The first chapter will deal with three films that have been regarded by many as, at best, marginal in the Kitano canon: *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990), *Minnā-yatteruka!* (*Getting Any?* 1994) and *Kikujiro*. Taken together (although the intent and effect is often satirical), these works represent the clearest instances of ‘Beat’ Takeshi in the cinema of Kitano Takeshi, and the most marked examples of the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque that is in many ways central to Kitano’s work (as indeed it could be argued to be in Japanese culture and cinema as a whole). As such, they can profitably be explored as a means to building a foundational structure of Kitano’s alter ego and the subversive comic spirit that cannot be ignored in any full consideration of his work. The argument will proceed from the position that, in contradistinction to the thesis offered by Abe Casio, Kitano films do not simply and explicitly reject and negate television’s ‘Beat’ Takeshi, but often symbiotically interact with this entity in making meaning. In addition to elucidating these peripheral texts and highlighting their significance, placing this chapter at the beginning will then allow for a more detailed analysis of the Cop and Yakuza films that will follow: films that remain Kitano’s most famous and revered works.

From this starting point will follow three chapters that each deal with one film in what may be termed Kitano’s ‘life and death’ trilogy: *Violent Cop*, *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*. The chief focus of these sections will be Kitano’s development from performer to director to auteur. It will consider, using psychoanalytical and existential precepts, his approach to his own persona and bodily reality, the crystallization of his thematic concerns and oft-commented preoccupation with violence and death, the centrality of genre and his increasingly idiosyncratic use and manipulation of a generic base. It will also detail the

development of the now readily identifiable signature Kitano visual style, in particular his use of the typical Japanese cinematic concept of classical theatrical space. Throughout, these chapters will explore and interrogate Kitano's status as auteur, and how his authorship offers a significant case study with regard to the re-opening of debates on the film author from the 1990s onward.

No less central to an understanding of Kitano's oeuvre, and arguably more important for a treatment of his directorial sensibility, are the films he has directed in which he has not himself appeared as an actor. These three works – *A Scene at the Sea*, *Kids Return* and *Dolls* – may in fact be grouped under an identifiable genre in Japanese cinema, one that has had important historical moments of prevalence since the golden age of Japanese cinema in the 1950s – the *Seishun eiga*, or Youth film. The focus here will be not only on Kitano's contribution to this significant genre and on attendant notions of genre in contemporary Japanese cinema which this particular group of films is better placed to explore, but also on how Kitano's more ambitious and complex treatment thereof extends the parameters of his art. Even more than his Cop and Yakuza films, Kitano's *Seishun eiga* (some of which have been markedly underrated) channel and challenge the specific weight of recent Japanese social, cultural and cinematic norms such that they may be argued to be of equal weight with their more celebrated counterparts in the Kitano canon. This chapter will make that case.

As already noted, Kitano's work in the last ten years has continually changed and transformed itself, with a view to perpetually challenging both artist and audience. The final chapter will entail a collective consideration of these more recent Kitano films that have, as it were, broken new ground and attempted to place Kitano in new and differing

spotlights. *Brother* [2000] was an attempt to make a palatable international vehicle of the violent Cop/Yakuza form; and stands at a point of summation with regard to Kitano's earlier examples of the genre in foregrounding, examining and deconstructing their central features.

*Zatoichi* [2003], Kitano's first *Jidai-geki* (period film) and hitherto biggest commercial hit, repackaged 'Beat' Takeshi as the wandering blind masseur and master swordsman made popular in a 26 film series and subsequent television serial. In so doing the film rethought almost all the attendant baggage of 'Beat' Takeshi and Kitano Takeshi, as well as contributing a vital strand to the recent re-emergence of the samurai genre. It is a more subversive film than may at first sight be suspected, and like *Brother* is predicated and dependent for its effect on earlier Kitano work. *Zatoichi*, in fact, channels earlier Kitano works in order to point out new directions for the future.

Latterly, *Takeshis'* ties up a number of the divergent strands that have amassed around Kitano's career, and in so doing narrativizes several of the (implicit and explicit) problems that will occupy this study. It internalises the enormity of perspectives of Kitano as both public and private figure, and of his art as predicated on a miasma of dichotomies and (structural and stylistic) antinomies. It is a film in which Kitano analyses Kitano, and as such is ideally situated at the summit both of his oeuvre and of this thesis, as it offers a personal point of view on the part of Kitano regarding those subjects that have long occupied discourse on his work.

This chapter will examine how and to what extent these reconfigurations of the Kitano brand add to an understanding of the central tenets of his cinema. It will locate them within the body of work of Kitano Takeshi - both in terms of his artistic development and

the overall pattern of his directorial career - as well as concentrating on their differences and divergences. The analysis of *Takeshis'* in particular will entail a comparison with several other films and filmmakers whose example can be used to illuminate Kitano's project in this most cryptic work. Ultimately, this chapter will seek to (tentatively) probe just what these under-valued films mean with regard to an appreciation of the many competing and contradictory faces of Kitano Takeshi and a Kitano Takeshi film.

Ultimately, these myriad facets of Kitano's art demand that his work be viewed and elucidated through a number of different disciplines. In addition to film theories pertaining to genre, star and authorship studies, this analysis will draw on psychoanalysis, philosophy, social and cultural discourses and examples from literature and the theatre to argue not simply for the singularity of Kitano's filmmaking, but of his place within Japanese (popular) culture. Indeed, the latter is particularly marked, as there are many antinomies on which Kitano's art is predicated, and that highlight the extent to which his work impacts upon a range of subjects pertinent to Japanese cinema, culture and modern national identity (if such an identity exists). His work is therefore useful for film studies, important in ascertaining a picture of Japan at a particular moment in its post-war development, and indispensable to an understanding of Japanese filmmaking since 1989.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mes, T & J. Sharp *The Midnight Eye Guide To New Japanese Film* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2005) p.158

<sup>2</sup> Kitano, T quoted in an interview with Mark Schilling, printed in Schilling, M *Contemporary Japanese Film* (Weatherhill, Inc., New York, Tokyo, 1999) pp.91-100

<sup>3</sup> Richie, D *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Kodansha International Ltd., Tokyo, New York, London, 1999) p.226

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Nakata, H Foreword to Mes, T & J. Sharp *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* pp.9-10

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.323

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<sup>7</sup> Information in Schilling, M *Contemporary Japanese Film* p.15

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.25

<sup>9</sup> An interview with Miike Takashi in Schilling, M *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2003) pp.80-81

<sup>10</sup> Sento Takenori in conversation with Mark Schilling, printed in Schilling, M *Contemporary Japanese Film* pp.107-115 - at the press conference announcing *Suncent*, Sento talked about introducing Western production methods in order to revive Japanese filmmaking and bring it in line with Western national cinemas. Reported by Schilling, M *Contemporary Japanese Film* pp.32-33

<sup>11</sup> See the chapter on Ozu entitled *Resistance to Definition: Ozu's "Noriko" trilogy*, in Wood, R *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, New York, Chichester, West Sussex, 1998) pp.94-138. In this feature, Wood elucidates Ozu's 'identification' (or 'imaginative empathy') with the character of Noriko in *Late Spring*, *Early Summer* and *Tokyo Story* primarily with reference to Ozu's life. Most especially, he cites the fact that Ozu never in his life married, preferring to live with his mother until her death a year before his own, and the related fact of his 'innate bisexuality', which he was apparently able to remain in touch with throughout high school (according to Donald Richie he was expelled from school for writing a love letter to a boy). This latter point Wood sees as representative of Ozu's understanding of Noriko's refusal to accept a socially imposed and conditioned identity and attendant roles in society, as it relates to the director's own refusal to acquiesce to the same in his formative years.

<sup>12</sup> See Oshima, N, Lawson, D (trans) *Cinema, Censorship and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima, 1956-1978* (The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1992) pp.195-220

<sup>13</sup> Danvers, L & C. Tatum, Jr., Nagisa Oshima (*Cahiers du cinema*, Paris, 1986)

<sup>14</sup> Turim, M *The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1998) pp.1-26

<sup>15</sup> Mes, T & J. Sharp *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* p.158

<sup>16</sup> Casio, A, O. Gardner, W & T. Hori (eds) *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* (Kaya Press, United States of America, 2004) – Originally published by Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., Japan, 1994

<sup>17</sup> Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* (British Film Institute, London, 2007)

## FALLING BETWEEN THE GAPS

**The Carnavalesque Cinema of ‘Beat’ Takeshi**  
**BOILING POINT [1990]**  
**GETTING ANY? [1994]**  
**KIKUJIRO [1999]**

**‘If I’m asked who I am, I can only answer, ‘I’m the man who plays Beat Takeshi and Takeshi Kitano’... it’s a classic case of a split personality<sup>1</sup>’.**

Kitano Takeshi

Dichotomies and structural antinomies abound in Kitano’s cinema. They pervade his films at the thematic, visual and narrative levels; and in some cases (most especially *Hana-Bi* [1997]) become a subject to be explored and elucidated. However, none are as pervasive and meaningful as that which is perceived to reside within the figure of Kitano himself. *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano*, to borrow the title of a Japanese study of his films, remains a foundational cornerstone of the director’s oeuvre and a necessary starting point for any consideration of a figure who for 20 years has judiciously separated his work between appearances on television and making films, between satisfying variously and contrastingly expectant national and international audiences. Indeed, it is so central to the Kitano brand that Aaron Gerow’s recent book on Kitano begins with a chapter entitled *Introducing Two Takeshis*<sup>2</sup>; whilst Kitano himself has made it the subject of his two most recent films: the emblematically titled *Takeshis*’ [2005] and *Kantoku banzai* (*Glory to the Filmmaker*, 2007).

Although this dichotomy denotes the perceived gulf between Kitano's national status as the popular television comedian 'Bīto' Takeshi (for which he is still most famous and popular in Japan) and his international canonization as the auteur filmmaker Kitano Takeshi, it is in fact a more important and connotative subject. It opens up highly fertile ground for not only for the study of Kitano in particular, but for an analysis of contemporary Japanese cinema in general. As such, it is the best to begin this study of a filmmaker whose centrality to both media makes him an invaluable aid to understanding Japanese popular culture and the place therein of the country's film industry.

The apparently clear demarcation between 'Beat' and Takeshi Kitano would appear to find a correlative in the dual credits that have always informed Kitano's work in the cinema. From the very beginning of his career, with *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki* (*Violent Cop*, 1989), the films credit 'Beat' Takeshi before the camera (the actor) and Takeshi Kitano behind it, the director, writer and (from his third film onwards) editor. Kitano has often stressed this clear opposition, speaking of filmmaking as simply a hobby, an entirely distinct entity from what he considers his day job in television:

**'If I just made movies, I couldn't eat...so for me being a director is a kind of hobby...I regard the two as being in completely different categories. It's like eating Japanese food and Italian food<sup>3</sup>'.**

Kitano has further noted the extent to which the two jobs are practically as well as aesthetically differentiated:

**'My biggest insurance as a director is that I am a comedian. Whether my film bombs or succeeds, I can laugh about it...'**

**I can be more adventurous because I have this insurance. I also try to keep my film career and my television career completely separate. I have my fees for doing television and a separate contract for doing film...the day people start seeing me as a television star making a movie, it's the death of me as a director. So I refuse to go on television and advertise my films. That would destroy me<sup>4</sup>.**

However, just as it has become one of the pre-eminent hallmarks of Kitano's 'Beat' Takeshi persona on film that the perceived 'real life' of the man named Kitano Takeshi has bled into his work, so the various professional personae have sporadically found a point of convergence in his cinema. Indeed, the fact that the credited actor 'Beat' Takeshi appears in Kitano's films again begins to undermine any stringent demarcation along the lines of television as distinct from cinema. As will be elaborated upon in the subsequent chapter, Kitano has almost always worked from a foundation in television's 'Beat' Takeshi, and popular perceptions thereof, as a sign that he can manipulate and upon which he can build.

It is with three particular films that the spectre of 'Beat' Takeshi can be said to invade Kitano most completely: not simply in a reaction to his televisual specificity, but a more complete appropriation of it. More than just being films that employ humour associated with Kitano's work on television, these works both comment and capitalise on the 'Beat' persona, and negotiate the divergent parameters of these two main faces of Kitano's multi-media output. It is with these films - *Boiling Point*, *Minnā-yatteruka!* (*Getting Any?* 1994) and *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1999) - that the present study of Kitano's oeuvre will begin. It will consider the multitude of reference points that pervade these works – not simply that of 'Beat' Takeshi on Japanese television, but specific points of cinematic

manipulation (generic, iconographic, narrative) – and how these colour the films’ respective textual concerns. Furthermore, employing the theory of carnival as it was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, this chapter will offer a framework for elucidating not only the cultural and personal specificity of Kitano’s comedy, but also much of his filmmaking in general.

This route through his early work, beginning with the above works before concentrating on the more widely known and celebrated life and death trilogy of *Violent Cop*, *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993) and *Hana-Bi* [1997], will facilitate a discussion of aspects of ‘Beat’ and Takeshi Kitano. In particular, it will open up and problematize the different ways of positioning the star as a film and television personality whose supposed divergent media personae have remained discrete but which can be seen to overlap in a significant way. It will also allow for the most productive exploration of the progression and development of Kitano’s career and artistry. That is, it will figuratively straighten out the trajectory of his body of work: from performer to director to international art-cinema auteur and beyond.

### **Beats and *Takeshis***

It is, first and foremost, necessary to explore the aforementioned distinction between Kitano’s films and television series. The Japanese author of *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano*, Abe Casio (Kashō), has used this opposition as the foundation of said book<sup>5</sup>, in which he argues that the case of Kitano highlights the division between television and cinema in Japan. It is a dichotomy that is corroborated by another Japanese commentator, Miyao Daisuke, in what he terms ‘the gap between cinephilia and telephilia<sup>6</sup>’, and can in

Abe's view be used as an ideological critique of what he refers to as a modern disease in Japan<sup>7</sup>. By this he specifically means the homogenized space of television that robs its personalities of the materiality of their bodies, reduces them to mere floating signs whose figurative lack defines their televisual spectacle. The point of Abe's book is to use the narrative dichotomy of life and ultimate death in Kitano's films to demonstrate how they represent an attempt on the part of the director to reclaim the reality and material presence of his body. That is, to use filmmaking as a weapon with which he can resist and fill in the lack at the heart of his persona as constructed on and by Japanese television.

There are a number of questions raised by this inquiry that Abe never truly acknowledges, and certainly fails to fully explore. One may ask whether such a stringent binary opposition can fully elucidate Kitano's art, especially given that it exists as a multi-media, trans-artistic brand, covering painting, journalism (including political commentary), criticism, poetry and fiction, not to mention pan-Asian film production. More importantly, one should probe further the mutual exclusivity with which Abe conceives of 'Beat' and Takeshi Kitano. In particular, it should be questioned whether the very basis of his study already begins to undermine the discourse that he : whether conceiving of Kitano Takeshi reacting against the televisual specificity of 'Beat' Takeshi is to begin to problematize their apparent dichotomous nature and allow a more complex relationship between the two, a falling between the gaps opened up by an emphasis on opposites. Nor should one ignore the danger in attaching qualitative and evaluative terms to a discourse of television and cinema as emblematic of an implicitly real (or at least meaningful) Kitano and his mere facsimile: the archetypical signifier without a signified?

Furthermore, and of paramount importance here, is the fact that a conceptual basis such as Abe's (and to an extent Miyao's) pre-supposes a relative stability of Kitano's different personae. Even if one accepts that 'Beat' Takeshi on television signals a figurative lack, this is nonetheless the known, visible currency of Kitano's televisual persona and celebrity; the form in which his stardom is consumed. Conversely, the notion that the flesh and blood of 'Beat' Takeshi on film represents a riposte only to television's 'Beat' Takeshi de-limits the scope of Kitano's performative function within the diegesis of his work.

From this perspective, 'Beat' Takeshi as a cinematic entity may be envisioned as being entwined in an inter-textual discourse that is more concerned with exploring Kitano Takeshi the auteur filmmaker than with refuting the televisual 'Beat' Takeshi. That is, along with directors such as Orson Welles, Maurice Pialat and comedians such as Nanni Moretti and Jacques Tati, Kitano's presence in front of the camera works as a form of what Rosanna Maule terms 'authorial interpellation'<sup>8</sup>. As such, his performances and characters work to visualize the extra-textual trajectory of Kitano's authorship: by, for example, presenting a protagonist such as *Violent Cop's* Detective Azuma, whose unthinkingly single-minded path through the narrative works in parallel to Kitano's own bullish desire to make over the film's script to his own specifications, ostensibly beholden to no one save himself but ultimately in hock to those in positions of power who pull the strings behind the scenes (as Kitano's producer Okuyama Kazuyoshi did).

One may further take issue with Abe's insistence on the flesh and blood corporeality of 'Beat' Takeshi on film. In *Violent Cop*, Kitano's body is both visually and thematically reconfigured as a shell, a suit of armour: that while technically not resistant to attack and

bodily damage (he does bleed), nonetheless seems to withstand an inordinate amount of violence, and all without any visible signs of pain. It is, from this point of view, crucial that at the end of this film the protagonist, Detective Azuma, literally walks into and away from a hail of bullets, only being stopped, as one might a robot or alien being in a science fiction film, by a shot to the head. Similarly, in *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*, death is the only means of inflicting violence upon the respective protagonist's otherwise unbreakable bodies; bodies that mete out violence but which also absorb and internalise it. Although it is specifically death upon which Abe builds his argument, it is difficult to separate out this concept from the fabric of Kitano's work and to discuss it in isolation.

It is also the case that, as Kitano himself has noted<sup>9</sup>, there is a strong connection between violence and comedy, the two defining facets (even if only in perceptions of his work) of Kitano's respective filmic and televisual work and personae. Both (at least in Kitano's cinema) are predicated on surprise: on the sudden eruption of these particular elements into scenes within which one has not been prepared for them. As Kitano says: 'both are unexpected, you can't anticipate them'<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, the two frequently converge. Like the Coen Brothers or Jim Jarmusch in the US, or Aki Kaurismäki in Finland, Kitano's work often presents violence in such an extreme and abrupt way that it edges into the realms of the comedic. Such instances as that in *Hana-Bi* when Nishi jams a chopstick into a yakuza's eye in a bar, or Yamamoto in *Brother* likewise inserting a pair up an enemy's nostrils are prime examples. They are graphically violent (and largely divorced as spectacle from real narrative import) to the point where the exaggeration of the action juxtaposed with an often prosaic, everyday setting, becomes comedic.

*Boiling Point* contains what is perhaps the *locus classicus* of this aspect of Kitano's cinema, when the former yakuza, now bar owner, Iguchi reacts violently to a group of snobs in his establishment. A woman complains that she cannot use the toilet because of the smell, and Iguchi promptly smashes her in the face with a thick glass ashtray. It is an altogether sudden explosion, as hitherto he had seemed accepting of these people's insults. But the eruption of extreme violence has an amusing aspect because of Kitano's generic subversion.

All this is not to disqualify Abe's work. It is true that in his first two films, the particular scenarios and characters that Kitano respectively adapted and created in *Violent Cop* and *Boiling Point* can be seen to invoke and undermine television's 'Beat' Takeshi. Indeed, it will be argued that this forms one of the foundations of Kitano's pre-eminent status as a carnivalesque director. The point is simply to suggest that engaging Kitano within the discourse of such a constricting binary rhetoric is to ignore, or at best obfuscate, the vitality and diverse make-up of his films.

### **A Carnivalesque Canon**

The emphasis on 'Beat' Takeshi rather than Kitano Takeshi in this chapter facilitates a discussion of carnival, of which Kitano is a pre-eminent artist. *Boiling Point*, *Getting Any?* and *Kikujiro* are further linked through their various appropriations of this phenomena, especially as it relates to the discourse common to all three films regarding the individual and Japanese group or collectively conditioned behaviour. Before elaborating on this, however, a few paragraphs are required to elucidate the particular nature of the carnivalesque, specifically as it pertains to Japanese cinema.

The concept of carnival was theorised as a tool of literary theory and criticism by the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin. It is derived from a socio-historical tradition and mythicized phenomenon of popular history: the folk carnivals that characterized the middle ages. Carnival time saw officially sanctioned culture giving way to popular and folk culture, and thus to a period of freedom for the people from normal societal constraints. It proposes “Life turned inside out”, “the reverse side of the world<sup>11</sup>”, and is defined by a subversion of all tenets of everyday existence, particularly such norms as ‘Socio-hierarchical inequality<sup>12</sup>’ that distanced people one from another.

The breaking of all boundaries and barriers forms the foundational basis of the carnivalesque (hence its use-value here in denoting the obliteration of the difference between ‘Beat’ and Takeshi Kitano). In addition to bringing together people of every class, age, gender and persuasion, there is a similar sense in which other normative distinctions are exploded. The opposition between the sacred and the profane, the wise and the stupid, the significant and the insignificant, are overturned. As, too, is the boundary between inside and outside with regard to one of carnival’s predominant categorisations: the grotesque body, with attendant notions of food, eating, bodily fluids and excretions, sex, birth, death and decay.

What most interests Bakhtin here is the body breaking through its nominal boundaries and normative limits in relation to the outside world. His analysis of Rabelais, in particular, focuses on the human body in flux and transformation: everything from the protrusions of an ungainly and distorted body (swollen limbs or features) to one that is soiled, unclean (everything from sweating to sneezing and defecating). It is here that the work of Julia Kristeva<sup>13</sup> overlaps with Bakhtin. Kristeva’s psychoanalytically inflected

concept of the abject - of that which brings a human of the symbolic order (i.e. the Lacanian world of language and law; of the socially coded and constructed 'subject') into direct contact with the pre-symbolic semiotic order – is similarly concerned with the grotesque realism of the transgressed body<sup>i</sup>.

This is a subject area that impacts greatly not simply on Kitano but also on Japanese cinema in particular and Japanese culture and society in general. The country is particularly receptive to the notions contained in carnival as one still finds in Japan a strictly ordered official doctrine that preaches conformism and a sublimation of individuality within the group consciousness (*Shūdan Ishiki*). It is stated in the book *The Japanese Mind* thus: 'In Japanese society, people are primarily group oriented and give more priority to group harmony than to individuals<sup>14</sup>'. Thus the protean vitality and revitalizing potentiality of carnival time seems practically applicable to Japanese socio-cultural norms of subject construction and conditioning.

Indeed, Japan has its own particular terms for describing the phenomenon of carnival as it is made manifest in the country's thriving folk culture. Japanese ethnologists have long had recourse to the words *hare*, *ke* and *kegare* as denotative of what Sugimoto Yoshio calls: 'situations in which formal, ceremonial and festive sentiments prevail<sup>15</sup>'. Closely associated with Japan's native religion of Shintoism, these terms broadly reflect three different periods of time that are seen to characterize existence. Respectively, these are festival time, routine, daily life ('in which people do things habitually<sup>16</sup>'), and a period when natural energy begins to fade and thus requires the festive, carnival time of

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<sup>i</sup> However, as Sue Vice has pointed out (Vice, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997 P.164) there is a fundamental difference in that Bakhtin attempts to reclaim the positive values of the grotesque body, whilst Kristeva aims to probe the history of a subject's grotesque nature and demonstrate why such a case is horrifying or disgusting to a 'normal' human being.

*hare* to once again reinvigorate the senses. As described by Sugimoto, these periods have been theorized by some researchers in folk-culture as pertaining to the specifically carnivalesque subject of the coming together of the sacred and the profane<sup>17</sup>.

This is a precept that a number of commentators on Japanese society, both from Japan and the West, have examined in detail. Stephen Prince, in his book on Kurosawa, follows up a quote by a prominent sociologist by noting that ‘other observers, even if seeming to subscribe to the view of Japanese society as rigidly hierarchical, have pointed to the existence of a tradition of rebellion throughout Japanese history, a tradition that celebrates nonconformity and the rejection of authority<sup>18</sup>’. The Japanese commentator Kawai Kazuo has corroborated: ‘while the formal organization of Japanese society and the official norms of social behavior have been rigidly hierarchical...there has paradoxically always been a tacit acceptance, or sometimes even an open idealization, of certain trends which exist in apparent opposition to the official norm<sup>19</sup>’.

It is therefore logical that this society, with its still rigid hierarchies and codifications, should be especially potent for the treatment of carnival, for subversion and being overturned and parodied. Indeed, as Gregory Barrett<sup>20</sup> has noted in an essay on Japanese film comedy, the most pronounced mode of recent years has been the satirical. This he contrasts with the more traditional Japanese form of *ninjō kigeki*, or sentimental comedy of affinity. Into this latter category would fit Shochiku’s comedies of the 1920s and 1930s, which include Ozu’s American-influenced farces *Wakaki hi* (*Days of Youth*, 1929) and *Tokkan kozō* (*A Straightforward Boy*, 1929), amongst other by Naruse Mikio and Heinosuke Gosho; the gentle, modern, character-based comedies of Shimazu Yasujiro

(especially *Otōsan/Father* [1923]); or, beginning in 1969, the *Otoka wa tsurai yo (Tora-san)* series.

Several commentators, Susan J. Napier in particular<sup>21</sup>, have also highlighted Anime as an intrinsically carnivalesque entity. The genre's ability to conjure up fantastical worlds that nonetheless have a basis in a recognizable Japan (see Miyazaki Hayao and new Anime prodigy Shinkai Makoto in particular) reinforces this notion, as does Anime's pervasive interest in gender and the corporeal identity of the body. In a number of works, the human body undergoes metamorphosis and is destabilized, broken and transgressed in ways that relate directly to the work of Bakhtin and Kristeva. Indeed, Napier even identifies genres of Anime that specialize in such visions, and which encompass several of the most famous films in the canon<sup>22</sup>.

There are also specific filmmakers associated with the carnivalesque. Arguably Japan's greatest practitioner of the theme is the New Wave luminary Imamura Shohei. His film *Eijanaika (What the Hell!* 1981) explores the actual historical phenomenon of Carnival in its depiction of the social chaos leading up to the Meiji revolution of 1868, when the ruling Tokugawa *Bakufu* (Shogunate) was collapsing and Japan was in a state of upheaval as it prepared to enter the modern world (or the modern and the 'world', as it was opening up to foreign bodies for the first time since the early seventeenth century). It is a film rife with images of dispossessed people of the under classes gathering together and taking to the streets in a drunken frenzy, celebrating loudly and lewdly as they vent their feelings and chant the titular refrain, which signifies the breakdown of official authority. The people collectively dance, play music, sing and, in an echo of the grotesque, openly urinate and fornicate in sight of the samurai caste against whom they

are rebelling. As Robert Stam has noted, this film, like the phenomenon of carnival, represents ‘History as seen from below<sup>23</sup>’. It is the immense tide of the official and officious past given life and immediacy as witnessed by everyday people, by the unofficial masses, which would generally be swept along and away by its momentum.

Imamura can further be categorized as a carnivalesque filmmaker for his insistent emphasis on the vivifying, vitalizing power of sex, its primeval power and energy in shaping human identity and subjectivity. One of his most famous and oft-quoted remarks pertains to this abiding authorial preoccupation: ‘I am interested in the relationship of the lower part of the human body and the lower part of the social structure on which the reality of daily Japanese life supports itself<sup>24</sup>’. In Imamura’s films, the official culture of Japan is repeatedly shown to smother and repress the true nature of the Japanese. This is not present simply in the police state, closed-doors society that is depicted in its death throes in *Eijanaika* (and which Imamura himself has said continues to this very day), but also in contemporary Japan. His characters are always lower class, socially alienated and marginalized outsiders. They are murderers in *Fukushū wa Ware ni Ari* (*Vengeance is Mine*, 1979) and *Unagi* (*The Eel*, 1997); a prostitute in *Nippon Konchūki* (*The Insect Woman*, 1963), and a simple bar worker in the aforementioned *A History of Post-war Tokyo as told by a Bar Hostess*. These, like Kitano’s protagonists, are peripheral within official Japan: they can find no role or place in polite society.

Comedy, parody and laughter are essential tenets of the carnivalesque, the primary tools whereby officialdom can be subverted and deconstructed. As Bakhtin stresses: ‘carnival laughter...is linked with the most ancient forms of ritual laughter...(and) always directed toward something higher-toward a shift of authorities and truths<sup>25</sup>’.

Logically, this is one of the primary routes by which Kitano can be constructed as a director associated with carnival. It is worth noting prior to a consideration of the films themselves that subversion and parody were integral aspects of Kitano's comedic armory and celebrity long before he entered the film industry.

During his time as a stand up comedian in the 1970s and, later, a radio and television personality in the 1980s and 1990s, he became infamous for his vulgarity and confrontational humor that mocked every imaginable social group, including the elderly, the handicapped and ethnic minorities. On shows such as *Oretachi hyōkinzoku* (*We Are Jokers*), which began in 1981, he irreverently skewered the taste and decency of 'official' Japan with ever increasing acts of depravity. He appeared on television entirely in the nude, patented a famous lewd posture, in honor of the eroticism of the Romanian Olympic gymnast Nadia Comaneci, whereby he would squat and form his arms into a V shape around his crotch, or simply peppered his dialogue with a great deal of swearing.

Perhaps the key title as regards this aspect of Kitano's work on television is a later show called *Japanese, You Are Out of Line*. Here, Kitano collates comments by Japanese and expatriates on all manner of Japanese customs and social, political, and cultural norms. Featuring studio guests and scathing letters from viewers, Kitano (dressed as a clown or other flamboyant costume) would ratchet up the tension and antagonism between defenders and attackers of Japanese ways, including commentators berating Kitano himself, whilst all the while presiding over proceedings like a comedy judge. He even had a toy gavel to bang whenever things got too lively or there was to be a commercial break.

Several of Kitano's individual films feature direct representations of carnival. *Zatoichi* [2004] climaxes with a grand village festival in which, to the insistent beat of a joyous dance, all the villagers spontaneously burst into song and celebration: a celebration that follows Zatoichi's freeing of the people from the tyranny of those who had hitherto kept them in fear and persecution. Thus, a hierarchical and oppressive social order is overturned and the people celebrate and dance as one in a scene that recalls Bakhtin's conception of carnival as a space that 'knows neither stage nor footlights...the carnival square of free familiar contact and communal performances'<sup>26</sup>.

Following *Zatoichi*, Kitano's next film, *Takeshis*', employs a further carnivalesque paradigm: the concept of the double. According to Bakhtin, the work of Dostoevsky is rife with what he terms 'parodying doubles'<sup>27</sup>. This 'system of crooked mirrors'<sup>28</sup>, directs mockery at the protagonist, with the double (literally or figuratively) dying or becoming otherwise negated so that the hero may be purged, reborn and renewed. In *Takeshis*', which builds an increasingly absurd, surreal narrative around two identical figures (the famous star 'Beat' Takeshi and a struggling actor named Mr. Kitano), this is precisely the trajectory undergone by 'Beat' Takeshi's *doppelgänger*.

As has already been outlined, he begins as a jobbing actor and convenience store worker, but after taking possession of a gun for a film role, begins to morph into the star he so resembles. It is a transformation that includes an explicit parody and denunciation of both Kitano's violent Yakuza films and his sea-front reveries. As, in one over-the-top scene by the sea, Mr. Kitano gratuitously shoots it out with hordes of police plus a myriad of other characters that have weaved in and out of the film. The scenario then climaxes when Mr. Kitano attempts to murder 'Beat' Takeshi in a television studio, and is revealed

to be but a fantastical construct of a troubled celebrity whose professional duality is beginning to consume him. Here, then, is an overtly carnivalistic reification of the figure whose own imagined death at the hands of his double is reversed: where the *doppelgänger*'s demise then could be said to purge Kitano of his demons: the death of the 'other' to effect a re-birth of the self.

The above examples demonstrate isolated instances of carnival within various Kitano works. The three films that occupy this chapter are fundamentally different in that they each see Kitano conceiving of narrative and film style as a whole in specifically carnivalesque terms. In so doing, they offer a particularly marked entry point into the multifarious and multifaceted nature of Kitano's comedy and parody, and by extension into the status of 'Beat' Takeshi as he is inscribed in their variously wayward structures. It is, in other words, the key to constructing a possible and credible cinema of 'Beat' Takeshi.

### **Reaching *Boiling Point***

*Boiling Point*, Kitano's second film as director and the first in which he worked entirely from his own screenplay, is a contentious film in the Kitano canon. The popular and critical reception it has been afforded is distinctly mixed and divisive. Lauded by Kent Jones in *Film Comment* as 'His (Kitano's) peak moment<sup>29</sup>', and by Wesley Morris as 'Contemplative, capricious and spellbinding<sup>30</sup>', it was criticized in Japan as being 'Mediocre<sup>31</sup>', and described by the director Shinozaki Makoto (who directed an on-set making of documentary about *Kikujiro* called *Jam Session* [1999]) as exuding 'a feeling of incongruity<sup>32</sup>'.

In the West it has been denigrated as ‘a far less in-depth film and...a more commercialized picture<sup>33</sup> than other Kitano films. It has also been derided for lacking the ‘pull<sup>34</sup>’ of Kitano’s other work, and for having a problematic ‘Extremist ambiguity<sup>35</sup>’ that makes it Frustrating to watch. Further, Tommy Udo has noted that: ‘If *Violent Cop* was Takeshi’s apprenticeship in film...*Boiling Point* is the work of a journeyman<sup>36</sup>’, with which Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp implicitly agree. They note that ‘*Boiling Point* is a less cohesive work than its predecessor, unclear in its focus and lacking a strong central character<sup>37</sup>’.

One commonality among reviews of the film is an admission that it represents the first flowerings of Kitano-as-auteur: that the seeds of his future style and thematic preoccupations can be seen in *Boiling Point* in embryonic form. As Mes and Sharp have noted: ‘in many ways *Boiling Point* represents a vital stepping stone for the director, and an experimental dry run for much of his later work<sup>38</sup>’. It is accurate to say that *Boiling Point* clearly anticipates several tenets of Kitano's oeuvre, displays the first flowerings of the director’s later style. It is the first of his films to demonstrate a concern with youth, and to feature a journey as a prominent aspect of its narrative (the spectre of the road movie will variously haunt almost every Kitano film from this point, although it will be modulated and transfigured in later works). Although Kitano receives no credit as editor in the film (his subsequent film, *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi/A Scene at the Sea* [1991], is the first in this regard), *Boiling Point* nonetheless begins to demonstrate the predilection for frontal, static compositions and structural ellipsis that quickly became intrinsic norms of his cinema.

Another tendency that was particular to the positive reviews of *Boiling Point* (as the Wesley Morris notice attests) was to pontificate over the film's sublime artistry as though it were un-problematically of a piece with other Kitano Yakuza pictures. This may well arise from the fact that *Boiling Point* was released in the wake of *Hana-Bi*, especially in the US when the triumph of the latter facilitated the rapidly successive release of several earlier Kitano pictures. *Hana-Bi* was thus the benchmark against which other films were measured, and one can surmise that many critics were still hooked on Kitano's stylized *mise-en-scène* and perceived Ozu-esque quietude and Zen tranquility contrasted with brutal, idiosyncratic violence, and that this colored their response to a film in which such moments are actually comparatively rare.

It is this that balances the sense of *Boiling Point* as Kitano's 'first auteur work'<sup>39</sup>. Indeed, in apparent support of Mes and Sharp, one may conclude from several shots and scenes in *Boiling Point* that it is markedly among Kitano's more sophomore efforts; not a film by Kitano at all. For example, his close-ups in reverse-field dialogue set-ups<sup>ii</sup> sometimes seem (ostensibly at least) awkwardly composed, with an unnecessary wide lens that distorts the protagonist's face. In the inciting petrol station run-in with the irate yakuza, there is a shot of him that emphasizes his ungainly face in an almost extreme close-up frame-right; whilst in the karaoke sequence a mobile camera dollies around the dance floor in a single long take as Uehara twice smashes a bottle over the head of a rival yakuza. However, the wide-angle lens visibly distorts the space within the frame, as though it were the POV of a drunkard for whom the room has begun to spin.

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<sup>ii</sup> Kitano almost never deploys conventional over-the-shoulder shots at part of his analytical decoupage. This, in a less overt way, is akin to Ozu in his characteristic refusal of classical continuity editing and his emphasis on the primacy of the camera and its own viewpoint on the action.

Wide-angle lenses are also used to distort space in certain dialogue scenes. When Iguchi, the ex-yakuza bar owner, visits his former gang to try and help Masaki out of his trouble with them, ostensibly simple shot/reverse shots present both men in further planes of the visual field, with characters' heads in the foreground crushing them in overly packed and cluttered compositions. Elsewhere, other shots, especially in the early part of the film, are obliquely angled so as to emphasize the space around the characters. This then results in a number of odd shots, connected with close-ups in particular, in which characters' heads are positioned so as to slice parts of the face off the screen.

Given that such shots and compositions are anathema to Kitano's style as it has subsequently developed, the temptation would be to regard them as uncharacteristically anomalous. In actuality, this style was a transformation even from *Violent Cop*. The earlier film is linear, direct and cleanly controlled, both in its visual style (what Abe Casio terms its 'right-angleness'<sup>40</sup>) and its pared-down narrative structure. *Boiling Point*, by contrast, is not only awash with the aforementioned unstable, imbalanced compositions, it has a loose, rambling narrative in which the plot variously deforms and elongates what is a slender story. Again to quote Abe, *Boiling Point* is a film that is characterised by 'diffusion'<sup>41</sup> - by a scattered and centrifugal quality in which everything explodes from the centre and entirely overturns any real sense of narrative or visual cohesion and instead presents a collage of disparate fragments. The ungainly close-ups one could put down to inexperience. The karaoke shot would likely have been necessitated by the practicality of shooting in a small, cramped location, with the long,

mobile take required to capture the particular rhythms and timings of what is essentially a comedic moment<sup>iii</sup>.

It is also noteworthy that in this film, as in *Getting Any?* Kitano takes a supporting, and in many ways revealing, role with regard to the 'Beat' Takeshi image. In *Boiling Point*, Kitano's character of the unhinged gang boss Uehara - who in some ways looks forward to the suicidal yakuza Murakawa in *Sonatine* - can be read as a commentary on the public persona of 'Beat' Takeshi. The character is a wild, uncontrollable, tyrannical leader of his gang, who bullies and coerces those around him into following his will: who demands that his orders be followed even though, as is often the case, this entails the humiliation and physical harm of those following him.

One can see in this scenario a reflection of the *Takeshi Gundan* (Takeshi's army), or at least a perception thereof on the part of the mainstream social order against which much of Kitano's aggressively vulgar and dangerous humor was directed. The *Gundan* was a group of disciples who dedicated themselves to Kitano after he had attained nationwide notoriety as 'Beat' Takeshi on television and radio in Japan. Referring to Kitano as *Tono* (my lord), his army would perform whatever crazy, and oftentimes embarrassing, actions Kitano demanded of them. It was a conceit that formed the basis of several of Kitano's most popular television shows, including *Ganbaruman*, *Fūn! Takeshi jō* (*Takeshi's Castle*) and *Ultra O-warai Quiz*. In these programs, his disciples would have to perform various stunts. They had to remain in boiling water until they burned, fight against

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<sup>iii</sup> On the other hand, one may well argue that the shots were intended to have the effect that they do. The exaggerated compositions could be regarded as a corollary of the narrative itself - as a broad framework shattered and transgressed by elements that puncture its nominal boundaries and reveal its fundamental untenability, in this case the Godard-esque point of failure of (commercial) cinema as an objective medium. The ostensibly awkward, wide-angle long take could be retrospectively vitiated if one considers and reconstructs the film as a fantasy. Here, in a point coterminous with the above, it may be argued that this distorted sequence shot appropriates the unbalanced psychological point of view of Masaki, a naïve youth who feels uncomfortable and ill at ease in the violent milieu in which he finds himself.

dangerous animals or professional boxers, or even (in one instance) drive headlong into an explosion, all for the amusement and favor of their beloved lord and leader.

This already begins to sound like a proto-typical Yakuza scenario, certainly as it has filtered through the lens of genre cinema and entered the popular consciousness, and it bleeds directly into *Boiling Point*. Whereas *Violent Cop* reacted against 'Beat' Takeshi in the person of the alienated, burned out protagonist and his essential difference from the televisual 'Beat' persona, *Boiling Point* conceived an antithetical response to the same subject. In other words, rather than present a diametrically opposed character to 'Beat' Takeshi, with Uehara Kitano begins with the omnipotent master of ceremonies made famous on television and pushes his behavior and characteristics to their objectionably logical conclusion. That is, he strips away the exaggerated hyperbole associated with his *Gundan* television shows and exposes the cruel extremities of such action and spectacle.

In this sense *Boiling Point* represents a logical progression for Kitano: from *Violent Cop*'s reaction against the public's knowledge and expectations of 'Beat' Takeshi to a comedic magnification of that same sphere of knowledge and expectation, a distillation of the 'Beat' characteristics of *Ganbaruman* and *Ultra O-warai Quiz*. Indeed, there can be no clearer indication of Uehara being conceived in response to the famous persona of the televisual 'Beat' Takeshi, and popular perceptions thereof, than the fact that his existence is ultimately revealed to be a purely adolescent construct. He is an imagined accretion of tics and traits perceived not simply by a third party but by someone who would generally be expected to be among 'Beat' Takeshi's core audience demographic: born from the mind of a youth fantasizing a picture of rampant, unapologetic

individuality in contrast to the somewhat prosaic teenage angst and alienation that he presumably feels in struggling to find a girlfriend and fit in with his local baseball team.

To suggest that Kitano is unambiguously appropriating 'Beat' Takeshi and his *Gundan* television shows would, though, be misleading. It has been said that he is merely playing himself in *Boiling Point*<sup>42</sup>. Certainly (again like *Violent Cop*), Kitano's second film was advertised with a campaign that traded heavily on assumptions of 'Beat' Takeshi and the aforementioned extreme game shows. The film, in fact, features many of Kitano's *Gundan* in subsidiary roles, most prominently *Dankan* as the protagonist's best friend, *Gadarukanaru Taka* (Guadalcanal Taka) as the fiery ex-yakuza Iguchi, and Rakkyo Ide as Hajime. As a result, the fact that *Boiling Point* was simply a *Takeshi Gundan* film along the lines of *Ganbaruman* was explicitly promoted in some quarters, with lines such as 'The Gundan let loose' appearing in certain promotional ads.

The film itself ultimately works against the extra-textual codifications inherent in its Japanese advertising campaign. The many *Gundan* members in *Boiling Point* are credited with their real names as opposed to the alter egos they adopted in Takeshi's army (a point which reinforces the carnivalesque sense in which they have left their daily, 'real', lives behind in becoming a part of Kitano's group). Furthermore, their dispersal across the narrative of the film, the fact that they do not simply play Uehara's gang underlings, may be inferred as representing a transformation by which one can conceive of a Kitano Takeshi rather than just a 'Beat' Takeshi *Gundan*.

Already, then, with his second film Kitano is almost parasitically dependent upon a parallel circulation of discourse on and knowledge of his televisual other self to arrive at a full understanding of his cinematic work. More than a simple reaction against 'Beat'

Takeshi on TV, it is, rather, a marked appropriation and parody of this persona that implicitly reinforces the relative stability of the former through a tacit acceptance that he is a construct with whose signs and codes the (domestic) audience is fully conversant. It could thus be said to be an underlining as opposed to an undermining of 'Beat' Takeshi on television; and as such is a good entry point into a discourse on *Boiling Point's* status as a carnivalesque text. This, in turn, opens up and elucidates the film's central thematic concerns with individuality, the group and the vagaries of personal action and desire.

It has been demonstrated that the overturning of established boundaries plays a central role in carnival. The resultant period of free play is inscribed into *Boiling Point* first of all at a narrative level, as Kitano progressively dispenses with even a token nod to plot mechanics to offer one of the purest instances in his career of what would later take root (albeit in a more tempered manner) in *Sonatine* and *Zatoichi*: namely, the divorcing of story from spectacle, plot from pure action. As Aaron Gerow has pointed out, this is most clearly seen in the transition from Tokyo to Okinawa<sup>43</sup>. The protagonist Masaki's friend, Kazuo, initially refuses to accompany him on his trip to procure guns for his ex-yakuza friend. Cut immediately to Okinawa (or what is later revealed as Okinawa, as there is a straight cut between the scenes with no immediate establishment of place), and the two are together on the beach. What prompted the change of heart is elided, and never figures in the film at any point thereafter.

In one sense this is perfectly in keeping with the overall design of the film. That is, if one accepts that the whole narrative is Masaki's daydream, then its ostensibly loose structure makes sense as someone fantasizing a scenario of travel and ultimately violent self-empowerment would not give credence to questions of plot causality and

characterization. It is this same rationale that legitimates the abrupt appearance of the best friend at the site of Masaki's noble self-sacrifice at the end of the film. Masaki is never shown telling Kazuo of his intentions, where and when he will be undertaking his plan.

At best this is a pure coincidence of the type a well-constructed screenplay would be expected to ensure did not occur. However, it is logical that Masaki would desire an audience to witness his final performance, and Kazuo in particular because his friend had recently fallen foul of the very yakuza who Masaki is trying to blow up in this penultimate scene. What is more, it was Masaki's fault that Kazuo was beaten up by gangsters, as he was accompanying him on an earlier attack from which Masaki fled when violence flared up. This action at the end is thus a performance of intended remorse and retribution, and Kazuo's audience is required to legitimate it as such, to configure his senseless suicide as a moment of triumph.

This preoccupation with individuality versus the collective, and with performance and identity, in *Boiling Point* is made manifest from the very beginning in both subject and in style. As Masaki walks back to the field of play following his toilet break at the very beginning, a combined tracking and crane shot follows him back into the throng of players and action in a reasonably long take. The purpose is to visualize the baseball field as a whole, unified space; as a site of action and performance on which ritualized competition and, more importantly, cohesive teamwork play out. Masaki literally becomes indistinguishable from the other players as he walks to where the game is taking place and away from the craning camera.

Following this, Kitano's depiction of the game tends to confuse space, in that he abstracts segments of the playing field with little orientation of screen direction to anchor

the action. For instance, he spends more time detailing the conversations of those watching the game than the game itself. The depiction of the game is then immediately, though briefly, realized with only static camera set-ups. These serve to divide the play into more or less discrete blocks of individual action and players for which there is a (rudimentary) consistency of screen direction but little sense of the specific dynamic of the play, the way the team works and interacts together. The baseball game thus becomes a mass of various different actions and movements that do not cohere into a cogent whole, into a team playing a game together<sup>iv</sup>.

The aforementioned crane shot also contrasts with the very first shot of the film. *Boiling Point* is one of a number of Kitano films that open with a shot of a character staring blankly out before them. Here, the protagonist Masaki is enclosed within the unnatural darkness of a toilet in which he is sitting (a carnivalesque image of bodily waste and function that is mirrored throughout the film), and against which only his face can be seen. The obvious contrast here is between this blackness and the bright light he steps into when he goes outside and returns to the game in the subsequent shots. However, there is another, sub-textual concern behind this overt visual juxtaposition. The first shot represents a personal, private and interior space that is then superseded by the public site of performance and (ostensible) cohesive collective identity that is the baseball team. This tension is underlined when Masaki later plays the game, hits the ball, but has his points negated because he overtakes his teammate whilst exalting in his glory and running from base to base.

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<sup>iv</sup> It is typical of Kitano that baseball should be a prominent aspect of the thematic of *Boiling Point* (he has since childhood been a baseball fanatic). Indeed, his use of the sport here is another explicit instance of his second film pre-figuring later works. Surfing in *A Scene at the Sea*, boxing in *Kids Return*, basketball in *Brother*: these sports are particularly meaningful within the context of each different film.

Thereafter, the fact that Masaki struggles on the Baseball field feeds directly into his subsequent actions, which all relate to an ethic of individuality over collectivity. Most obviously, he breaks the rules governing the social milieu in which he lives (as Kitano breaks the rules of classical cinematic illusory best practice) when he reacts violently against yakuza oppression and attempts to punch a gangster at the petrol station where he works. In so doing, he behaves in a way that challenges the hierarchy, the marked structure that elevates one person above another, and this initiates the plot of the film.

The opening shot can also be read in another significant way. It is suggestive of a viewer in the darkness of the cinema, seated and watching a film. This is the cinema not as is often theorized with regard to Hollywood, of a communal, shared experience representative of escape and of dreaming, but as redolent of an individual, private connection to a text; of the light from the screen's other, narrated world illuminating a personal void. There is, though, an essential difference to *Boiling Point's* first shot that distinguishes it from the similar openings of *Violent Cop*, *A Scene at the Sea*, *Hana-Bi* and *Brother*. These films begin with characters staring off-screen. Masaki, in contrast, looks directly at the camera, out at the audience. Where his contemporaries in the Kitano canon stare into diegetic space beyond the frame, he (like the dolls at the beginning of *Dolls*) looks past the world of the film and into the extra-diegetic realm of viewing subjects that are (theoretically) regarding him as voyeurs, especially so given he is engaged in the private activity of defecating.

Masaki is, then, configured as a combination of protagonist, narrator and narratee: actant, storyteller and spectator. In the specific realms of Kitano's filmmaking, which places great stress on (cinematic) structures of looking and being looked at, Masaki is the

first incarnation of a Kitano protagonist who is at once seer and seen. Indeed, the fact that he becomes both simultaneously differentiates him even from later characters such as *Sonatine's* Murakawa, *Hana-Bi's* Nishi or *Brother's* Yamamoto, who tend to slide from one mode to the other.

As Kitano's compositions in these introductory moments make clear, Masaki will both narrate and watch his own actions. With this, Kitano offers a challenge to ideas of the carnivalesque: that is, instead of breaking down the barriers that delineate hierarchical levels, he calls attention to the fact of film viewing and thereby enhances distance, makes it impossible for an audience to view the work as a window on the world. It is a probing of the potentiality of carnival, a tacit assertion at the beginning that the film to follow will test the extent to which a thematic of carnival can aid one's understanding of a number of tenets of Japan, its society and, more pressingly, its cinema.

The explicit assertion is that carnival, the overturning of authority, has at least the potential to be as damaging and limiting as subservience within a group. This particular dichotomy is one of extremes, of diametric opposites, with no middle ground. The film begins with a picture of a group in the baseball team that needs to cohere as a unit to prosper and succeed, and ends with an overt example of unilateral individuality in Masaru's kamikaze mission against the local yakuza. In the interim, Masaki is similarly surrounded by these has Kazuo on one side, his often timid friend who does almost nothing to stand out, trying hard to blend in with the collective around him, and Uehara's rampant disregard for any boundaries of socially-acceptable behavior on the others (indeed, he has literally been ejected from his professional group: the yakuza gang).

Masaki singularly fails to navigate these opposing paradigms. He cannot work within the groups signified by the baseball team (his one moment of individual glory costs the team a game when he outruns his teammate Kazuo) and by the working environment where he attempts to punch a local yakuza rather than submit to him as his colleagues do. However, against this, he can only kill himself trying to take on the local yakuza, a struggle that began with the skirmish between Masaki and the gangster.

This tension between carnival and those elements that undermine it rhymes with the dichotomy between the individual and the group within Japan. The implication is that there are only extremes, only absolutes, and that there is concomitantly no credible, private space for selfhood that is not defined against this or that codification of behavior. Even Masaki's burgeoning relationship with his new girlfriend can find no space to grow away from such corrupting and delimiting concepts, as the stranger asking if he has had sex with her yet amply connotes.

Ultimately, the effect of *Boiling Point* is of experimentation. It feels like the work of a filmmaker who felt constrained on his previous film (taking over the mantle from another director on a project he didn't initiate) and is here boldly testing the waters of film directing. It is a loosely strung together assemblage of scenes, visual ideas, characters and jokes, the whole given the slightest narrative framework and ostensible structure in a generic story of gang war. In this sense one can trace marked commonalities and connections across Kitano's canon. In particular, it can be seen to prefigure *Sonatine* three years later, where a trip to Okinawa similarly becomes a liminal time of game playing and waiting for action. Uehara in this film also looks forward to Murakawa in the

later film, particularly as he has premonitions and fantasies of his own death, and at the end kills all his gang superiors in a gunfight that takes place in a small room.

Moreover, the aforementioned loose and wayward structure is also the most extreme example of what would soon become a recognizable intrinsic norm of his style. This, in addition to *Boiling Point* marking the first flowerings of Kitano's distinctive editing, make it a stepping stone of a film: the work of an inexperienced director not just experimenting but searching: for an identity and a model of self-expression in a new medium (especially having come from another, different medium within which he was by this time an experienced and established figure). It is an important film, linking *Violent Cop* with later works such as *Sonatine* and *Brother*, and it elucidates both 'Beat' Takeshi and Kitano Takeshi; performer and filmmaker.

## Who's Getting Any?

**'It's an 'avant garde' film whose very existence was unlikely<sup>44</sup>.**

Kitano on *Getting Any?*

*Getting Any?* like *Boiling Point* before it, has been both marginalized and lauded, derided and celebrated, in roughly equal measure. Abe Casio has said that 'Watching it over and over again, I came to realize that it is a precisely calibrated film - indeed, a masterpiece unequalled in Japanese film history<sup>45</sup>'; to which the Japanese critic Ōtaka Hirō

acquiesces. He noted in *Kinema jumpō* at the time of the film's release that he loved it and found the humour 'irresistible'<sup>46</sup>. Similarly, Kitano, whose has been reluctant to discuss the film (presumably because of the extent to which its comedy is personal: that is, directed at 'Beat' Takeshi), has nonetheless described it as amongst his favourite three of his own pictures. In an on-camera interview, which he prefaces with the caveat that the following will be the only time he will publicly discuss *Getting Any?* he says, with due seriousness, that he finds his fifth film a 'great piece of work'<sup>47</sup>.

On the other hand, Keiko I. McDonald mirrors the reaction of a majority in Japan when she ignores the film completely in her overview of Kitano's career in her most recent book *Reading a Japanese Film*<sup>48</sup>. Concomitantly, the critic Tommy Udo, who has been vociferous in his championing of Kitano's oeuvre, noted before the film's European release that 'it could certainly blow Kitano's art-film kudos'<sup>49</sup>.

*Getting Any?* is the key film in Kitano's canon in attempting to construct a cinema of 'Beat' Takeshi, or at least a meaningful and symbiotic cinematic interaction between 'Beat' and Takeshi Kitano. Its advertising in Japan stressed both 'Beat' Takeshi and a convergence of 'Beat' Takeshi and Takeshi Kitano. Kitano's few scenes as the crazy scientist were prominent in the trailer: in particular the two shots (from a brief fantasy scene in the film) in which he is applauded by a panel of jurors. This pair of shots is repeated at the start of the trailer, inter-cut with a shot of Tokyo Tower across which a text scroll reads: 'First film directed by Beat Takeshi, fifth film directed by Takeshi Kitano'. This, along with the aforementioned shots that appear twice, seems explicitly to offer and to celebrate the arrival of a film by 'Beat' Takeshi.

In keeping with the comedic emphasis on signs, language and advertising found in the film itself, the trailer for *Getting Any?* also offers a number of other such gnomic pronouncements. In particular is a text scroll declaring ‘The Birth of *O-warai* Cinema’, a term meaning laughter and often used in conjunction with comedy on television, frequently, as in Kitano’s own *Ultra O-warai Quiz*, in the title. It is employed in this context to imply the migration of this televisual form into Kitano’s filmmaking: ‘You’ve seen this on TV, now watch it in the cinema<sup>v</sup>’.

In a recent interview concerning *Getting Any?* Kitano noted that most comedians take their jokes very seriously<sup>50</sup>. By way of contrast, he said his aim in *Getting Any?* was above all to mock himself and his own outré comedic persona by inventing more irreverent and scatological scenarios than he could get away with on television. He then found that he enjoyed this self-mockery so much that he got carried away and lost himself in it<sup>51</sup>. This in itself is an explicitly carnivalesque notion: the breaking down of all barriers and a renewal and rebirth through laughter and parody. It comes into figurative effect here through Kitano being the butt, rather than just the perpetrator of much of the comedy (the role he has generally occupied as ‘Beat’ Takeshi on television). As a result, the hierarchical structure of the *Takeshi Gundan* is subverted, with Kitano appearing as a peripheral character in only the film’s final section: a character who remains largely ineffectual and incompetent; who, in undertaking his own work (rather than ordering around a collection of underlings), fails completely in his task of perfecting invisibility.

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<sup>v</sup> One other scroll is a mock of a Cannes statement from Cannes saying that the Cannes Film Festival is not going to touch this film. Thus is Kitano distancing himself from his other work in cinema, especially his previous film, *Sonatine*, which many in Japan had though self-indulgently experimental and artistic, by disavowing any connection between himself and the premiere means by which his work can be circulated as art cinema abroad.

A perceived homogeneity within Japanese society is ridiculed in *Getting Any?* In particular, it is the protagonist's presumptions about sex, and his belief that everyone is doing it, that compounds his endless and vain pursuit. Indeed, the film's Japanese title, *Minnā- Yatteruka*, translates literally as 'Is everyone doing it?' Here one finds Japan's social and cultural collectivity being explicitly narrativized by Kitano, as a strange sense of conformity underlies the central quest; one that entails a particular capitalist logic of betterment through competitive material gain, especially the accrual of money and the fantasy that is sold about the route to happiness lying herein.

This attack on famous and revered Japanese cultural icons extends to other aspects of Japanese social norms. The dominance of laughter aimed directly at what Sue Vice terms 'exalted objects'<sup>52</sup> in carnival is designed to breathe new life into them, and to allow for an exploration of their otherwise taboo status. In this category comes the attack on the Japanese family in *Getting Any?* - the cornerstone and foundation of Japanese society. In particular there is the omnipresent family hovering in the background whenever Asao tries to buy a car, a family whose child the car salesman repeatedly cracks around the head in a running joke.

This theme is also reinforced in the scenes with Asao's family. Respect for one's elders remains of great importance in Japan, but Asao callously sells off his ailing grandfather's internal organs for quick cash (the notion of human identity reduced to and defined by purely physical, corporeal terms figures in several Kitano films). Similarly, he can only defecate on his mother as she tries to talk some sense into him when he appears as the fly man over the sports stadium during the film's coda. It is a literal defecation on the prevalence of family matched by Kitano's symbolic act throughout the film.

Such laughter at the Japanese family may seem simple or overly obvious on the surface. However, given the film's preoccupation with its protagonist's ongoing search for easy sex and pleasures of the flesh, the family (which is, after all, the natural biological determinant in sexual activity, its legitimate aim) thus becomes the kind of official and officious social institution that carnival seeks to subvert and overthrow. This kind of social parody is, in fact, something of a recurrent Kitano concern, and pre-dates the beginning of his career in filmmaking. For example, one of the most infamous jokes from his early days on television as part of the Two Beats was a parody of a road safety slogan in which he would say 'Cross when the traffic lights are at red, like everyone else, and you will be safe'. This is a joke aimed directly at the Japanese tendency to collective psychology and group-oriented self-conduct.

It is through carnival and parody that meaning can be uncovered in *Getting Any?* The elements of the grotesque referred to above, particularly regarding the lower bodily stratum and sex and waste, are central throughout. As such, they are thematically as well as narratively constructed. Most obviously, *Getting Any?* is concerned with the exploits of a young loser to have sex, and this desperate urge governs all his actions and various escapades as an actor, a yakuza hit man, etc. Kitano extends this basis of his picaresque narrative to include an attack on all manner of socially and culturally conditioned and governed behavior and identity construction. It is something seen at the very beginning of the film. Like Itami's *Tampopo* [1987] (to which it bears a marked similarity), *Getting Any?* opens with a moment of pronounced self-reflexivity, with a voice-over correcting the apparent opening titles of a television police show. After the incorrect credits are removed, the program continues, and follows a man in a sports car who picks up a

woman stranded by the roadside and proceeds almost immediately to have sex with her in the car.

It is this fantasy that ignites the protagonist, Asao's, desire and leads him to begin his quest by buying a car in which he can emulate what he has seen on TV. He simply presumes that masculinity is defined in this way, through sexuality and sexual conquests, and that this is inextricably connected to material gain and status. From the outset, then, Asao is explicitly, mindlessly reacting to what is sold to him, constructing his sense of self via external, culturally coded determinants. When he later crashes a car he has stolen into a billboard advertisement, it succinctly encapsulates the film's thematic concern with and presentation of an inescapable nexus of signs that governs each successive stage in the narrative just as it governs life and culture in Japan. Asao literally enters into the space of the sign, becomes a part of its make-up (it is an ad for an eatery through which he ploughs, replacing the picture of a car with his actual one). Even here the concept of signs, of packaging and selling a product, becomes significant. The most prominent image used to promote the café, with the slogan 'satisfaction guaranteed', is a picture of a sexually suggestive woman holding food: of, in other words, a signifier of sex out of context, used for commercial, consumptive purposes. The comedic point, that the penetration of Asao's fancy sports car through the sign inscribes the act of sex within his literal crash through the sign, speaks precisely to this thematic end. It is car sex made manifest in a more literal way than Asao intended, and as such exposes and undermines the notion of sex as commodity.

Asao's desire for car sex, rather than simply sex, reinforces this theme of consumptive practice, of selling and receiving a specific image of sexuality and intercourse that masks,

conceals, the (biological) reality beneath. It is sex divorced from making love, from feelings, and culturally encoded as part of a larger aspirational aesthetic of living: i.e. it is not enough to have sex; one must have the right car to have sex in. This discourse of overt signs and signifiers is very much in keeping with Kitano's other films, where overt uniforms act as façades that frequently clash with, in some way oppose or oppress, the protagonists. Here, these signs offer a pervasive wall of self-perpetuating signifiers that inform and condition Asao's desires.

Thus, what seems in *Getting Any?* to be a particularly loose, free form narrative - one in which the various episodes don't so much feed as collide into each other in an especially blunt manner as the protagonist stumbles clumsily from one misadventure to the next - can in fact be understood as a carefully constructed whole. Indeed, it becomes the 'perfectly calibrated' work that Abe Casio believes it to be. It is the precise juxtaposition of sex with transport and travel that defines the early stages of the film: of sex as for having an expensive sports car or for flying first class. In effect, it is the body offered solely as a body, which in turn makes thematic sense of one of Asao's plans for raising money in order to buy a sports car: that is, harvesting the organs, the body, of his grandfather; literally turning him inside out.

This is, of course, one of the central features of the carnivalesque. The emphasis on the lower stratum of the body, on sex and ultimately on defecation and waste, corresponds perfectly to the defining precept of carnival in grotesque realism. The two are inextricably linked in this film, and, despite Kitano's insistence that he did not intend *Getting Any?* to carry any social relevance, they can be seen to relate to Japanese society

in much the same way as does Imamura's insistence on carnival: on sex and the grotesque realism of the body.

In point of fact, through its thematic of sex, *Getting Any?* not only echoes Imamura, but also the Japanese New Wave in general. Sex was one of the defining features of the New Wave cinema in Japan: not simply in the politicized portraits of works by Oshima and Yoshishige, but as variously comedic (Masumura Yasuzo's *Kōshoku ichidai otoko/A Lustful Man* [1961]) and dramatic (Hani Susumu's *Hatsukoi: jigoku hen/The Inferno of First Love* [1968]) portraits of raging passions. Indeed, so prevalent was sex in the New Wave that Satō Tadao's book *Currents in Japanese Cinema* has a section specifically detailing its treatment by all the major directors associated with this collective<sup>53</sup>.

In *Getting Any?* sex is a consuming force that, even though it is conditioned by media outlets, nonetheless defines the character completely. It is a picture of sex as a monstrous eruption that literally takes the film into the realms of horror in the last section of the narrative. This is something Kitano will return to in *Dolls*, where a vision of Japan as hell arises from the horrors of romance, desire and commitment. As Jack Hunter has noted, sex often entails hell on Earth in Japanese cinema<sup>54</sup>, and so it is that an apocalyptic scenario is the ultimate after-effect of carnality. It is thus fitting that the Flyman's last words before his death refer back to the beginning of the film: 'car sex'.

Signs and signifiers of sex, then, predominate throughout *Getting Any?* In a related thematic, language also becomes crucial to the film's meaning and effect, albeit in a different way than the psychoanalytical exploration of this subject that informs Kitano Cop and Yakuza films. The notion of language working at an overt, surface level is inscribed into the textuality of *Getting Any?* in both diegetic and extra-diegetic ways.

Most obviously, such instances as the written text (about Kitano's date with a woman in Roppongi) that suddenly appears onscreen during the sequence in which Asao accompanies a treasure hunter into a cave on a search for lost Tokugawa gold seem bluntly to insert, or force, 'Beat' Takeshi into the film. This is precisely the kind of detail that would constitute the personal side of Kitano's radio show in the early 1980s, and which ensured the loyal following that would go on to become the *Gundan*. However, it becomes clear when this device is used again near the end of the film that it is serving other ends than simply replicating famous facets of 'Beat' Takeshi's comedic persona.

It is also an explicit subversion of the autobiographical import that has been perceived in his films. Indeed, to the extent that it personalizes (that is, over-personalizes) his film, it can even be argued to serve as a denunciation of authorship, of the interjection of the stamp of the creator into an otherwise generic film. Similarly, an earlier instance of this device is used in the fantasy scene in which Asao imagines going to work at a factory in order to make a pistol. Here, the text speaks out in defense of the environment, and notes how Japan should curb its whale hunting, before a brief note shortly afterwards stating 'I like to eat whale meat' appears. Where the later interjection of 'Beat' Takeshi relates to an authorial precept, here it is the concept of social commentary and commitment that is satirized, Kitano in effect short-circuiting any attempt to read his film as meaningful beyond the confines of his own brand of comedy.

This personalization is transformed yet again later in the narrative when Kitano repeats the on-screen text. This time, as the self-defense forces gather to combat the Fly man, the onscreen text relates specifically to advertising. One soldier makes a remark about Hibino Astro vision, the giant television before which Terajima Susumu (whose

has already died twice in the film) is singing and on which he appears in a music video. He does this because, if the product is named in the film, then its rental fee will be lower, something visualized subsequently when the price appears on screen and proceeds to plummet.

Kitano here returns to the self-reflexivity and play on signs with which he began the narrative of *Getting Any?* He foregrounds both the business of filmmaking, the behind-the-scenes needs (such as equipment rental) necessitated by the specificities of the particular film, and the question of product placement, the fact that something is being sold by the film. This, by extension, also carries the logical correlative of consumption. In underlining the selling, Kitano also highlights the viewer's role (like Asao's) as an entity being sold something, and this can then be related back to Kitano himself in that he is dissecting the vicissitudes of film authorship. Discourse on auteur studies by commentators such as Timothy Corrigan<sup>55</sup> has stressed the spectator's role in recognizing signatures of the auteur and the concomitant commercial value of authorship in the cinema: that of selling a particular name as auteur.

Given Kitano's stated aim of satirizing his own comedy in *Getting Any?* one can easily see that a parody of the textual practices of reception studies in film authorship relates to the visibility of 'Beat' Takeshi over Kitano Takeshi in the film. Indeed, this is especially so at a time when, in the wake of the criticisms against the perceived auteur pretensions of *Sonatine*, Kitano was eager to transform himself and his work and reconnect with his comedic roots (the source of his popularity in Japan).

This explicit presentation of signs further positions *Getting Any?* as a comedic precursor to Kitano's later *Dolls*, which is similarly about the cultural claustrophobia and

imprisonment within a radically demarcated space defined entirely by a monstrous manifestation of symbolic social signification. Most overtly, as in the above example, these examples of cultural visibility form a tangible and imposing veneer, a postmodern empire of signs, that, like *Tampopo*, stands in for 'Japan'. It is a representation of a country through images that becomes the country itself. At the end when the chief of the Earth self-defense force refuses to go to combat the Flyman in Ginza because it is not a cool place to be seen, this precept is crystallized. It is, like everything else in the film, about images and their sale and consumption, the ways in which the promulgation of images defines both selfhood and national identity<sup>vi</sup>.

Just as *Boiling Point* marks the important first steps towards Kitano the auteur, and is a vital link between *Violent Cop* and *Sonatine*, *Getting Any?* is similarly a significantly placed film in Kitano's oeuvre. Kitano has himself stated that everything he has made since this film is based on it: that his career has somehow grown and developed from this seemingly inauspicious, certainly anomalous, picture. One may take this as evidence of his apparent dissatisfaction now with the violent films that made his name<sup>vii</sup>, but equally one might point out that this film may well have cleared the ground for Kitano's successes to follow, that the film was a cathartic purging of the darkness and despair that had been made manifest in *Sonatine*. It represents a vital step that needed to be taken before Kitano's directorial career could be reborn with *Kids Return* and *Hana-Bi*, his next two films.

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<sup>vi</sup> All of which makes *Getting Any?* very much of a piece with other Kitano films that implicitly explore notions of the image as they pertain to looking and being looked at.

<sup>vii</sup> *Takeshis* and *Glory to the Filmmaker* both take pains to ridicule and parody Kitano's violent, affect-less Yakuza films.

### ***Kikujiro*: Acting without an audience**

**‘I couldn’t help feeling that my films were being stereotyped...it became difficult for me to identify with them. So I decided to try and make a film no-one would expect from me<sup>56</sup>’.**

Kitano’s American production notes for *Kikujiro*

Prior to the above statement, Kitano had already made plain his desire to confound audiences and follow *Hana-Bi* with something entirely different, entirely new. At the Rotterdam Film Festival in 1998, he said that being pigeonholed as a director of violent films was beginning to frustrate and anger him. He was, he continued, going to abandon this aspect of his work to make a film based on *The Wizard of Oz* [1939]: a film in which, as he told Mark Schilling, he would attempt to take on a very generic, classical story and see how he could make it his own, how he could approach and execute it differently:

**‘It’s like a piano recital where everyone plays the same number, but one performance is somehow better than the others. I would like to try something like that once. Everyone has his own idea of how to tell a story about family relations<sup>57</sup>’.**

*Kikujiro*, then, is clearly not a film with the same anarchic sensibility and narrative as either *Boiling Point* or *Getting Any?* As Kitano noted, it was a project undertaken with a view to adhering to a given generic template and tradition. Typically for a director who was now becoming well accustomed to foreign as well as local consumption of his work, this included both international (*The Wizard of Oz*) and Japanese models. The latter is

perhaps the more pronounced of the two. The broad generic categories of the road movie and the Japanese genre of the *Haha mono*<sup>viii</sup> (Mother story) would seem to intertwine to lend *Kikujiro* its foundation, whilst a number of television programmes can be seen to feed into its narrative specificity. As Mark Schilling has noted: ‘the theme of a child’s search for a missing parent is a TV-drama staple<sup>58</sup>’; in particular, one may point to *Haha wo tazunete sanzenri* (*30,000 Leagues in Search of Mother*, 1976). This animated series, adapted from a story in Edmondo de Amicis’s *Cuore* (*Heart: A Schoolboy’s Journey*) entitled *Dagli Appennini alle Ande*, details the exploits of a young Italian boy attempting to reach his mother in Argentina. It was directed by future Studio Ghibli alumnus Takahata Isao and ran to 52 episodes. Like its literary source (which was ultimately published as a stand-alone story away from its origins in Amicis’s collection), it achieved immense popularity and longevity in Japan<sup>ix</sup>.

The particular subject matter of a child’s search for an estranged parent is also much in evidence in Japanese cinema, most overtly in the 1990s and shortly thereafter. *Ōtobai shōjo Shojo* (*The Motorcycle Girl*, 1994) directed by the sometime actor and musician Agata Morio, concerns a teenage girl’s journey from Tokyo to Hokkaido by motorbike in search of her father. Closer to *Kikujiro* is Sakamoto Junji’s *Kizu darake no tenshi* (*Injured Angels*, 1997), in which a private detective is charged by a dying man with taking his son to find the boy’s estranged mother.

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<sup>viii</sup> This is a sub-genre of the *Shomin-geki*, or home drama, and first flowered in the 1930s in the work of Ozu Yasujiro (*Haha o kowazu ya/A Mother Should be Loved*, 1934 and *Hitori musuko/The Only Son*, 1937) and Shimizu Hiroshi (*Koi mo wasurete/Forget Love for Now*, 1937). It was further refined in the 1950s in such films as Kinoshita Keisuke’s *Nihon no higeki* (*A Japanese Tragedy*, 1953) and *Nijūshi no hitomi* (*Twenty-four Eyes*, 1954), Naruse Mikio’s *Okāsan* (*Mother*, 1952) Shimizu Hiroshi’s *Bojō* (*A Mother’s Love*, 1950).

<sup>ix</sup> To this end it would go on to inspire several more animated adaptations, most recently the film *Marco haha wo tazunete sanzenri* by Kusuba Kōzō in 1999

Kitano's appropriation of a classical, generic story and narrative framework in *Kikujiro* may be argued to undermine its status as a carnivalesque text; or at best qualify it as a more ambiguous, peripheral example than either *Boiling Point* or *Getting Any?* Underlining this view is the fact that it is, quite unapologetically, different to its direct progenitors in Kitano's canon. It is warm, poignant and engaging: a life affirming, emotionally empathetic and visually arresting experience. Moreover, it is a film that one may anticipate would satisfy both a sentimental Japanese appetite for (to borrow a famous film title) souls on the road and the spectre of what Ian Buruma calls 'The eternal mother'<sup>59</sup>, whilst keeping company with a long tradition of similar films from all over the world. Here one may list Chaplin's *The Kid* [1921], Fred Zinneman's *The Search* [1945], Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* [1973], Wim Wenders' *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, 1974) and *Paris, Texas* [1984], John Cassavetes' *Gloria* [1980](remade by Sidney Lumet in 1999), the Czech film *Kolya* [1995], Theo Angelopoulos' *Mia aioniotita kai mia mera* (*Eternity and a Day*, 1998), Zhang Yimou's *Qian li zou dan qi* (*Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, 2005), Walter Salles' Oscar winning *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, 1998), Carol Lai's first film *Boli shaonu* (*Glass Tears*, 2001); even the Adam Sandler comedy vehicle *Big Daddy* [1999] and the Disney film *The Kid* [2000] with Bruce Willis.

Appearances, though, can be deceptive, and *Kikujiro*, as both Abe Casio<sup>60</sup> and Aaron Gerow<sup>61</sup> have alluded, is a more problematic film than may ostensibly be supposed. It is most certainly a carnivalesque text, albeit more subtle and elusive than *Boiling Point* or *Getting Any?* But its status as such is coterminous with and attendant upon its identity as a genre film. More than its carnivalesque forebears, it involves appropriation and

dissociation: and its reputation as a sentimental road movie, or an ‘overtly saccharine fairy tale’<sup>62</sup>, tends to obfuscate the way in which Kitano manipulates his generic base. It is therefore important to (re)-examine *Kikujiro* in terms of its use of genre and employment of features associated with carnival. In doing this the film can be analysed for the ways in which it both fits into and departs from the Kitano paradigm, something that has thus far been marginalised in discourse on the film<sup>63</sup>.

Symptomatic of the critical neglect and short-sighted-ness with which *Kikujiro* has been treated is Donald Richie’s brief consideration of the film for the catalogue of titles he offers at the close of his book *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*. He sums up *Kikujiro* thusly:

**‘Like many comedians before him, Beat Takeshi turns sentimental about kids. In this film he plays a no-good ne’r-do-well who teams up with his small buddy and they do their road thing. In the end both profit from their little adventure. The end’<sup>64</sup>.**

That, apparently, is all *Kikujiro* amounts to. It is so generic as to be beneath consideration: ‘about two buddies doing their road thing. ‘The end’. But what is their ‘road thing’? And does Kitano’s film exemplify a traditional journey structure and road movie paradigm in keeping with its aforementioned generic counterparts in Wenders, Bogdanovich, Salles, *et al.* It is true that the spectre of the road-movie format perpetually hovers over *Kikujiro*, as it does over a number of Kitano’s films, but Kitano effectively short circuits its essential dynamics, de-familiarises the familiar.

If one takes Wim Wenders (a director whose enduring association with the road movie has ensured his continuing popularity in Japan even as it has waned in Europe) as

representative of this mode of filmmaking, then Kitano's deviation becomes immediately apparent. *Alice in the Cities*, like Wenders' later *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, 1975), renders the primacy of physical movement in time and space, depicting at length the characters in transit and documenting the details of their journey from place to place with topographical accuracy and documentary veracity (as this outward journey prefigures a more important inward, interior journey). Indeed, *Kings of the Road* begins with a Godard-esque text that, along with informing one of the widescreen aspect ratio in which the film was shot, also details the locations used in the film and the length of time of the shoot.

*Kikujiro*, by way of contrast, features almost no travelling, no movement in time or space that signifies the progression of the characters' journey from one location to another. The film begins in the city, and the destination turns out to be a rural town, but the journey between the two (as between each successive stop on the road) is completely elided. This approach echoes *Boiling Point*, *Sonatine* and *Getting Any?* and contrasts with the more literal, physical travails in *Hana-Bi* and especially *Dōruzu* (*Dolls*, 2003). It is something that Kitano underlines in a single shot when Kikujirō and Masao are left at a remote country bus stop. This scene is introduced with a reflection of the static protagonists going continuously round in the hubcap of the car that drives away and abandons them. Thus does the film insist upon a clear division between the two travellers on the one hand and movement and momentum on the other by showing their reflection as stationary entities trapped within but distinct from a moving body.

Kitano does repeat one aspect of the road movie as exemplified by the work of Wim Wenders: that of the interior journey. Indeed, the lack of any tangible sense of exterior

movement or travel in *Kikujiro*, along with the anonymity of the various locations, works to create a psychological space that permeates the film, a space in which an emotional, psychological journey is underlined. This is something introduced in the very first image of the film: a joyous, slow motion long shot of Masao running. Kitano has used slow motion only sparingly throughout his career. Most often, his use of the technique has been for dramatic emphasis in moments of particularly heightened violence, as in *Violent Cop* and *Boiling Point*. One can thus attach a measure of privileged importance to its deployment here, and the effect is to associate Masao, and by extension childhood, with a different, alterior sense of time, an elongated, almost suspended temporality that remains impervious and impenetrable against the encroaching strictures of the world and of adulthood.

From this perspective, the charge that *Kikujiro* is a simple and straightforward genre entity becomes untenable. It not only subverts the road movie form, but this opening relates a singular rather than generic take on childhood and selfhood. Proceeding from the slow-motion opening shot, *Kikujiro* stresses an insular time of childhood as childhood. That is, a generic coming of age trajectory on the part of Masao does not materialise, is abandoned: his is not a story of maturation, of becoming, a process entailing the growth of personal identity through his trials and tribulations (which the road movie narrative would seem to be ideally suited to: a form that depicts the child leaving his home and figuratively leaving his childhood behind as he ventures into the world). Instead, his hermetic seal remains intact, something exemplified most prominently in the fact that the truth about his mother is never actually related to Masao, who remains unaware of the truth of the situation.

As if to emphasise this presentation of the self-contained, hermetic presentation of childhood, Masao is juxtaposed with the titular Kikujirō. He is a character that does undergo a change of character as he travels with his junior companion: and it is a two-fold transformation. On the one hand, rather than Masao becoming an adult (or at least taking the first, formative steps on this long road), Kikujirō by way of contrast becomes a child, regresses to infancy in his own search for a lost mother, before ultimately reaching a point of maturation in becoming something of a father figure for Masao.

This is a distinct reversal of the norm, certainly for Japanese cinema, where such films as the aforementioned *Injured Angels*, Kurosawa's *Hachigatsu no rapsodī* (*Rhapsody in August*, 1991), *Firefly Dreams* [2000], Nagasaki Shunichi's *Nishi no majo ga shinda* (*The Witch of the West is Dead*, 2008) or the sports picture *Haisukūru: Hero* (*School Wars: Hero*, 2005), in which initially unruly children or teenagers change and develop, undergoing a rite of passage over the course of the narrative, often as a result of a relationship with an older person and often set during the summer school holidays.

In these respects, then, *Kikujiro* fulfilled Kitano's desire to break with and distance himself from the stereotypical cinema that he had begun to feel was dominating discourse on his work. However, in other ways it is less of an anomalous work than both its director and several reviewers have supposed. Indeed, it is a film that accrues much of its meaning and specificity from juxtaposition with elements of earlier Kitano pictures. *Kizzu ritān* (*Kids Return*, 1996) was the film that really marked a shift in the heretofore-distinctive Kitano paradigm, and introduced a more conventionally and transparently plot-driven narrative built around well-drawn and developed characters within an observed (rather than subverted) generic milieu. *Hana-Bi*'s plot structure fragmented its

story to startling effect, but in contradiction to *Sonatine*'s art-cinema façade and narrative experimentation, this was a more tangible subjective means to a clearly defined and elucidated psychological end. In other words, in the former work, Nishi has an inner, emotional life and trajectory that the film's overt style and a-linear structure works to illuminate. This is something that Murakawa in *Sonatine* (and, for that matter, Detective Azuma in *Violent Cop*) markedly lack.

This is one reason why *Kikujiro* represents yet another paradigm shift in Kitano's cinema: a transformation that combines the approaches of both *Kids Return* and *Hana-Bi*. On the surface, its structure has the lucid, causal construction of the former and the stylized appropriation of another media/art form (the child's picture book/diary) as an integral feature of its meaning from the latter. In addition, *Kikujiro* shares *Kids Return* and *Hana-Bi*'s emphasis on fractured family dynamics and focus on two characters who, abstracted from the traditional spaces of family and daily life and routine, come together and find a mutual fulfilment that is the more moving for its limited temporality, the fact that it does not, cannot, last.

One of the key carnivalesque features of both *Boiling Point* and *Getting Any?* is their respective treatments of 'Beat' Takeshi: exaggerating his televisual persona in the former and the subverting the same in the latter. *Kikujiro* connects with both strands of self-parody as evinced in these earlier works. Most overtly, the titular protagonist becomes the obverse, mirror image of Uehara in *Boiling Point* (and Murakawa in *Sonatine*). Whereas the crazed Uehara rules over his gang of yakuza completely, bending all around him to his will, Kikujirō is little more than a cuckolded husband who cannot even impose

himself on his wife (she perpetually berates him and governs his behaviour; indeed, it is she who forces him to accompany Masao on his journey in the first place).

When he does ultimately gather together a group of which he could be said to resemble its pre-eminent, guiding figure, it is merely as a parodic characterisation of a yakuza boss. In doing this, Kikujirō repeats Murakawa's orchestration of play on the beach, but the games are transfigured as literal child's play. They are symptomatic acts not of one man's alienation, nor of the fractious group dynamics entailing a puppet master and his dolls, but of a process of recuperation. It is the coming together of what may be regarded as a surrogate family in the person of Kikujirō, Masao, the travelling gypsy and the two bikers.

Thus does *Kikujiro* explicitly foreground both the childish and regenerative aspect of game playing explicitly denied elsewhere in Kitano's work. This emphasis on play becomes coterminous with a thematic stress on performance and theatre which, in addition to being a natural correlative to themes of perception and point of view (and also a logical subject for Kitano, who has stressed the performative in both 'Beat' and Takeshi Kitano), is intimately bound up with a dichotomy between acting and simply being; or more properly, the slippage between the two. Just as the narrative of *Kikujiro* begins to foreground a tension between its own difference and deviation from the generic base with which it is working at the same time as it can but re-inscribe its indebtedness to said foundation, so this sense of flux and transit applies to the characters themselves.

Kikujirō is key here. Throughout much of the film he remains akin to Iguchi in *Boiling Point* in that he performs the role of a yakuza, promulgates the image of the gangster he wants and believes himself to be. Take, for example, the scene in which

Masao is accosted by a paedophile whilst Kikujirō is drinking in a bar. After he rescues Masao and removes him from harm's way, he returns to deal with the pervert. However, the anticipated violence, the act that would validate Kikujirō's status as a yakuza, does not materialise. Rather, Kikujirō is seen playing the part of a child for the paedophile: he has taken his trousers down and is goading the man into trying to molest him.

Conversely, at a hotel later in the film, Masao and Kikujirō visit the swimming pool, whereupon it is revealed that the latter cannot swim. In an act of defiance against the embarrassment engendered by this inability, Kikujirō gets into the water and splashes around hopelessly in a vain attempt to navigate his way across the pool, in effect becoming a child attempting to swim for the very first time. It is another example of the titular character assuming the case that he goes from playing the part of a child in the earlier scene to becoming a child in this latter act.

One can see, then, that Kikujirō's selfhood is paradoxically and amorphously predicated on external precepts. Early in the film, his irascible wife tells him to stop playing at being a yakuza. But this is but one role that he overtly performs: husband, child, son, even the blind man he plays so as to fool drivers into stopping when he and Masao are stranded in the middle of nowhere; all are performances of identity that exist on the surface. That is, at least until the final act of the film, when a newfound subjectivity emerges within Kikujirō precisely at the point at which he and Masao introduce themselves with their names before parting. This Kitano emphasises with recourse to POV shots from Kikujirō's point of view, watching Masao waving and running away a happier, more contented child whose own identity itself has stabilised.

This duality and fluid, transitory sense of identity finds a corollary in the way Kikujirō moves between a figurative parental role and his desired role as a son himself. It is precisely at the moment following his most overtly parental act and demonstration of fatherly feeling towards Masao (comforting him with the angel bell and its attendant story) that he visits his mum, unbeknownst to her, in the home for the elderly in which she resides. In an echo of the earlier scene in which Masao was confronted with the apparent reality of his mother's new life and his exclusion from it, Kikujirō looks but is not looked at; watches but is not seen.

Point of view and contrasting perspectives are staples of Kitano's cinema. Indeed, they frequently feed into the multiplicity of antinomies that structure and inform his work. However, *Kikujiro* is almost unique in the Kitano canon: differing fundamentally from almost all of its counterparts (only *A Scene at the Sea* offers a comparable example) in the specificity of its looks. Rather than stressing objectivity, the (thematic and visual) act of being seen as an inevitable corollary of being looked at (both within the pro-filmic space, by other characters, and by the audience of the film), *Kikujiro* focuses on the act of looking that lacks subjectivity because it lack a reciprocal look. In other words, it concentrates on the act of looking, the notion of gazing without actually being seen, without figuring as the concomitant object of the gaze of another.

There is a marked existential import to this notion. In an essay entitled *The Encounter with the Other*, Jean-Paul Sartre outlines the significance of the titular encounter to constructing one's own self and subjectivity within the world.

**‘If the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fun-**

**damental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other...for just as the Other is a probable object for me-as-subject, so I can discover myself in the process of becoming a probable object for only a certain subject<sup>65</sup>.**

This was also theorised by the Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, encapsulated in his phrase ‘to be is to be perceived<sup>66</sup>’. Thus, Kikujirō and Masao each seek the look of their mother to be able to construct and define their own identities, to legitimate their roles as sons. This is particularly the case with regard to the titular character; and indeed it is this crisis that makes him unequivocally the film’s true protagonist. That is, he emerges as such because he displays such a performative identity throughout film, displaying no stable or coherent sense of selfhood. He acts and performs to cover a fundamental lack.

It is this that allows the games played by the group to assume greater import, as an arena distinct from familial concerns where alterior imperatives and personal agency can predominate (Kikujirō in this sense recalls *Sonatine*’s Murkawa in acting as a ringleader, a director, of the games that are played). The scenes immediately following Kikujirō’s visit to his mother are taken up almost exclusively by game playing orchestrated by the titular character. Once again, it is the performance of an assumed identity here that takes precedence over an actual one, over what is real, as Masao and especially Kikujirō retreat from the alienation and disappointment of their actual lives into an imaginary space of play and family.

The actual games they play are also significant. Whilst Kikujirō is away visiting (or rather watching) his mother, the gypsy plays a game with Masao, a magic trick that

specifically involves the latter's concentrated gaze as he tries to determine under which cup a ball is located after they have been moved around. Similarly, the main game played when Kikujirō returns involves the participants attempting to move closer to Masao whilst he is facing in the opposite direction and looking away from them. He, in turn, must count to three before turning around to try and catch the players actually moving. In other words, the game depends upon the unseen movements of the participants and the figurative blindness of the person trying to see them, to catch them out as they move.

That structures of looking and the gaze will be a central feature of *Kikujiro* is indicated in the credit sequence: which, like *Hana-Bi*, is composed of paintings of angelic figures. The first painting is of a close-up of an eye with an angel inside, and the camera draws ever closer in as the credits progress. It is further made manifest in the narrative in the sporadic shots of Kikujirō and Masao seen from an oblique perspective: through a tray of champagne flutes in a dream, reflected in the hubcap of a car as they are left at a remote country bus stop, for instance, or, more crucially, seen in multiple images from the perspective of a dragon fly as they arrive with their fellow traveller at the beach.

These shots may in fact have been mischievously intended on Kitano's part. He has spoken of film schools in Japan that teach students to always conceive of shots as from a person's point of view, and concomitantly of his own experience in which a cameraman has berated him for using a low angle shot following a shootout. 'That's impossible', Kitano was apparently told: 'that means the corpse is seeing this, but he's dead'<sup>67</sup>. One can thus imagine Kitano taking immense pleasure in presenting the optical viewpoint of a dragon fly, and herein lies one (carnavalesque) reason for their existence in the film: to subvert established cinematic norms and practice, perhaps even for Kitano to subvert or

parody his own intrinsic filmmaking norms, as thoroughly as the film undermines the filmic figure of 'Beat' Takeshi as it has developed in the years and film since *Violent Cop*.

There is, though, a sense in which these shots serve an important function over and above their (arguable) carnivalesque parody. Principally, they underline the centrality of point of view, of the gaze, within the film, the importance of the perception of the other for both Kikujirō and Masao. These shots also function as an objective correlative and corrective to the normative looks between characters in the film, emphasising an alien, otherness, of point of view, and by extension the essential futility of looking and not being seen.

The overt use of these shots, coupled with scenes like the one in which the angel appears to glide down to earth for Masao, demonstrate why Kitano has said that: 'my cinema is much more a cinema of images than a cinema of ideas<sup>68</sup>'. This statement succinctly encapsulates Kitano's abiding conception of narrative as an organizing principle rather than as a causal chain, a transparent vehicle for a well-constructed plot. This is borne out by the number of scenes in *Kikujiro* that feature dreams and fantasies that exist by and of themselves with more thematic than narrative import.

Also important with regard to the above and to the presence of 'Beat' Takeshi is the scene in which Kikujirō and Masao become stranded at a bus stop in a remote rural milieu. At this point, another man joins the travellers, and he and Kikujiro bicker before the latter steals the former's lunch and the former then leaves in a car. This man is Kaneko Kiyoshi, otherwise known by his one-time stage name 'Beat' Kiyoshi. In other

words, he is the other half of the 'Two Beats' stand-up comedy act that first brought Kitano to fame in Japan in the 1970s.

The significance of this scene is twofold. Firstly, following *Hana-Bi* and the birth of Kitano Takeshi the auteur, it cements the presence of 'Beat' Takeshi as an important, signifying figure within *Kikujiro*. That is, 'Beat' Takeshi as himself, as 'Beat' Takeshi: not, as will subsequently develop, 'Beat' Takeshi as the character Kikujirō. In effect, and further underlining the aforementioned performative aspect of the film, Kikujirō exists in double acts from the beginning of the film. He begins in a comedic relationship with his wife, submissively answering her nagging, before progressing to one with Masao that casts him as a selfish villain comically bullying and using the boy for his own ends (principally for betting).

Against this is set the comic game playing towards the ends of the film, when Takeshi *Gundan* members Ide Rakkyō and Great Gidayū engage in a familial space of play with Masao. This represents a significant progression from the cruel and verbal *Manzai* acts early in the film. Here it is 'Beat' Takeshi as *boke* (joker) to a series of *tsukkomi* (straight men) that predominates, whereas it is the physical, group role-playing under the auspices of 'Beat' Takeshi as *tono* that make up a significant portion of the narrative in the final stages of the journey, and which signals a reinforcement of the autobiographical dimension of *Kikujiro*.

The figure of 'Beat' Takeshi as connoted through the various comedy acts that have defined the narrative (as they have Kitano's career) develops beyond the confines of this real-life precept and into a character in his own right. This character, named after Kitano's own abusive and drunken father, is then re-configured as the end point, the

natural destination, of a trajectory that involves not only an awakening of his own subjectivity (explicitly invoked in the optical POV shots from his perspective at the very end as he and Masao part) but a textual overriding of a real-life destitute father. Thus, at the end, as Kikujirō cements his paternal relationship with Masao, this real father is transformed into a fictional filmic substitute, the very fact that he has developed from a textual encoding of 'Beat' Takeshi (the performer) underlining the progression from act to life, performance to existence.

The other way in which this scene becomes crucial is in its status as an objective correlative to the central dynamics of looking but not being seen. The short 'Two Beats' performance, their explicit double act, is performed without a (diegetic) audience. It is an act specifically performed in the middle of nowhere where there is no-one present to witness their work together. They are performers in search of viewers, with the extra-diegetic spectatorship throwing in relief the fact that they are invisible within the film and its narrative.

To return to the theory of carnival, it remains now to follow on from the above and demonstrate *Kikujiro's* relevance as a carnivalesque film. As already stated, its status as such is ambiguous. However, it does have both diegetic and extra-diegetic codifications of carnival. Chiefly, it conforms to what is perhaps the most overlooked imperative of this theory: that of the text itself. This feature of Bakhtin's theory refers to the signifier becoming the signified. In literature, it denotes the relish of language with which Rabelais describes and conjures his subjects as 'The tangible equivalent of improper speech<sup>69</sup>'. In effect, the figurative body of a text can be disrupted and punctured as markedly as any literal body within its diegesis. Bakhtin himself cites book four of

*Pantagruel*, which breaks its narrative to offer ‘the longest list of foods of all world literature<sup>70</sup>’, but one may also point to the grotesque and this mode of realism. As Sue Vice has noted: ‘the shock of suddenly changing subject positions, and the vivifying of objects by unexpected use of verbs or adjectives, can occur most clearly within a text<sup>71</sup>’.

From this perspective, those disruptions to Kitano’s heretofore clearly defined style are paramount. Of particular note here is the visual presentation of jokes, and Kitano’s elliptical editing. In his films prior to *Kikujiro*, Kitano tends to depict visual comedy by cutting away from the action as it is occurring to a static shot of the aftermath, sometimes with shots of shocked onlookers lending punctuation. For instance, in *Getting Any?* a short scene with the protagonist walking by the road ends with him tripping over and landing head first in a large container (legs flailing in the air above him). Kitano focuses on the feet as the character is walking. Then, after he has tripped, the film cuts to a long-shot of him already stuck, glossing over the actual fall. Even more prominent is a gag towards the end of *Kids Return*. Two school bullies take up boxing to be like one of the protagonists, Shinji, who is succeeding at the sport. Getting above himself when a friend is beaten up outside the gym, one of the toughs strolls outside to avenge this violence. From inside the gym, Kitano cuts directly to a POV shot showing a very large and burly man glowering down; then to a reverse POV shot looking down on the bully, who is now looking up in shock and fear (with his two friends also looking on behind him). Following this, the next shot (a long-shot) shows the bully lying flat on the ground, whilst his friends turn and flee.

In *Kikujiro*, this precept begins to change markedly, indeed in diametric opposition to the above. One representative gag occurs in a field after Kikujirō and Masao have been

picked up by the kindly young couple who are on a date. The young man and woman have been playing with Masao, whilst Kikujirō has attempted juggling (because the girl has demonstrated skill at it). The final shot of this scene begins with a long shot of Masao running around the couple, delighting in his new backpack with its angel's wings. It then begins to gradually zoom out, and as it does it takes in, first, Kikujirō, still failing to juggle and as a result flailing around on the grass, then as it recedes further and further a series of signs begin to be revealed. When the shot reaches its final stasis in an extreme long shot, the four characters are framed neatly in the dead centre of what are four signs that say 'keep off the grass'.

It is not simply that this manner of visual joke contrasts so markedly with Kitano's typical method of presentation, although this it certainly does. Rather, this gag, and the way in which it is set-up and paid off, is a revealing moment within the totality of the narrative. It contrasts and, because of the single take, visually connects the respective childlike states, actions and personalities of Masao and Kikujirō, and further relates these characters to carnival, to transgression. This it does with regard to their emotional trajectories and identities over the course of the film: the fact that, ultimately, they explode notions of the family as the centre of Japanese society, and in particular the predominance of the figure of the mother (something that further undermines the generic imperative of *haha mono*).

Here, then, are two interrelated instances of carnival, both diegetic and otherwise. It is, though, the latter precept is the most significant with regard to Kitano. If one configures his oeuvre as a textual body, then his carnivalesque status seems even more assured. Here one is very much concerned with *Kikujiro's* differences, discontinuities and anomalies

within Kitano's canon, as it is with those commonalities that help canonize Kitano's oeuvre as a coherent whole. With *Kikujiro*, Kitano followed his biggest success to date (*Hana-Bi*), the film that made his name and secured his reputation around the world, by immediately undermining expectations not only of the filmic 'Beat' Takeshi persona, but also his authorial status and international lionisation as a director of violent Yakuza films. Thus, a carnivalesque ritual of death (the death of a certain phase of Kitano's career) and re-birth (of a new, different Kitano) was enacted. It was a transformative process that would become the norm thereafter, and would go on to define the cinema of Kitano Takeshi in the years and films to come.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* (British Film Institute, London, 2007) pp.1-15
- <sup>3</sup> Kitano, T in Schilling, M *Contemporary Japanese Film* (Weatherhill, Inc., United States of America, 1999) pp.96-97
- <sup>4</sup> Kitano, T *Hana-Bi* Press Kit, 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Casio, A, Gardner, W.O. & T. Hori (eds) *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* (Kaya Press, United States of America, 2004) pp.2-45 – originally published by Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., Japan, 1994
- <sup>6</sup> Miyao, D *Telephilia vs. Cinephilia = Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano Framework*, vol. 4.5 no.2, Autumn 2004 pp.56-61
- <sup>7</sup> Casio, A *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* pp.3-45
- <sup>8</sup> Maule, R *De-Authorizing the Auteur* in Degli-Esposti, C (ed) *Postmodernism in the Cinema* (Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford, 1998) pp.113-130
- <sup>9</sup> Kitano made reference to the mirror image of comedy in violence in an interview in *Empire* magazine: Kennedy, C *Hit that perfect Beat boy Empire* March 2001 pp.84-87
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.87
- <sup>11</sup> Bakhtin, M, Emerson, C (trans, ed) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, United States of America, 1984) p.122
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.123
- <sup>13</sup> Kristeva, J 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980) P.78 See Vice, S *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997) for a detailed comparison between Bakhtin and Kristeva's competing theorizations of grotesque realism
- <sup>14</sup> Davies, R & O. Ikeno (eds) *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture* (Tuttle Publishing, Boston, 2002) pp.195-199
- <sup>15</sup> Sugimoto, Y *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003) p.255
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>18</sup> Prince, S *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1991) pp.27-28
- <sup>19</sup> Kawai, K *Japan's American Interlude* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1960) pp.48-49
- <sup>20</sup> Barrett, G *Comic Targets and Comic Styles: An Introduction to Japanese Film Comedy* in Nolletti, Jr., A & D. Desser (eds) *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992) pp.210-226
- <sup>21</sup> Napier, S.J. *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, Hampshire, 2005) pp.195-216
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp.39-145 These include the adolescent film (*Akira*), pornography, technological scenarios (*Kōkaku kidōtai/Ghost in the Shell* [1995]), and even the romantic comedy
- <sup>23</sup> Stam, R *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1989) p.119
- <sup>24</sup> Imamura, I interviewed by Yamada Koichi, quoted in Richie, D *Notes for a Study on Shohei Imamura* in Quandt, J (ed) *Shohei Imamura* (Toronto International Film Festival Group, Toronto, 1997) p.17
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.127
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.128
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.127
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Jones, K *Takeshi Kitano Film Comment* Volume 37, No.5, Sept/Oct, 2001 p.14
- <sup>30</sup> Morris, W *A Simmering Beauty: Boiling Point: capricious and spellbinding* online at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1999/07/30/WEEKEND13216.dtl> (Accessed 12/09/08)
- <sup>31</sup> Tayama, R *Gendai nihon eiga no kantoku tachi* (Gendai kyōyō bunko, Tokyo, 1991) p.218
- <sup>32</sup> Shinozaki, M *Takeshi Kitano's Movie Technique Switch* 1991 quoted in Abe, C *beat takeshi vs. takeshi kitano* p.69
- <sup>33</sup> Foster, D *Boiling Point* online at <http://dvdtimes.co.uk/content.php?contentid=5037> (Accessed 12/09/08)
- <sup>34</sup> Whitney, I *Boiling Point* online at <http://www.duallens.com/index.asp?reviewid=40403> (Accessed 12/09/08)
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Udo, T *Boiling Point* in Jacobs, B (ed) *Beat Takeshi Kitano* (RM Europe Ltd., Great Britain, 1999) p.22
- <sup>37</sup> Mes, T & J. Sharp *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, 2005) p.162
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Udo, T *Boiling Point* in Jacobs, B (ed) *Beat Takeshi Kitano* p.22
- <sup>40</sup> Abe, C *Beat Takeshi vs Takeshi Kitano* p.54
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.74
- <sup>42</sup> Richie, D *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Kodansha International, London, 2001) p.261
- <sup>43</sup> Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* (British Film Institute, London, 2007) pp.79-80
- <sup>44</sup> Kitano speaking in an interview on the Artsmagic UK DVD release of *Getting Any?*
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.217
- <sup>46</sup> Hiro, O *Minnā-yatteruka Kinema Jumpō*, Vol. 1184, 1996 p.103
- <sup>47</sup> Kitano on the Artsmagic UK DVD release of *Getting Any?*
- <sup>48</sup> Mc Donald, K. I. *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context* pp.219-231
- <sup>49</sup> Udo, T *Getting Any?* in Jacobs, B (ed) *Beat Takeshi Kitano* p.29
- <sup>50</sup> Kitano on the Artsmagic UK DVD release of *Getting Any?*
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Vive, S *Introducing Bakhtin* p.152
- <sup>53</sup> Sato, T, Barrett, G (trans) *Currents in Japanese Cinema* (Kodansha International Ltd., Tokyo and New York, 1982) pp.229-234
- <sup>54</sup> Hunter, J *Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema* (Creation Books International, London, 1998) p.3
- <sup>55</sup> See Corrigan, T *Cinema Without Walls* Routledge, London, 1991
- <sup>56</sup> Kitano, T in Sarris, A *All About My Mother in Japan* *New York Observer*, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2000 p.19
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- <sup>59</sup> Buruma, I *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains in Japanese Culture* (Jonathan Cape Ltd., Great Britain, 1984) pp.18-37
- <sup>60</sup> Casio, A *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* pp.241-246
- <sup>61</sup> Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* pp.157-171
- <sup>62</sup> Hoberman, J *Promised Lands The Village Voice*  
<http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0021,hoberman,15054,20.html> (Accessed 12/09/08)
- <sup>63</sup> See in particular Tony Rayns' review for *Time Out* – Pym, J (ed) *Time Out Film Guide Ninth Edition* (The Penguin Group, London, 2001) P.578 or Abe, C *Kikujiro* in Jacobs, B (ed) *Beat Takeshi Kitano* pp.37-41
- <sup>64</sup> Richie, D *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* p.271
- <sup>65</sup> Sartre, J.P. *The Encounter with the Other* in Marino, G (ed) *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (The Modern Library, New York, 2004) p.397
- <sup>66</sup> Berkeley, B quoted by Worton, M *Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text* in Pilling, J (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994) pp.67-87
- <sup>67</sup> Kitano, T in Tirard, L (ed) *Moviemakers' Master Class: Private Lessons from the World's Foremost Directors* (Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 2002) pp. 171-172
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p.166
- <sup>69</sup> Vice, S *Introducing Bakhtin* p.176
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

## VIOLENT COP [1989]

**‘The dominant genre today is the yakuza genre. I think the reason for this is that the Japanese audience likes Hollywood films. That is why the main genres are mysteries and thrillers and yakuza films. And, of course, one of the most important names here is Kitano Takeshi<sup>1</sup>’.**

Kurosawa Kiyoshi

*Sono Otoko, Kyōbō ni Tsuki* (*Violent Cop*, 1989) has generally been regarded as a film in which Kitano Takeshi served a form of cinematic apprenticeship as a director: a film that, for all its points of interest (and it is certainly regarded as a worthwhile film), it nonetheless remains a fledgling effort, the work of an interesting but as yet only formative talent. The response of critic Tommy Udo can stand as representative of both Japanese and international reactions to Kitano’s debut work: ‘*Violent Cop* stands outside of the rest of Takeshi’s canon of work because it is his most conventional film<sup>2</sup>’.

There are persuasive reasons for considering the film thusly. Kitano was originally hired to act in *Violent Cop*, and he only migrated into the director’s chair when it was vacated by the original choice, the veteran Yakuza filmmaker Fukasaku Kinji. Therefore, for the first and only time in his career, Kitano worked from a scenario and a script he did not originate (although he made significant revisions), and he did so when production was already underway. Furthermore, Kitano himself had said that, until *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1994), his fourth film, he felt as though he had not mastered the art of filmmaking<sup>3</sup>; that he was simply learning the rules.

*Violent Cop* was to have been directed by Fukasaku Kinji, who had been almost single-handedly responsible for the rejuvenation of the Yakuza genre in the 1970s with his dark, explicitly violent and stylistically audacious film series *Jingi Naki Tatakai* (*Battles without Honour and Humanity*, 1973-1976). However, Fukasaku departed the project shortly after filming had commenced, the explanation for which is usually said to be that he was ill and could not complete the shoot. In actual fact, he was unable to reconcile difficulties of scheduling with Kitano. *Violent Cop* had originally been slated for a four-week period of production, but its star had arrived on set and informed the producer, Nabeshima Hisao, that due to his busy TV schedule he would only be available to film for periods of ten days at a time. This had not presented a problem before, as Kitano's parts in theatrical films had been relatively small. However, now that he was expected to complete *Violent Cop* playing the lead role, the short time allotted by Shochiku was a serious obstacle.

To compound the problem, Kitano insisted on doing only a single rehearsal and a single take, something that was common in TV due to the extremely high turnover of product. Fukasaku refused outright to work under such conditions and reportedly told executive producer Okuyama Kazuyoshi 'Either I or Takeshi has to go<sup>4</sup>'. With Kitano being the star of the film and a considerable media personality in his own right, he was deemed by Okuyama to be more important than the veteran director. Soon afterwards, Fukasaku departed the production, and a crisis meeting was held to determine if the film was still viable. Kitano was eager to continue, but *Violent Cop* had no director. As a joke or provocation, Okuyama apparently asked his star if he would like to direct the picture himself. Kitano's response was, simply, 'Sure...how hard can it be<sup>5</sup>'.

Despite his lack of directorial experience, Kitano immediately made a concerted effort to stamp his authority on the material. He had craved being taken seriously as an actor, but Japanese audiences too familiar with 'Beat' Takeshi on television had instinctively laughed at his earlier dramatic performances, even in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. Consequently, he sought to rework *Violent Cop* into a bold and violent drama that set itself in opposition to his televisual spectacle. He thus rewrote the script, changed much of the narrative structure and content and removed the comic set pieces that had been prevalent in the original scenario.

The shooting, perhaps unsurprisingly, was fraught with tension between the inexperienced director and his professional crew. Kitano insisted on a static camera much of the time in order to minimise the chances of mistakes being made and to avoid unwanted elements finding their way into shot, and these changes angered many technicians, as did the new director's decision to emphasise the violence and darkness and downplay the comedy. Even so, Kitano pressed on with his changes, and managed to distance himself as a filmmaker and actor from his persona as a comedian and popular television personality: in effect, to author *Violent Cop* as Kitano Takeshi rather than 'Beat' Takeshi.

With hindsight, it is striking how much of the director's subsequent work would be prefigured in his debut, to the extent that to speak of the film away from the context of Kitano's oeuvre (as is implicit in the notion of its conventionality) is to misread its importance. This point will be explored in this and subsequent chapters. Suffice it to say here that the treatment of his own bodily presence and reality on film, and the myriad

meanings (some of which were elucidated in the previous chapter) attendant upon this phenomenon.

### **‘Beat’ Takeshi: ‘This Man is Violent’**

Okuyama Kazuyoshi, the producer of *Violent Cop* and the man who is said to have coined the title<sup>i</sup>, offered the role of Detective Azuma to Kitano, was quick to use the involvement of his star in the project to promote and differentiate his product. The marketing of the film thus concentrated almost exclusively on Kitano: or, rather, on ‘Beat’ Takeshi. The promotional poster for the film resembled a wanted sign in that it was a simple black and white shot of Kitano's detective Azuma, with the title of the film, *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki* (literally *This Man, In view of his Extreme Violence...*), printed across the middle. There is no indication of the genre or the style of the film, and indeed none that the wanted man featured is the character in the film: no distinction or distance between actor and role just as there is no such dividing line within the film between cop and criminal.

One may well infer from this that the violent man wanted by the authorities is, in fact, Kitano himself. This was something with very particular extra-cinematic connotations at this particular time, when Kitano had not long completed an enforced sabbatical from television over a widely publicized scandal in December 1986. In an infamous incident, Kitano and his loyal gang of followers (his *Gundan*) burst into the offices of the tabloid magazine *Friday* and proceeded to demolish property and beat up reporters for publishing

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<sup>i</sup> The title *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki* had appeared prior to Kitano's film. It was used for the Japanese translation of James Hadley Chase's 1968 novel *Believed Violent*, which was published in Japan in 1972. There is no connection between the novel and Kitano's film in terms of plot, characters or setting (the novel was, in fact, filmed in 1990 with Robert Mitchum and Michael Brandon).

photos of Kitano and an alleged mistress. This debacle only reinforced Kitano's already established reputation as an extreme and subversive figure, a reputation founded on his extreme antics on TV and radio, and thus fed into the promotion of *Violent Cop* as a film built on the infamy of its star. This, in turn, would thereafter become an intrinsic norm of Kitano's career, both in his own and in other directors' films: the convergence of his own life and personality and the fictional specificities of the characters he was playing<sup>ii</sup>.

Another aspect of the 'Beat' Takeshi filmic persona established by *Violent Cop* that would come to full fruition in the subsequent life and death trilogy was the confusion of the boundaries between character and actor. This was inherent in the discrepancy between the film's tone and content and the way in which it was sold to the public, and it began a manifest fluidity with which aspects of Kitano's TV personality and (perceived) private life can be seen to feed into and inform his films. It is a subject that makes Kitano an interesting figure in the discourse of star studies: As Paul McDonald notes: 'The study of stars as texts should not, and indeed cannot, be limited to the analysis of specific films or star performances. Star images are the product of intertextuality<sup>6</sup>'. The notion of the persona of a particular star being constructed by on-screen appearances and off-screen life and image circulation is taken up in the books *Stars* and *Heavenly Bodies* by Richard Dyer<sup>7</sup>, who, along with Christine Gledhill and John Ellis, is the most important contributor to this particular field of study. There are a multitude of approaches to the analysis of film stars, several tied up with questions of official studio discourse and their constructions of image and persona that are less tenable and applicable today. More

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<sup>ii</sup> There are extra-filmic progenitors for this prevalent aspect of Kitano's cinema. For example, in his radio shows (which achieved nationwide popularity in the 1980s and in many ways established and circulated 'Beat' Takeshi for the first time in Japan), he would regularly include sordid details from his personal life, and encourage his listeners to do likewise.

significant to the present study is the sense in which the structural elements of analysable stardom open up a veritable fault line of instabilities that are typically concealed beneath the veneer of the star as coherent object revealed through performance. That is (as Ellis' expounds in *Visible Fictions*<sup>8</sup>), the intertextual codification of actors as stars in discourses subsidiary to that of the cinematic is only theoretically made whole in the performance itself. Spectators then frequent the cinema in order to complete the puzzle, the incompleteness, of the persona as it is circulated outside the realm of the filmic<sup>9</sup>: they themselves provide the necessary perspective that finally unifies the star.

A star's persona is, then, an essentially unstable construct that comprises a number of component parts, or markers. As Christine Gledhill theorises stardom, these markers are the real person, the 'reel'<sup>10</sup>, person - that is, the character - and the narration or mediation between the two, the persona<sup>11</sup>. What is distinctive about Kitano is not simply that he has a marked persona as a film performer; there are, of course, other Japanese stars with recognisable and clearly delineated images (Asano Tadanobu, Yakusho Koji, Matsuda Ryuhei, Takeuchi Riki, Megumi Okina). Rather, it is because he so overtly foregrounds the divergent aspects that characterise the star: he is the star as star, as construct: the star as artifice and as illusion. There is no veneer, no facade of completion or unity to his image: it is defined in correlation with his typical performance style that stresses blankness and stasis, a veritable *tabula rasa*. Thus, Kitano as star provides a central, animating empty space around which orbit the various markers of star and persona. Importantly, these features are not held in the usual balance, but rather seem to vie for prominence, indeed are often in outright conflict with one another.

The incorporation of aspects of real life into Kitano's film roles is the most significant aspect of the above, as is the explicit recapitulation of prominent features of other characters played by 'Beat' Takeshi (frequently both of these together). This is an overt facet of the 'Beat' Takeshi screen persona, to the extent that it defines each successive character almost exclusively in a hermetic, insular seal. This then reconfigures the typical construction of stardom whereby the real is subservient to the reel. It was a potentiality that was first raised in (exploited by) *Violent Cop*: wherein Kitano's real-life antics and television persona factored strongly in the film's publicity. It has also been seized on by other filmmakers in the works in which Kitano has appeared as an actor. In two films in the early 1990s - *Hoshi wo Tsugu Mono (Inheritors of Stars, 1990)* and *Kyōso Tanjyō (Many Happy Returns, 1993)*, which was based on a story by Kitano himself - Kitano played characters who for a time achieve cult status as folk heroes in a manner very much reminiscent of his own rise to success in the 1970s.

In 2000, Kitano starred in Fukasaku Kinji's hugely popular and successful *Batoru Rowaiaru (Battle Royale, 2000)*, and it is here that this particular aspect of the 'Beat' Takeshi film persona is most purely distilled. Kitano plays a jaded schoolteacher who takes his class out to an island for them to take part in the titular game where they must slaughter one another in order to survive. A number of additions to the source novel by Koushun Takami were made in the wake of the casting of Kitano, principally re-naming the character Kitano, and deepening of the part (he is a somewhat one-dimensional villain in the book) through the introduction of a typically Kitano-esque conflict between violence and tenderness. This is seen most overtly in his teacher's affectionate

relationship with his favourite pupil, which introduces the character's isolation and estrangement from his family.

Kitano's image as derived from TV and life comes into play in this film most overtly in the re-naming of his character, the teacher, and calling him Kitano (in the novel he is called Sakamochi<sup>iii</sup>). This protagonist is then characterised and developed with aspects familiar from earlier Kitano performances and incidents from his life. One of Kitano's paintings is introduced at the end of the film, recalling both *Hana-Bi* and the actual incident behind the use of painting in that film (Kitano's near fatal accident after which he took up the art). Prior to this, the presentation of and repeated emphasis on the central conceit of the narrative as a game presided over by Kitano's character can, like *San tai yon, ekkusu...Jūgatsu (Boiling Point, 1990)* and *Sonatine*, be seen as an explicit reference to the extreme game shows, such as *Fūn! Takeshi jō (Hero Takeshi's Castle)*. The fact that Kitano's character has the army at his command whilst presiding over the battle royale also seems to be a veiled reference to Kitano's own life: to the *Gundan*, who would refer to Kitano as *Tono*, Lord, whilst carrying out extreme, dangerous missions in public at their master's behest.

More recently, Kitano's acclaimed performance as an abusive, tyrannical family patriarch in Yoichi Sai's dark drama *Chi to hone (Blood and Bones, 2004)* transposes the cinematic 'Beat' Takeshi's typical protagonist. It takes the paradigmatic affectless and violent loner familiar particularly from Kitano's own films, and, again like *Hana-Bi*, relocates it in the context of a family drama, albeit of a fundamentally different, darker and more naturalistic, vein. Sai was so adamant that Kitano play this role that he waited

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<sup>iii</sup>This practice was carried over into the sequel, directed by Fukasaku Kinji's son, Kenta (following his father's death), in which Takeuchi Riki assumes what is essentially the same role as Kitano's in the original, playing a character named Takeuchi Riki

for over six years until his star was available and able to commit to the long and arduous shoot. It is a role that Mark Schilling, in *The Japan Times*, observed that Kitano was born for<sup>12</sup>: because of his image; and because, as with *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1999), he could channel the comparable example of his own abusive father and essay another character drawn from his own life.

The fact that perceptions of Kitano's life have become such a marked component of his persona; and given that his life has been characterised by a certain childishness - that he has by his own admission remained a child who has refused to grow up - serves here to introduce the discourse of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytical precepts have in fact been among the most important for theorising stardom in the cinema. Lacan, in particular, has provided a durable and convincing model for elucidating diegetic narrative dramatization and extra-diegetic theories of spectatorship, mixing, as he does, psychoanalysis with philosophy. Kitano, for his part, offers a cogent example in his Yakuza films of the progress to subjectivity and selfhood associated with the work of both Lacan and Freud.

Building on the theories of cinema as commodified desire offered by Christian Metz, spectatorial appropriation of psychoanalysis displaces onto the film viewer the notion of formative subjectivity figuratively encountering Lacan's mirror stage before the movie screen. In other words, the spectator in the cinema identifies with the ego ideal, the perceived completion, of the movie star in the same way as the infant is said to identify with its own image in the mirror as a supposedly complete, autonomous, subjective other. This desire for a unified, ideal self arises from a lack inherent in subject formation, the lack that appears when the oedipal complex separates the child from its mother. Desire is then transfigured as the seeking out of that which will fill this lack, and herein lies the

pull of the cinematic text as that which will complete and unify the star: the star as idealized other.

However, one may also understand the star himself as psychoanalytical agent. From this perspective, the aforementioned incompleteness of the star's persona becomes representative of a pre-symbolic state of confused subjectivity. As Susan Hayward puts it: 'Star images...are more than just the image...a star...is a cluster of meanings and parts...profoundly unstable...(there are) too many mirrors reflecting back the multiple self<sup>13</sup>'. That is, although there is an ostensible post-Oedipal (facade of) completion to the star once s/he is consumed within the theatre, one may in fact argue that the opposite holds true: that the star's absence of a unified, autonomous identity in and of themselves replicates a pre-oedipal, imaginary syndrome signified by the as-yet unbroken union with the mother and the to-be-entered post-oedipal, symbolic realm of the father and the law.

In Kitano's Yakuza films in general, and in *Violent Cop* in particular, the bodily presence of 'Beat' Takeshi can be understood in precisely these terms. As will subsequently be demonstrated, he remains distinct, separate, from everyone and everything around him. This distinctness reconfigures him as the pre-symbolic infant at the centre of his own world, with a perceived mastery of his body and his surroundings. As will subsequently be elucidated, he moves freely through a number of different and divergent spheres of space with a near-immunity to violence, his body both a weapon and a shell. However, he could be argued to be a character attempting to gain mastery of the world through his overtly violent behaviour and incessant motion.

Ultimately, this becomes suggestive of the frustration of the infant's entry into the oedipal complex and the failure of the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic

realm. The violence dispensed by Azuma from this perspective becomes redolent of sublimated sexuality bursting forth in a marked transference of energies. The number of stabbings and attempted stabbings in *Violent Cop* underlines this import, as they present a phallic symbolism that alludes to the sexual dimension of the knife penetrating flesh (something he shares with Kiyohiro, whose homosexuality Freud would have identified as a failure of the oedipal trajectory).

The psychoanalytical dimension in Kitano's Cop and Yakuza films is not anomalous, as the particular strictures of the yakuza milieu itself carries a distinct psychoanalytical subtext, at least in its cinematic incarnations. The emphasis on behaviour and maturation through and within clearly demarcated codes of conduct defined by a masculine patriarch, a father figure who regulates the law, alludes pointedly to the oedipal complex. This is underlined by the familial language used to denote relations between yakuza (the fact that they are brothers and, more importantly, sons). More importantly, it is frequently the case, especially in the darker *Jitsuroku eiga* subset of the genre, that the protagonist undergo an oedipal conflict with his boss, that he challenge him: and this is often facilitated by a desire for the wife of his father substitute. One can even see the presence of castration inherent in the ritual violence enacted within the yakuza environs. In particular, the typical symbol of atonement, the cutting off of a finger, stands in for the castration that is present as punishment transgressions that commonly define the *Jitsuroku eiga*.

In his Yakuza films, then, Kitano is already working within a genre that features a marked psychoanalytical dimension as an integral part of its mythicised, heavily ritualised universe. This is something that, beginning with *Violent Cop*, he then begins to

weave into the meaning of his films and develop as a central facet of his persona. Detective Azuma is a paradigmatic case for the imaginary subject-to-be: in Sartrean terms existence without essence. The reticence, frequently the awkwardness, with language that defines Kitano's persona can be understood precisely along these lines. Azuma is an imaginary character: not because, like Clint Eastwood's eponymous Dirty Harry (to whom he has somewhat lazily been compared) he is a tight-lipped, no-nonsense hero who prefers to act as opposed to talk. Rather, in a way that is closer to Alain Delon's hitman Jeff Costello in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* [1967], he is uncomfortable with words and language: at best functional in stating the minimum of what needs to be said (as in the opening scene when he simply says that he is a police officer before barging into the home of the youth who has helped to kill a homeless old man). The only times when he appears to master or at least control language is when he is using it as a shield against the encroachment of others. In several instances, such as his visit to a bar with his new underling, or when he is questioned about his past en-route to a call-out, he retorts only with jokes in avoidance of having to engage with his associates on even the most basic personal, human level.

Otherwise, he acts without recourse to language at all. In these instances, such as the dénouement in which he is faced with the desperate situation of his now drug-addicted (as well as mentally-impaired) sister, words fail him completely. He is thus given to self-conveyance and expression through action. In this particular case, and in most others throughout the film, this takes the form of enunciation through violence. Azuma simply acts, and kills his sister.

In this way, Azuma is further redolent of an infant whose accession to the symbolic order, the order of language, has stalled. This is underlined in his particular situation within the police force. As the Violent Cop of the title, his behaviour positions him outside and beyond the law; with this realm of the father ultimately casting him out and positioning him beyond law and language in the wake of his excessive treatment of the suspects he arrests. It is then precisely from this point in the film, following his dismissal from the police force, that Azuma dispenses with verbal language, with expression through words, entirely.

### ***Violent Cop and the Yakuza film***

**‘There is no one else quite like Kitano in the history of the yakuza movie genre<sup>14</sup>’.**

Mark Schilling

Along with Tsukamoto Shinya’s *Tetsuo (Tetsuo: The Iron Man 1989)*, *Violent Cop* became a watershed work with regard to contemporary Japanese cinema. Whereas Tsukamoto’s film re-introduced Japanese cinema to international audiences after the barren years of the 1980s, *Violent Cop* had a palpable impact on domestic filmmaking, prefiguring and helping to shape the major developments that took place in the 1990s. This significance relates to the rehabilitation of the Yakuza genre in general, and specifically to the cinematic treatment of violence, during this transformational decade, and makes Kitano’s one of the key Japanese films of the past 25 years.

The Yakuza film genre was, along with the samurai *Jidai-geki*, the most prominent and most popular genre in Japanese filmmaking in the post-war era. Indeed, in its early

manifestations it had simply been a sub-set of the samurai film. From the period between the end of the silent era and the end of the Second World War (1927-1944) when that genre had by far been the dominant mode in domestic filmmaking, Yakuza films tended to be set in the immediate pre-modern past (early/mid 19th century) and based on figures of oral and literary tradition and enduring legend. Several salient features of the genre as it would develop in the post-war era were introduced in the Yakuza films of this period, most notably the centrality of the contradictory impulses of *giri* (social duty or obligation) and *ninjō* (personal feeling) and the dichotomy between what Keiko I. McDonald describes as ‘in-group (society) to outer-group (social outcasts<sup>15</sup>)’.

The most prevalent of cinematic representations of yakuza at this time were as quasi-heroic men driven to become outlaws (most commonly *bakuto*, or gamblers) by opposing the corrupt authority they perceived around them. They were often victims of circumstance, more sinned against than sinning, who become sympathetic, pessimistic loners living according the strict yakuza code of honour, *jingi*, and who felt tied to obligations surrounding their family, their group or their boss.

Following the war and the end of the period of American occupation in 1952, the genre, following society, changed dramatically. In point of fact, the assertion by Keiko I. McDonald in 1992 that ‘The *yakuza* film is an excellent example of a genre taking shape, and changing shape, in response to popular culture’<sup>16</sup> can at this time be seen very much to come into clear focus. The occupying forces had placed a strict ban on any material promoting perceived feudal values, which had meant a curtailing of almost all *Jidai-geki*. As a result of this the Yakuza film had suffered, as it was closely related to the samurai film in terms of themes and pre-modern, pre-industrial setting. However, an

overwhelming desire for cultural continuity had resulted in an explosion of samurai *Jidai-geki* to rival the first wave of films of this genre that predominated the immediate pre-war period. Consequently, the Yakuza film also re-emerged, but did so in a form more conducive to its sociological and industrial context.

It was in the 1960s that the yakuza film enjoyed its greatest commercial success and achieved a distinct generic identity: as Satō Tadao notes: ‘A new vogue for *yakuza* movies...began in 1963 and lasted for a decade, and its success is unparalleled in the history of Japanese film<sup>17</sup>’. The key work was Tadashima Tadashi's *Jinsei gekijō: Hishakaku* (*The Theatre of Life: Hishakaku*, 1963), which was based on a popular fiction of the Taisho era (1912-1926) by Ozaki Shiro, and which introduced and popularised a distinctive sub-genre of the Yakuza film, the *Ninkyō eiga* (chivalry film). The generic features of this sub-set would account for over three hundred films before the end of the 1960s, and would introduce many of the Yakuza film's biggest stars: Takakura Ken, Tsuruta Koji and the actress Fuji Junko.

In contradistinction to its feudal-set forebears, the setting for the *Ninkyō eiga* films was the late Taisho or early Showa era (roughly between 1922 and 1940), when industrialisation and Westernization were putting Japanese capitalism on the road to its ultimate post-war prosperity. Along with this particular form came the move for *Ninkyō yakuza* from the country to the city, most commonly Tokyo, where they fought opposing gangs: both over turf and, crucially, over honour and morality. The same polarities of characterisation that had characterised the pre-war Yakuza films still hold true for the *Ninkyō eiga*. However, the antagonists in these films, the rival gangs and gangsters, are generally younger than the protagonists and are from a new generation interested not in

codes of honour and conduct but only in money, power and status. Indeed, in attempting to further their goals they are often in league with corrupt businessmen and politicians: a development that would continue so that, by the time of *Violent Cop*, they were to all intents and purposes businessmen, corporate criminals.

By the early 1970s the Yakuza film, and in particular the *Ninkyō eiga*, was following the Japanese film industry into decline. A female yakuza series, *Oryu* [1968] and several *koshoku rosen* (pinkie violence) films about female gang members had to a certain extent undercut the macho posturing of the 1960s Yakuza films, and particularly the superstars of the 1960s *Ninkyō* pictures<sup>iv</sup>. Many Japanese critics have noted that this sub-genre effectively came to an end when its foremost female star, Fuji Junko, quit acting, and this collapse of the star system resulted in Toei, the studio most closely associated with the Yakuza genre, taking drastic measures to preserve what had long been their prized generic commodity. On the strength of his film *Gendai Yakuza: Hitokiri Yota* (*Street Mobster*, 1972), Fukasaku Kinji was given the task of reinvigorating the genre. As he himself has noted, 'my contribution to the development of Japanese cinema was to abolish the star system. The traditional *yakuza* film depicted a clear-cut struggle between good and evil...I bucked this convention by playing up the negative aspects of *yakuza* life'<sup>18</sup>.

The key work in defining this new, gritty and supposedly realistic strain of the Yakuza film (termed the *Jitsuroku eiga*, or true story film) is Fukasaku's aforementioned *Battles without Honour and Humanity* series. These five films are representative of the 1970s

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<sup>iv</sup> Pinkie Violence was the generic term coined for sensationalist, sex and violence drenched female-centered Yakuza films such as Suzuki Norifumi's *Furyō anego den: Inoshika Ochō* (*Sex and Fury*, 1973) and Ishii Teruo's sequel *Yasagure anego den: Sōkatsu rinchi* (*Female Yakuza Tale: Inquisition and Torture*, 1973), as well as the numerous female yakuza film series like *Female Prisoner* (1972-77), *Stray Cat Rock* (1970-71), *Terrifying Girl's High School* (1972-73) and *Girl Boss Blues* (1971-1974)

Yakuza film in general, with a collective title that alone sums up the films' attitude to the idealistic aspects of *Ninkyō eiga* yakuza etiquette<sup>v</sup>. Based on actual events, these works overhauled the emphasis on *jingi* that had characterised the earlier films of the genre. For instance, early in the first film a yakuza in prison commits faux-*seppuku* in order to escape, thus transforming one of the most potently symbolic acts of sacrificial honour inherited from the yakuza's samurai lineage into a mere pretence undertaken to avoid the punishment that the character should, by rights, endure.

In the place of *jingi* and concepts of honour and ethics in the *Jitsuroku* is an exploration of individuals trapped within systems, within yakuza gangs as corporate capitalist entities vying with other such groups for money and power. Good and bad, when still discernible, are essentially irrelevant: they are simply two sides of the same coin, mere mirror images of one another. The protagonists, who tend to cling to the last vestiges of old traditions and values (they have often spent time in prison and miss out on the period of change and transformation) emerge as pawns in a larger game, one that plays out beyond his control or often even his comprehension.

These new Yakuza films typically play out in the immediate post-war years in a Japan ravaged by war, and they strive for the veracity of a documentary in chronicling the fortunes of the country at large as represented in the central characters. *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, as Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp have noted, begins 'With the atomic bomb and end(s) with powerboat racing<sup>19</sup>'. Contemporary problems such as the American occupation and immigration are touched on, and there is a pervading sense of fatalism and nihilism inherent in the emphasis on extremes of purposeless violence. The

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<sup>v</sup> The *Jingi naki tataikai* series did continue with one further film by a different director (the extreme *Jidai-geki* specialist Kudo Eiichi) in 1979: *Battles Without Honor or Humanity: Aftermath*

difficulty and messiness of actually killing someone is also emphasised, with the highly choreographed fights of old replaced by desperate scuffles and struggles (reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* [1969]) in which many wild gunshots and stabbings fail to actually accomplish the kill. In this respect, the end of *Graveyard of Honour* is exemplary, when a gang of yakuza attack the central character at length with swords, only for the narrator to note that: 'Even this failed to kill this man, seemingly fated to life,' leaving it to the protagonist to do the job himself and jump from a building after being sent to prison.

By the 1980s, the number of Yakuza films being produced had, like the samurai film, decreased exponentially. The growth of television and the introduction of VCR home video players had poached much of the audience for these films, and the general downward shift in the average age of the cinema-going viewer, coupled with the desire of this new audience to see the pop idols that were increasingly prevalent singing and romancing as opposed to fighting had significantly depleted the demand. Films like Furuhata Yasuo's *Yasha* (*Demon*, 1985), which featured Kitano as a violent gangster; veteran director Gosha Hideo's Godfather-esque family epic *Kiryūin hanako no shōgai* (*Onimasa*, 1982) and the one real genre success of the decade, the film series *Gokudō no onna-tachi* (*Yakuza Wives*<sup>vi</sup>), were in many ways antiquated fare, works that made only nominal changes to their otherwise well-worn formulas. *Demon*, for example, is set primarily in a small coastal town, to which Takakura Ken's typically stoic protagonist has retired to escape from and atone for his violent past, while Somai Shinji's *Sērā-fuku to*

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<sup>vi</sup> This series was based on a popular book by Ieda Shōko and starred Shinoda Masahiro's wife and regular actress Shima Iwashita. It lasted until 1998, comprising ten films (some under the title *Shin Gokudō no onna-tachi*/*New Tales of Yakuza Wives*). It was recently resurrected with *Gokudō no onna-tachi: jōen* (*Yakuza Wives: Burning Desire*, 2005)

*kikanjū* (*Sailor Suit and Machine Gun*, 1981) has a high school girl thrust into the position of gang boss.

When Kitano made *Violent Cop* the Yakuza film had all but disappeared. However, as Kurosawa Kiyoshi has noted, in the 1990s it once again became the genre of choice for many distinguished directors. In part this is down to the rise of what has been variously termed 'OV,' Original videos, or, more popularly (certainly in Western discourse), V-Cinema: the production of straight to video films. In 1990, the Toei group Company Toei Video began production of Yakuza films especially for this market after taking note of the prevalence of video stores in the 1980s and the popularity on video of titles in this genre. Rival studios soon began their own V-Cinema production houses, and violent action films, especially Yakuza pictures, became the mainstay of their output.

Several of the most prominent names in contemporary Yakuza and gang films, including Miike Takashi and Mochizuki Rokuro, worked as directors in what rapidly became the V-Cinema industry. It was therefore logical that when these filmmakers moved into making films for theatrical release (something that was inevitable given Toei's subsequent trend of shooting on 16mm, blowing up the print to 35mm and exhibiting the films in second-run urban theatres) they would remain within the Yakuza genre. This, coupled with several high profile progenitors (of which *Violent Cop* is the clearest) and a general return to violence in films as a mode of expression, meant that, whilst it did not enjoy the prevalence it had done in the 1960s and 1970s, the Yakuza genre in the 1990s once again became a distinct generic entity.

One marker of this return to health was the re-emergence of the Yakuza film series, which had made up a significant number of works in the genre's heyday in the 1960s and

shortly thereafter. It is true that such film series were not wholly absent in the barren years of the late 1970s/1980s. But those that were made, such as the aforementioned *Yakuza Wives* films, fell broadly in line with films like *Onimasa* and *Sailor Suit and Machine Gun* in becoming stranded between formula-oriented commercial imperatives and desperation for new twists on the same material.

However, in the 1990s the Yakuza film series returned to prominence. There are works by Miike (his *Kuroshakai*, or ‘Black society’ trilogy<sup>vii</sup> [1995-1999], as well as the two-part *Family* [2001] and the rather more fantastical *Dead or Alive* trilogy [1999-2002]); there is Miyasaka Takeshi (who directed the two part *Yanagawa gumi*, or *Yanagawa Mafia Family* [2002] along with the third and fourth instalments of the *Tokyo Mafia* series: entitled, respectively, *Battle for Shinjuku* [1996] and *Yakuza Blood* [1997]); Ishii Takashi, who directed *Gonin* [1995] and *Gonin 2* [1996] as well as *Kuro no tenshi Vol.1 (Black Angel, 1997)* and *Kuro no tenshi Vol.2 (Black Angel 2, 1999)*; and Muroga Atsushi and Ozawa Hitoshi, who respectively directed the two *Score* films in 1995 and 1999. There is also Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s six-part, made for television comedy series *Katte ni shiyagare!! (Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself 1996)*.

Related to this is the fact that the 1990s saw an increase in the number of directors specifically associated with the Yakuza genre. The genre became the domain of a new generation, co-opted by young directors who followed Kitano’s lead by using its subject matter, themes and potentiality for personal and social expression and commentary. Along with Kitano, one can point to Miike Takashi, Mochizuki Rokuro, Sabu, Miyasaka

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<sup>vii</sup> The films that make up this tripartite are known in English as *Shinjuku Triad Society* [1995], *Rainy Dog* [1997] and *Ley Lines* [1999]. However, the Japanese titles reveal the thematic continuity and progression of the three: *Shinjuku kuroshakai* (lit: *Shinjuku Black Society*), *Gokudō kuroshakai* (lit: *Criminal underworld black society*) and *Nihon kuroshakai* (lit *Japan Black Society*).

Takeshi, Aoyama Shinji and Ishii Takashi as new directors who have made both their national and international names on singular, idiosyncratic Yakuza films. In addition, older, established directors such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi also made significant entries in the genre.

There was also a concomitant number of different approaches to and revisions of generic formulas, characters and paradigms. One prevalent feature of many new Yakuza films, particularly in the series works, was an appropriation of past forms within new, divergent parameters of generic deviation and experimentation. Film series like the aforementioned *Tokyo Mafia* and especially the *Yanagawa Family* series were very much indebted to Fukasaku, and in particular to his *Battles without Honour or Humanity* films. Both sets of works mirror their progenitor by starring the actor most readily identifiable with the genre in the 1990s, the decade's Takakura Ken or Sugawara Bunta: Takeuchi Riki (who in fact combines the stoic, protean heroism and traditional values of the former with the more aggressive individuality and capacity for violence of the latter). Moreover, the character he plays, especially in Miyasaka's two *Yanagawa* films, is predicated to a large degree on the archetypical Yakuza protagonist as filtered through the lens of Fukasaku. He is the traditional good yakuza figure, the repository of compromised honour whose values make him anomalous within the post-war milieu of corrupt and corporate Yakuza gangs. He is a character the like of which Takeuchi would later essay in films such as *The Yakuza Way* [1999], who has spent time in prison and has re-entered a world he no longer recognises, where old values and codes have all but disappeared.

Perhaps the clearest signifier not simply of the return of the *Jitsuroku* sub-genre but of the Yakuza film in general were two remakes of earlier films by two significant 1990s

filmmakers: *Shin jingi no hakaba* (*Graveyard of Honour*, 2002) by Miike Takashi, a reworking of Fukasaku Kinji's *Jingi no hakaba* (*Graveyard of Honour*, 1975); and *Tsumetai chi* (*An Obsession*, 1997) by Aoyama Shinji, adapted from Kurosawa Akira's *Nora inu* (*Stray Dog*, 1949). The title of Miike's *Shin jingi no hakaba* is usually given in English as identical to Fukasaku's. However, it translates literally as *New Graveyard of Honour*, and this title more accurately captures and reflects the fact that Miike is updating Fukasaku's model. The protagonist of this film is an archetypal *Jitsuroku* protagonist in that he is based on an actual figure: a man of extreme violence who rose to stature in Japan's underworld and infamy before increasingly breaking his personal codes of honour in an extended series of attacks on his own superiors. Following an attempt on his life (by his own yakuza brethren), he ultimately committed suicide in prison.

As if to emphasise the fact that he is picking up where Fukasaku finished, Miike alters the chronology of his narrative and literally begins his film at the point at which Fukasaku ended his: with the protagonist's suicide in prison. Following this, the setting is updated to the 1980s and 1990s, with Miike aping Fukasaku's voiceover narration that details the salient social developments (in particular the bursting of the economic bubble) of the period. It is a potent move on the part of Miike and screenwriter Takechi Shigenori, as the pointed trajectory of their extreme protagonist mirrors modern Japan more closely than Fukasaku's did the post-war era. His trajectory, progressing through gang loyalty and upward mobility to a subsequently marked individualism typified by self-interest, excess (of violence, drug consumption and monetary greed) and ultimately abjection and death reflects modern Japan. It typifies the move from the apex of the economic miracle and capitalist enterprise in the 1980s through the tribulations and

attendant spiritual bankruptcy of the 1990s, when the sudden absence of wealth meant that for many Japanese, viable constructions of national identity had been fractured.

Aoyama similarly stresses a link to the post-war period in depicting contemporary urban ennui in his remake of *Stray Dog*. In place of Kurosawa's antagonist is a young criminal dying of leukaemia, a hereditary disease he has contracted from his mother, who was a so-called *hibakusha*: someone who suffered with long-term disease in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. A direct link to the turmoil of the post-war period, and the setting of the 1970s *Jitsuroku eiga*, is thus established, and the problems engendered in Japan's post-war society are underlined as directly relevant to its contemporary malaise. Indeed, it is not too extreme to suggest that Japan in the 1990s returned to the ashes from which the phoenix of the miracle economy rose in the 1960s and subsequent decades. The country died in 1945 and was reborn some years later, and the fact that one can speak of another death from 1989, and onward throughout the 1990s, can be oriented and legitimated textually with reference to the changes that rang in that decade of malaise and turmoil.

Beyond these films, the contemporary director who best exemplifies this once-prevalent facet of the genre is Mochizuki Rokuro, a professed admirer of Fukasaku. A number of the Yakuza films he directed in the mid-1990s, especially his self-titled 'no-good middle-aged Yakuza trilogy' comprising *Shin kanashiki hittoman* (*Another Lonely Hitman*, 1995), *Onibi* (*Onibi: The Fire Within*, 1997) and *Koi Gokudō* (*A Yakuza in Love*, 1997), owe a (direct or indirect) debt to the novels of Yamanouchi Yukio. This writer had capitalised on a contemporaneous vogue for true life Yakuza tales (found in such memoir-driven works as Saga Jun'ichi's *Confessions of a Yakuza*<sup>20</sup> or Tendo Shoko's

*Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter*<sup>21</sup>; or in an exposé such as Christopher Seymour's *Yakuza Diary*<sup>22</sup>). As such, his work was ripe for adaptation, and he formed a fruitful collaborative relationship with Mochizuki, providing the source material for *Another Lonely Hitman* and *A Yakuza in Love*, and the original story for *Onibi: The Fire Within*. He also wrote the original treatment for the director's more recent *Nureta akai ito* [2005].

### **Violence, Cops and Criminals**

Even though *Violent Cop* is not, strictly speaking, a Yakuza film, it nonetheless incorporates many of the features described above<sup>viii</sup>. Indeed, as Donato Totaro has pointed out '*Violent Cop* remains Kitano's *purest yakuza* film<sup>23</sup>' (Totaro's italics), by which the author presumably means the way in which it can be seen to adhere to several paradigms of past strains of the Yakuza film, especially in its 1970s *Jitsuroku* phase. This can be seen from the very beginning of the film in the scene of the youths terrorizing and ultimately killing a homeless old man. As previously noted, one of the most significant developments in the Yakuza genre under Fukasaku in the 1970s was an emphasis on the contemporary, which is inscribed into *Battles without Honour and Humanity* from the outset in the photographs of a mushroom cloud and the destruction and human suffering left in the wake of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It then proceeds into the very

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<sup>viii</sup> There are some precedents to *Violent Cop* in ostensible Yakuza films focusing on obsessive and beleaguered cops. Most prominent are several films by the supreme *Jitsuroku-eiga* filmmaker, and *Violent Cop*'s original director, Fukasaku Kinji (which is perhaps why he was the original choice to direct *Violent Cop*). The most obvious example is *Yakuza Graveyard*, in which extreme tactics and behavior, as well as a corrupt force, lead the protagonist to side with a yakuza gang, and form a pact of brotherhood with its leader.

first scene of a bustling market stall, when occupying American soldiers attempt to rape a Japanese woman.

The beginning of *Violent Cop* works in the very same way. The opening, pre-credits scene of the homeless old man being harassed and eventually stamped and kicked to death would, to a Japanese audience of the time, have alluded to the specific problem of *bōsōzoku*, or 'speed tribes:' the teenage bike gangs. By the 1980s, there were an estimated 40,000 such tribes across the whole of Japan, and according to Japan's National Police Agency figures, they were responsible for up to 80% of juvenile crime<sup>24</sup>. This opening scene thus works in the same way as the opening of *Battles without Honour and Humanity* in locating the film in the here and now and commenting on the state of contemporary Japan, its moral bankruptcy. Indeed, the fact that the country is divorced from its traditions and heritage could scarcely be better symbolised in the action of the young killing the old (the fact that the old in this case is represented by a homeless man further reinforces the contemporary redundancy of the past<sup>ix</sup>).

The protagonist of *Violent Cop*, Detective Azuma, is another example of contiguity between the 1970s Yakuza film and Kitano's 1989 debut. The central characters of many 1970s *Jitsuroku* films are, due their violence and erratic behaviour, looked down upon by their superiors, and ultimately ostracized from their gangs. Azuma is likewise continually reprimanded by his superiors for his violence and brutality, such as barging into a youth's house and bedroom in the opening scene and beating a confession out of him. Furthermore, although there is little indication that he enjoys violence (or that he feels

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<sup>ix</sup> In his cultural study *A Japanese Mirror* (Jonathan Cape Ltd., Great Britain, 1984), Ian Buruma explains that a number of *Ninkyō-eiga* Yakuza films begin with scenes in which a picture of traditional Japan is invaded and disrupted by a paradigm of corrupt modernity such as an American car driven by a western-attired villain. This then feeds into a dichotomy between tradition and modernity that characterizes good and bad respectively

anything one way or the other about it), there are still several scenes in which his colleagues have to physically restrain him after he has begun to viciously and ceaselessly beat a criminal.

The essential likeness between Azuma and his Yakuza film progenitors is crystallized in the scene in which he borrows money from his underling for gambling, being warned in the process that ‘You can’t, gambling is a crime’. In a majority of Yakuza films, there is at least one scene featuring the protagonist gambling (the word yakuza in fact refers to the losing hand in a traditional card game). Indeed, as already noted, the early manifestations of the genre were often built around characters who became gamblers, *bakuto*, after opposing corrupt authorities. It is a pastime that is ‘pursued with ritual intensity<sup>25</sup>’, and which bonds men together in the *Ninkyō eiga*.

In *Violent Cop*, by way of contrast, Kitano adheres to the *Jitsuroku*/Fukasaku technique of subverting classical tenets of the genre. Thus, Detective Azuma (like the protagonist of Fukasaku’s *Graveyard of Honour*) thinks nothing of using his underling’s cash to fund his betting. Moreover, the betting itself is an exercise of automation that he appears to be undertaking out of some kind of residual urge. In *Ninkyō* or samurai films (including Kitano’s *Zatoichi*), betting is often a fraternal activity, a distillation of the enmity between rival yakuza and gangs, and/or a demonstration of the protagonist’s superior abilities. In *Violent Cop*, Azuma approaches gambling much as he does every other aspect of the life we see him lead: with wearied detachment and emotional nullification.

However, the importance of *Violent Cop* goes beyond its centrality to the revival of Japanese filmmaking and the reappearance of the Yakuza film in the 1990s. As its

inclusion in the compilation of essays entitled *The Cinema of Japan and Korea*<sup>26</sup> as the only Yakuza and the only Kitano film attests, it stands as a significant artistic achievement in its own right. Underlining this is the fact that Japanese critic Abe Casio covers the film in more depth than almost every other Kitano film<sup>27</sup>, elucidating its style and in particular the already discussed importance of Azuma within a discourse on 'Beat' Takeshi.

What Abe, and many others who have written on the film, have not touched upon, certainly not in detail commensurate to its significance, is the film's picture of existential subjectivity and self-hood. This point has been ignored, as has the extent to which Kitano was already beginning to conceive of genre as a vehicle for cinematic expression. However, this existential inquiry can be regarded as conveying the fundamental meaning of *Violent Cop*. Questions of action and inaction dominate the narrative, as they do in many Kitano films (especially his Yakuza works). Here, though, they are of an essentially different order to later works like *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*. *Violent Cop* in fact has more in common with such ostensibly different works as *A Scene at the Sea* or *Dolls*. Its emphasis on action and inaction, and thus on unilateral decision-making, has a true existential import, one of the purest of Kitano's oeuvre. In the absence of any other viable precepts or determinants of identity, it is what defines the reality of the main characters, especially Detective Azuma.

In several key instances, it is inaction, or more properly delayed action, that typifies the protagonist. His (belated) entrance into the film in the opening scene establishes this dichotomy, and introduces a recurrent feature the narrative. It is clear that he witnesses the opening attack and subsequent killing of a homeless old man, but he chooses to let it

happen - to, in effect, allow the man to die - and to reprimand one of the young assailants afterwards in his home and effect the considerably easier task of using violence himself, coercing the youth to give himself up.

If there is a serious consequence to Azuma's inaction in this opening scene, there is an even more directly relevant after-effect in a later incident, the one that leads to the film's central set-piece scene of the chase through the streets of Tokyo. Here, on a call out to a flat that is housing a criminal, Azuma allows various colleagues, along with his subordinate, to enter the flat and attempt to take the man into custody. He himself remains outside, laughing, as the police officers who have gone in to apprehend the criminal are savagely beaten, only acting when the criminal manages to escape. However, the fact that he flees the flat then leads to a fight with the officer who remained outside on the lookout, which in turn causes serious injury to him when the criminal attacks him with a baseball bat.

Herein, then, lies the basis of *Violent Cop's* thematic emphasis on decision-making, choice and action as determining identity and selfhood: on, in effect, the external, surface construction of identity, on facade as reality. Action and choice (usually not to act) are all that delineate and characterise Azuma. Like the protagonists of contemporary European directors such as Bruno Dumont or Gaspar Noé, he does not think, nor does he reflect: he simply acts, or otherwise. He bluntly and blindly moves through physical space in the film with an ostensible single-minded purpose that is actually an ironic counterpoint to his essential pointlessness. He achieves or changes nothing at all throughout the course of the narrative of *Violent Cop*, at least nothing positive, his agency extending little beyond affecting the deaths of those around him.

Action, choice and agency are thus ambiguous concepts within *Violent Cop*, and this thematic crux colours the style and realization of the film. As can be inferred from the earlier discussion of psychoanalysis, the concept of space has a number of ramifications for *Violent Cop*. It is subtly demarcated and hierarchically delineated throughout the film's *mise-en-scène*. From the first two scenes, in which Azuma accosts the youth in his bedroom, before subsequently being depicted simply walking to work (important scenes that will be returned to in due course), the protagonist is perpetually presented as a being who transcends and violates different spaces, particularly public and private realms. In effect, he floats through all space with little (if any) restrictions, something reinforced by the film's central set-piece scene: his pursuit of a fleeing criminal through downtown Tokyo. This extended chase begins in a small flat, before exploding out into the city; and over the course of an almost ten-minute hunt, both on foot and in a car, Azuma traverses a broad section of the city before he catches his man and runs him over.

In his boundary-less physicality and ability to cross all spatial parameters, Azuma is, in effect, a ghost that haunts the film, a presence that exists on a different plane of reality. Kitano conceives of him along existential lines, defined by exterior action, because that is all there is to the character. He is, as a number of later Kitano protagonists will be, what is seen on the surface: the sum total of what he does, or fails to do, defined entirely by action. In Kitano's films, action (and acting) such as this frequently involves prolonged movement, most often walking, and it is conceived of as a significant thematic event. Although *Violent Cop* is almost unique among his Yakuza films in featuring what may be termed the theme of walking (it is fore-grounded far more clearly in *A Scene at the Sea*, *Zatoichi* [2004] and, most overtly, in the bound beggars story of *Dolls*), it is nonetheless

an integral part of the film's meaning. In emphasising, thematizing, walking, Kitano is not alone in Japanese cinema: a number of directors (Naruse Mikio chief among them) have conceived of walking in very particular ways. Naruse, for instance, depicts walking as representative of all-too-rare (and therefore precious) moments when his characters can experience respite from the tribulations and oppression that typifies their lives. That is, whilst in transit between different locations, they have time to themselves: time to think, and to interact with others<sup>x</sup>. It is, in effect, a transitory life away from life for characters whose existence extends little beyond the perfunctory.

Kurosawa is another filmmaker to have made walking and physical action a crucial feature of his work. However, it is far more grandiose in conception and import than is Naruse's. Stephen Prince has said of the typical Kurosawa hero that 'they live life as if it were stretching before them as a sharply defined road<sup>28</sup>'. As such, it is their travails whilst walking this road (a road to self-fulfilment and attainment of personal goals) that characterises their trajectories in the films. In a literal sense, they often have to walk, to cover significant distances, in order to achieve their aims. In *Nora inu* (*Stray Dog*, 1949), the protagonist Murakami's pistol is stolen, and he ventures deep into the figurative underworld of Tokyo's teeming post-war black market to find the person who can help him recover it. It is a trek Kurosawa visualizes in an eight-minute- plus montage sequence following Murakami endlessly walking through this hellish milieu (signified as such through the intense, ceaseless heat). Similarly, The peasant protagonists of *Kakushi-toride no san akunin* (*The Hidden Fortress*, 1958), like the retainers of *Tora no O wo*

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<sup>x</sup> Naruse's *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*, 1955) is exceptional in this regard, with almost a whole relationship between the protagonist and her sometime lover playing out over time in these in-between moments and spaces

*fumu otokotachi* (*They Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*, 1945) are charged with a quest that entails a treacherous and protracted walk across enemy territory.

Kitano, by contrast, conceives of walking, indeed movement in general, as outward motion that is dichotomous with interior stasis<sup>xi</sup>. A majority of Kitano's protagonists do not see their lives and destinies before them as Kurosawa's do. Indeed, many (especially those essayed by Kitano himself in the Cop and Yakuza films) see only their death, and are more concerned with life in hindsight, the time they have already lived, than their future and their life ahead. As such, their protracted physical movement through space, their exterior motion, lacks any real concomitant interiority, any viable or sustained movement within: it is an exterior sign that offsets interior stasis.

This latter point, in addition to reinforcing the aforementioned psychoanalytical thematic, also reinforces *Violent Cop's* existential vision. Sartrean existentialism, in particular the argument offered by Sartre in his defence of his philosophical position in *Existentialism and Humanism*, stresses not simply individual action and personal agency, but attendant consequence and responsibility (for the lives and well-being of others). It is therefore significant that Azuma's actions and choices at almost every stage of the narrative have a (direct or indirect) effect on others around him. His hesitancy in the two aforementioned instances, something that is clearly figured as a decision not to act, costs others their lives. Elsewhere, even his positive police work in uncovering the drug dealing of the yakuza has negative implications for his friend, who has been working with them in distributing their narcotics and who is murdered when his corruption is brought to light. Even in a scene of conflict such as the one wherein Azuma is attacked in

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<sup>xi</sup> According to Kitano, all the walking in *Violent Cop* came from the fact that the film was too short when it was completed, so such moments of movement were included to pad out the length.

the street by Kiyohiro, the detective's actions of self-defence (kicking away Kiyohiro's arm as he is about to shoot him) leads to the death of an innocent bystander, a young girl at a nearby bus stop who is shot in the head.

Kitano's aforementioned connection to Kurosawa begins to be dismantled at this point, as surface similarities yield discrepancies beneath. Something that connects a majority of the latter's protagonists is an existential thematic whereby they enter upon a path of enlightenment, of personal integrity and self-betterment that implicitly entails a responsibility toward others in action and choice. Once again, *Stray Dog* may be understood here as a progenitor of *Violent Cop*. The film's moral import arises when Murakami's stolen pistol is used in several crimes, including murder and armed robbery. He then begins to despair as increasing feelings of moral culpability for the crimes committed with his weapon engulf him (the weapon he felt was only taken from him as a result of his own negligence).

The emphasis on action inevitably carries the corollary of acting. It has been demonstrated how Kitano stresses the importance of this facet of Azuma. However, there is another level at which this term operates: that of performance; and this, too, feeds into the specificity of *Violent Cop's* central character. To return again to the introduction of Detective Azuma: his first two appearances in the film theatricalise the frame and the pro-filmic space. Initially, he strides into a static composition, entering the film as if making his entrance onto a stage; whilst in the following scene, Kitano depicts at length Azuma crossing a bridge on his way to the police station. He is initially seen in a frontal composition, walking directly toward the camera in the distinctive, inimitable 'Beat' Takeshi gait. Following this, a striking, Kurosawa-esque 90 degree cut picks up his

movement in a lateral tracking shot (establishing what will henceforth become an intrinsic stylistic norm) that then follows him as he walks up to and enters the station.

Significantly, in this extended, narratively superfluous scene, the bridge that Azuma crosses (which is the first of many that will recur as important elements of the *mise-en-scène* in Kitano's later films) may be conceptualised in two interrelated ways. Most overtly, it reinforces the aforementioned demarcation of different spheres of space by existing as an in-between, intermediate realm; that is it connects, bridges, two distinct arenas of space. Given that Kitano has already introduced Detective Azuma by showing his lack of boundaries in traversing, indeed breaching, different spaces: most obviously in his intrusion into a private environment from a public, communal area when he enters not only the house but the bedroom of the youth involved in the killing of the old man, and forces him to give himself and his friends up (this will be repeated later when bursts into Kiyohiro's apartment to arrest him).

In addition, the bridge also underlines the theatrical space of the film. One may in this respect conceive of the bridge as a classical *hanamichi*, the traditional walkway, or flower path, of the Kabuki stage. This is the route by which actors make their entrances and exits in the theatre (in this it fulfils a comparable role to the *Nō* theatre's *hashigakari*) and is located at a 90 degree angle from the stage, something Kitano alludes to here in the 90 degree cut between angles of view on the movement of Azuma. The *Hanamichi* is thus the connection between offstage and onstage: between life and theatre, reality and fiction, self and actor: in existentialist terms, existence and essence.

The thematic and visual presentation of discrete spheres of spatial environs has another dichotomous configuration in *Violent Cop*, one that plays an increasingly

significant part in subsequent Kitano films: the opposition between self and other. Most significantly here is Kitano's conception of the relationship (structural and textual) between his Detective Azuma and the yakuza hit man Kiyohiro, his ostensible mirror image. Again, *Dirty Harry* [1971], along with *The French Connection* [1971] and Michael Mann's *Heat* [1995] have been invoked as touchstones for *Violent Cop*: as a film that is perceived to explore the similarity between cop and criminal, the mirror image of the one in the other and the thin and tenuous line between law and criminality.

However, Kitano's film is in fact more akin to Kurosawa's *Stray Dog* than its supposedly comparable American cinematic counterparts. It is true that Kitano takes great pains to highlight an ostensible commonality between Azuma and Kiyohiro. Their respective positions within the police force and the yakuza are markedly similar. The unilateral actions and extreme, violent behaviour of both men cause them to run afoul of their superiors, and to ultimately be cast out of their professional environments, which are further presented as institutional facsimiles of each other.

There are also a number of visual markers of similarity. Towards the end of the film, when both have become adrift from their work, they are depicted in very similar clothes: black trousers and a white cotton jumper (something Kitano highlights by beginning the scene of Kiyohiro's attack on Azuma in the street with an extreme long shot in which the men are almost indistinguishable). Both men are also depicted searching for the same drug dealer in the same disused office building. Indeed, the editing is such that the two characters' respective hunts are figuratively converged. The first scene of Azuma searching this location gives way to one of his underling asking after the criminal on a busy street. Immediately after this static long shot, Kitano cuts straight to a lateral

tracking shot (much like those that have frequently been used to shoot Azuma) of Kiyohiro to all intent and purposes continuing, and successfully completing, Azuma's pursuit.

There are, furthermore, repeated scenes in which graphic patterning alludes to a similarity between protagonist and antagonist. Following Azuma's arrest of Kiyohiro, he violently beats him in the police station locker room. In the wake of the assault, the latter is shown sitting against a wall, with the detective standing and looking down on him (something that is subsequently transformed when Azuma himself sits down, at which time the frontal compositions taken at 180-degree angles across the axis of action suggest mirror images). This above/below dynamic is repeated when Kiyohiro attacks Azuma. Their fight ends with the beleaguered cop sitting in an alley whilst his assailant usurps the detective's former position and looks down at him, repeatedly kicking him in the face and attempting to shoot him.

Finally, the tables are reversed once again. In the climactic shootout between ex-cop and ex-yakuza, Kiyohiro remains sitting against a concrete pillar whilst Azuma walks up to him and they each shoot the other several times. The detective then only manages to kill his opponent with a shot to the head, and again this finds its mirror image in the fact that Azuma himself will only be felled in this way a moment later as he leaves the warehouse where the duel has taken place.

However, this overt juxtaposition does not exhaust *Violent Cop's* thematic potentiality. The point is to stress a physical, exterior commonality in order to offset and counterpoint other, more fundamental, differences, ones that relate back to the film's existential thematic. This is, once again, where *Stray Dog* emerges as a point of

reference. Kurosawa uses the aforementioned sameness, the sense of moral responsibility felt by Murakami for the crimes his gun has been used to commit, in order, ultimately, to highlight difference. His point is one of existential choice: that given the void in which one exists (especially at that time, amid the venality and desperation of post-war Japan), it is only personal choice that separates law from criminality, good from supposed evil.

In *Violent Cop*, the fundamental reason underlying the close juxtaposition of protagonist and antagonist, cop and criminal, is comparable. However, for Kitano the specificity of the equation is markedly different. Azuma, as was demonstrated above, exercises personal choice: he acts of his own volition, never reflecting on his actions and choices and feeling nothing. This is precisely the reason why he can act and behave in this manner: because, in effect, all actions and their attendant outcomes and ramifications inspire no change in reaction or emotional response from the embittered cop. Whatever happens is, quite literally, all of a piece to Azuma, as it subsequently will be to Murakawa in *Sonatine*.

By way of contrast, Kiyohiro may well be said not to possess this freedom of decision-making, the ability to choose and to act. One may say, furthermore, that it is because of his feelings, his interiority (precisely what Azuma lacks), that he cannot exercise his will and act in any meaningful fashion. It is his code of honour within the yakuza, in particular his devotion to his boss that precludes and prevents his ability to act. His behaviour and actions are prescribed by the collective, hierarchical yakuza mindset, their social inscription and codification of his loyalty and servitude, which is something that he values and which continues to instruct his actions and personal conduct even when he is no longer a yakuza.

This is a paradigmatic presentation of the *giri/ninjō* dichotomy that the Yakuza genre often depicts as a microcosmic reflection of Japanese society in general: in which personal inclination is circumvented by duty (figuratively or otherwise) and personal identity is subsumed within that of the group. It finally comes to a head in the aforementioned scene in which Kiyohiro hunts down the drug dealer who has informed the police of vital information, a scene that culminates in the yakuza killing his quarry (someone who has transgressed the codes of yakuza etiquette). This one real act of unilateral choice on his part is what precipitates Kiyohiro's dismissal from the yakuza, and it is something that is shown to be a regrettable development for him as opposed to Azuma, who evinces no reaction when disciplined and dismissed from the police force. Indeed, he simply takes the time to indulge in leisure activities as though he has simply taken time off from work.

These opposing forces and characterizations come together in the aforementioned scene in which Kiyohiro accosts and attacks Azuma in the street, which follows directly from the above, from Azuma's indulgence in practicing baseball and other such activities. For Kiyohiro, even now that he has been ostracised from his gang, one cannot say that he acts freely in tracking and assailing Azuma. His actions still stem from his sense of *giri* in as much as he desires revenge against the man whose own actions resulted indirectly in his excision from the ranks of the yakuza. That he attempts to kill Azuma in the street following the montage sequence depicting the latter at play crystallizes their respective characters and attitudes. Azuma's indifference to work and any attendant notions of honour or devotion is encapsulated in his immediate retreat into the pleasures of play, whilst Kiyohiro becomes lost without the defining parameters of the group and

immediately takes it upon himself to take revenge on Azuma for costing him his self identity.

Kitano will repeat this particular dynamic in strikingly similar terms fifteen years later in *Zatoichi* [2004]. In the interim, it has fed into the characterisation of his subsequent cop and yakuza protagonists, and as such *Violent Cop* prefigures these later works very clearly and can be regarded as a more important part of the Kitano canon than has generally been allowed. The markers of this characterisation, of Detective Azuma's existential crisis and ennui, are multifarious. Most prominently, the use of an the first of Eric Satie's *Trois Gnossiennes* from 1890 (also used by Louis Malle in *Le Feu Follet/The Fire Within* [1962]) works against rather than in support of several key scenes. Most notable in this regard is the central chase around downtown Tokyo. Far from underlining the action and urgency of this pursuit, the sparse, heavy piano chords and legato jazz saxophone of the arrangement here carries a subjective import in connoting Azuma's emotional nullification, the fact that he is engaged physically in the chase but not emotionally, is there in body only but is immune to the intensity, the energy and elation that a more generic character may be expected to evince during such a set-piece, and that would typically be underlined by a driving, percussive cue on the soundtrack<sup>xii</sup>. It also reinforces the aforementioned construction of Azuma as an anomalous figure within the film, someone who literally intrudes into the film (as when he enters a static shot before forcibly crossing the boundary between public and private space when he apprehends the youth).

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<sup>xii</sup> This stylistic choice, indeed this particular scene, has been entirely misread by commentators such as Chris D (in his commentary for the film as released in the *Second Sight Kitano* DVD box set). In bemoaning its lackadaisical construction and lack of tension, he fails completely to understand its subjective and thematic import; that it is not supposed to be an exiting, exhilarating chase scene.

In addition, the distinctive cinematography of *Violent Cop* is particularly connotative with regard to the above. The lateral tracking shots at right angles<sup>xiii</sup> that are introduced in the second scene of the film, and which are repeated when he collects his sister from the hospital, work very specifically to centre Azuma as a self-contained, insular presence: an entity distinct and separate not simply from the world and the people around him, but remote also from the viewer. They are rigidly formal in holding Azuma at a distance, presenting different views of him as much as to say that this surface, this exterior, is all there is to the character. This also has the double function of stressing that the protagonist will be an object, the focus both of the gaze of the camera and that of the audience, rather than a subject, someone whose (optical and figurative) point of view and consciousness will focalize the narrative. Indeed, as the aforementioned example of the score attests, the film as a whole defines its style after the model of its central character, rather like directors such as William Wellman and Raoul Walsh would tailor the gangster films they made with James Cagney to the particular nature of their star, taking their cue from his intensity and keeping the films short and fast-paced.

The editing and cinematography of *Violent Cop* typifies this precept. The camerawork makes explicit the objectification of Azuma in a number of static, extreme long and high-angle shots that observe his movement through space. In addition to his introduction, walking into a high-angle long shot in pursuit of a youth, and the aforementioned shot that introduces the scene in which Kiyohiro attacks him in the street, there is an intermediate shot of Azuma walking home with his sister at night through a harbour. Once again, it is a walkway that Azuma traverses, an intermediate space through which

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<sup>xiii</sup> Abe Casio has convincingly argued that the concept of the right-angle is an organic feature of *Violent Cop's* style, and has detailed the myriad ways in which it is made manifest in the visual fabric of the film

he moves, with the gleaming facade of the city's skyscrapers in the third focal plane of the deep-focus shot further connoting the ever present, inexorable presence of the corrupt, corporate yakuza as paragons of capitalism.

These static compositions further contrast with a number of mobile, reasonably long takes that predominate throughout the film. The very first scene of *Violent Cop*, in which a homeless old man is attacked and killed by several youths, is largely depicted in a lengthy, close-up lateral tracking shot that keeps the old man in the centre of the frame as the violence against him bluntly intrudes from off-screen. Here, the boundaries of the frame are invaded and transgressed much like Azuma will later explode the distinction between several otherwise discreet spheres of spatial orientation.

This tension and dichotomy between static and mobile shots relates to Azuma himself, to his overt definition in movement and (figurative and literal) death in stasis. Such visual techniques and formal characteristics will go on to define Kitano's style in later work. The presentational aspect of the shots and editing here will be remodelled and refined into the typical static, frontal compositions from Kitano's next, second film, *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990), onward. Conversely, the sense in which a majority of Kitano protagonists function as objects within the text comes directly from *Violent Cop*. The relative paucity of optical POV shots reinforces this precept, something that, as Nick Browne<sup>29</sup> notes in his celebrated analysis of *Stagecoach* [1939], underlines a lack of subjectivity and social status, in this case on the part of Detective Azuma.

These early shots, particularly the first right angle cut, also serve to subtly reinforce the dichotomous body/mind opposition that runs throughout the narrative. When the frontal shot of Azuma crossing the bridge at the beginning of the second scene cuts 90

degrees to the lateral tracking shot, the composition in this mobile take frames Azuma so that his head is sporadically invisible beyond the top of the screen. The shot thus underlines the predominance of Azuma's body, its essence-in-movement, over his interior, emotional life. Whereas in Bresson the body is often a prison for the soul, and for Kurosawa its frequent fallibility, such as the diseases or the ageing that afflict the protagonists of *Yoidore tenshi (Drunk Angel, 1958)* and *Ikiru* [1953]; *Hachigatsu no rapusodī (Rhapsody in August, 1991)* and *Madadayo* [1993], stands in contrast to an attendant existential, spiritual growth or self-definition. For Kitano and 'Beat' Takeshi, the body is a shell, a hollow physical spectacle that absorbs and dispenses violence but will admit nothing beneath its facade.

In later films, the performance of an identity substitutes for this fundamental lack, and from *Hana-Bi* through to *Brother*, Kitano's protagonists develop a relationship that gives some meaning to their empty existences. In *Violent Cop*, though, Azuma's relations, with his sister and the corrupt older cop Iwaki at work, offer little beyond the cursory and functional, with a lingering sense that any apparent closeness has been forgone as he has become walled in and closed off. Indeed, the blankness of Azuma specifically serves to offset the crises that afflict the characters around him. Each has his or her problems that are set in relief by Azuma's affect-less, hollow emptiness.

This is cemented in three moments of crisis for three different characters: when, as outlined earlier in this chapter, language completely fails Azuma and he appears as an infant before the traumas of the world. In these key scenes – when Iwaki's corruption comes to light, when he visits Iwaki's widow following her husband's death, and when he is finally confronted with his mentally ill sister's drug addiction in the film's climax -

he remains helplessly silent and static, impotent before the seismic, life-changing problems of those ostensibly closest to him.

As has already been noted elsewhere, 90, 180, even 360-degree editing have typically been prevalent in Japanese cinema, to the extent that they may seem like specifically Japanese delineations of cinematic space. They were commonplace in Ozu and Kurosawa (who also made extensive use of lateral tracking shots), and sporadically appear in the work of Shimizu Hiroshi, Ichikawa Kon, Kinoshita Keisuke and Naruse. They frequently relate to traditional Japanese visual arts, especially the compositional practices associated with classical ink and scroll painting, an artistic lineage that these filmmakers have been perceived to assimilate and exemplify in their films<sup>30</sup>.

The very fact that, in *Violent Cop*, Kitano uses such editing and cinematography solely to characterise his protagonist relates to the contemporary malaise that was on the horizon at the time of the film's production. That is, just as there is a (diegetic and extra-diegetic) distance inherent in Azuma's relationship to those around him, there was a concomitant and intrinsic separation that at this time governed and shaped a modern director like Kitano, a separation from his lineage as a Japanese filmmaker and artist. The artistic and spiritual bankruptcy that commentators such as Alex Kerr<sup>31</sup> and Patrick Smith<sup>32</sup> have identified at the heart of modern Japanese society is very precisely construed as a divorce from tradition, a rupturing of past and present that has separated the country from itself as it strove to financial, capitalist supremacy. Kerr, in particular, writes at length of the Westernization inherent in the figurative 'new cities' that characterise modern Japan<sup>33</sup>. He himself also discourses on Japanese cinema as paradigmatic of the gulf between a perceived past golden age (in this case the vibrant

studio system in the 1950s and the work of Ozu, Kurosawa, Mizoguchi) and the dearth of such films and filmmakers today<sup>34</sup>.

As such, *Violent Cop*, along with *Tetsuo: the Iron Man*, can be seen to represent a ground zero for Japanese cinema, the point of origin from which modern filmmaking in the country grows and develops. Seen in this light, the affectless, stripped-down, directly causal style of Kitano's film (his first and only such narrative) and its antithetical counterpart in the frenetic visual assault of Tsukamoto appear at opposite ends of a spectrum that would go on to provide the foundational paradigm of 1990s Japanese cinema. *Violent Cop* is also, in a sense, the blank canvas that Kitano would incrementally manipulate, fill-in, and on which he would increasingly paint and add colour and texture, as well as a more marked Japanese-ness, before finally arriving at *Hana-Bi*. This film, Kitano's seventh, is at its core almost a remake of his debut work, and certainly offers a detailed contrast with regard to its protagonist and existential thematic. But it is a film that, in complete contradistinction to *Violent Cop*, has accrued all the authorial and artistic markers of a singular, controlling vision, and which was lionised internationally as the introductory text of a new auteur director.

Thus, despite being a pared-down and plot-driven film to an extent almost unique in his body of work; in spite also of the fact that it is in several ways stylistically anomalous, Kitano's debut film is nonetheless worthy of close attention. It is far from the (comparatively) simple genre piece that some commentators would have one believe. It establishes the norm of 'Beat' Takeshi the performer, inscribing the psychoanalytical tenets and bodily reality that would become more marked in subsequent films. It also initiates much of what would later become identifiable facets of its director's thematic

preoccupations, especially his abiding, philosophically and psychoanalytically-inflected concern with existential self-hood and identity and the fracturing of mind and body, self and other, subject and object.

The fact that this film can be elucidated along generic lines is testament not so much to Kitano's formative reliance on a pre-existing framework or model, one moreover that he had inherited as a project initiated and begun by someone else, but to the beginnings of Kitano's personalized conception and expressive use of genre. Although, as already noted, there would be a further eight years and six films until the true emergence of Kitano-as-auteur, and the international recognition of this fact, *Violent Cop* clearly points the way forward. It is, in both senses of the term, the first film by Kitano Takeshi; but even more, it is the first, foundational, film in modern Japanese cinema.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kurosawa, K quoted in D. Richie *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Kodansha International Ltd and Kodansha America, Inc. United Kingdom 2001) p.215

<sup>2</sup> Udo, T *Violent Cop* in Jacobs, B (ed) *Beat Takeshi Kitano* (Tadao Press, Great Britain, 1999) p.19

<sup>3</sup> As reported in Kitano's biography in English at [www.kitanotakeshi.com](http://www.kitanotakeshi.com) (Accessed 12/01/08) See the chapter on *Sonatine* for the full quote and attendant elucidation of this comment.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp.1-19

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> McDonald, P *Star studies* in Hollows, J & M. Jancovich (eds) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995) p.83

<sup>7</sup> Dyer, R *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Routledge, London, 1986)

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, J *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1982)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp.77-90

<sup>10</sup> Gledhill, C *Stardom: The Industry of Desire* (Routledge, London and New York, 1991) p.214

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Schilling, M *Portrait of the Patriarch as Monster* online at The Japan Times Online – <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/member/member.html?ff20041027a3.html> (Accessed 21/04/08)

<sup>13</sup> Hayward, S *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (Routledge, London, 2000) pp.352-353

<sup>14</sup> Schilling, M *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2003) p.76

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, K.I. *The Yakuza Film* in Desser, D & A. Nolletti, Jr. (eds) *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History* (Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1992) p.170

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.166

<sup>17</sup> Sato, T, Barrett, G (trans) *Currents in Japanese Cinema* (Kodansha International Ltd., Tokyo, 1982) p.51

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.184

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- <sup>19</sup> Mes, T & J. Sharp *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2005) p.56
- <sup>20</sup> Saga, J Bester, J (trans) *Confessions of a Yakuza: A Life in Japan's Underworld* (Kodansha International Ltd., United Kingdom, 1991) First published (as *Asakusa bakuto ichidai*) in 1989 by Chikuma Shobo
- <sup>21</sup> Tendo, S, Heal, L (trans) *Yakuza Moon: Memoirs of a Gangster's Daughter* (Kodansha International Ltd., United Kingdom, 2007)
- <sup>22</sup> Seymour, C *Yakuza Diary: Doing Time in the Japanese Underworld* (Grove Press, Atlantic Monthly Press, London, 1999)
- <sup>23</sup> Totaro, D *Sono Otoko kyōbo ni tsuki/Violent Cop* in Bowyer, J (ed) *The Cinema of Japan and Korea*, (Wallflower Press, Great Britain, 2004) p.136
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.132
- <sup>25</sup> Mellen, J *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan through its Cinema* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1976) p.121
- <sup>26</sup> Totaro, D in J. Bowyer (ed) *The Cinema of Japan and Korea* pp.128-136
- <sup>27</sup> Abe, C, O. Gardner, W & T. Hori (trans) *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* (Kaya Press, United States of America, 1994) pp. 46-60 - Originally published in Japanese as *Kitano Takeshi vs. Beat Takeshi* by Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., in 1994)
- <sup>28</sup> Prince, S *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1991) p.34
- <sup>29</sup> Browne, N *The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach* in Nichols, B (ed) *Movies and Methods Volume II* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1985) pp.458-475
- <sup>30</sup> See in particular Ehrlich, L.C. & D. Desser (eds) *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts of China and Japan* (University of Texas Press, Texas, USA, 1994)
- <sup>31</sup> Kerr, A *Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan* (The Penguin Group, London, 2001)
- <sup>32</sup> Smith, P *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (Random House USA Inc, USA, 1997)
- <sup>33</sup> Kerr, A *Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan* pp.161-217
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid. pp.307-334

## SONATINE [1993]

**‘It is with *Sonatine* that I had the feeling I had achieved the first stage as a director<sup>1</sup>’.** Kitano Takeshi

Along with *Hana-Bi* [1997], *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993) is the most important film in Kitano Takeshi’s oeuvre to date. It was shown at festivals in the West (where it won an award in Italy), and as such served to introduce the director to European audiences; whilst in Japan it was the film that facilitated Kitano’s decisive break from Shochiku, the studio that had produced his first two works, *Sono Otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki* (*Violent Cop*, 1989) and *San tai yon, ekkusu...Jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990). Despite public and critical indifference to *Boiling Point*, Okuyama Kazuyoshi, the maverick executive producer of *Violent Cop* and *Boiling Point* had wanted to work with Kitano again. In response to a statement by Okuyama about himself and Kitano collaborating on a Japanese version of *Die Hard*, Kitano replied that he had just such a script.

As a result, *Sonatine* was immediately green-lighted with a budget of 500 million yen (around \$4.5 million), and Kitano flew his crew out to one of the most remote of the Ryukyu islands in Okinawa Prefecture, to begin production. Importantly, this location, to which Kitano was returning after shooting much of *Boiling Point* on the same island, was only accessible via a plane that came to and from the mainland once a day. Kitano was thus left almost entirely to his own devices, and proceeded to make the film that he wanted, that he had originally intended, to make: a Japanese re-working of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le fou* [1965] (the working title of *Sonatine* had been *Pierrot Okinawa*).

At this time Shochiku was experiencing severe financial hardship, the hardship that had beset the studio for the greater part of the preceding two decades. Okuyama became frustrated that he was unable to oversee the production of a film in which he had invested a considerable amount of money: almost as much, in fact, as a top-of-the-line Japanese A-feature. This problem was then exacerbated when he saw rushes from the set, and he quickly reached the conclusion that Kitano had reneged on their deal, that he was making a markedly different film from the commercial property he believed they had agreed between themselves to produce.

According to Kitano himself, Okuyama publicly denounced the work-in-progress as 'not a movie<sup>2</sup>'; and later, when Kitano's improvisational methods had extended the location shoot and thus increased the budget, he apparently accused the director/star of auteurist ego-tripping, demanded his name as producer be taken from the credits and severed Kitano's professional ties with Shochiku. Indeed, so strained did relations become between the two that the producer allegedly kept the aforementioned fact that *Sonatine* had won the prize in Italy (at the Taormina festival) quiet from his director. Kitano learnt of his film's success only when asked about the award by an Italian journalist in Cannes some two years later.

Although disastrous for the studio (whose ailing fortunes were compounded two years hence when their flagship Tora-san film series ended following the death of its star, Atsumi Kiyoshi), *Sonatine* was a significant work for its director, for both positive and negative reasons. It facilitated the (arguably) necessary next phase of Kitano's growth as a filmmaker and artist: his permanent move into independent production and distribution. Conversely, it was with this film that the public's dismissal of Kitano on grounds of

perceived esotericism was crystallized. The aforementioned reaction to Kitano's early work by many Japanese, who had become overly familiar with his persona as a lowbrow television personality, was one of indifference at best, and at worst outright dismissal. Okuyama, who lost his job as Shochiku's head of production in large part as a direct result of *Sonatine's* commercial failure, contributed to this reaction against Kitano with his very public denunciations of his actor/director's rampant, egotistic and self-consciously magniloquent authorial aspirations.

Okuyama had produced some of Shochiku's biggest hits of the late 1980s/early 1990s, including the hugely popular *Hachikō Monogatari* (*The Story of Hachi the Dog*, 1987), and *Tōki Rakujitsu* (*Faraway Sunset*, 1992), a biopic of the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Noguchi Hideyo. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, he had as a producer a considerable public profile (he has been described as 'a slight man, with a mild, soft-spoken public manner [and] a flair for self-promotion<sup>3</sup>'). On many trailers, including those for Kitano's *Boiling Point* and *Sonatine*, such that his was one of the (often very few) behind-the-scenes names prominently identified; as, say, Jerry Bruckheimer or Joel Silver might be in contemporary Hollywood films.

Thus, the Japanese public were aware of him and the work he had done. Given his popular filmography and status as a recognisable figure, it would not be unlikely that they would pay attention to what he had to say. Furthermore, with the fact that Kitano's films since *Violent Cop* had been commercially unsuccessful, many Japanese would not have required a great deal of convincing that his work for the cinema was esoteric and 'not a movie' (that is, not a movie they would want to see).

Amid such industrial conflict, *Sonatine* emerged as, and today arguably remains, the most demanding and difficult film in Kitano's oeuvre. Its status as such is compounded by another, complementary discourse of conflict and opposition: the contrary, obfuscating and dichotomous opinions that have sprung up around it, and which seem representative now of the limitations inherent not simply in commentary on this film, but on Kitano's work in general.

*Sonatine* is thus an ideal text to begin to understand and elucidate the complexities and significance of Kitano's authorship. As mentioned, then, there are a number of competing, seemingly mutually exclusive readings of *Sonatine*, not the least of which are those by the director himself. The quotation at the head of this chapter suggests the extent to which Kitano's fourth film was something of a milestone, a turning point, in his progression as a director: a work that, as one commentator has paraphrased the director, stands as 'the first film of his (Kitano's) where one can sense he is in control of the medium<sup>4</sup>'.

The notion that this is because Kitano believes *Sonatine* to signal the film with which he attained technical proficiency would appear to be borne out by its enigmatic title. According to him, *Sonatine* is a musical term meaning 'little sonata,' and is most often used to describe educational compositions with which one gains a rudimentary confidence in one's practice:

**'When learning to play the piano, one studies various types of pieces. When one acquires the basic knowledge of these pieces, one has reached sonatine. It's not really control, but it marks the end of the first stage of training<sup>5</sup>'.**

However, such an assertion is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the work itself; as indeed is Kitano's similar proclamation that it is the easiest of his films to understand<sup>6</sup>. If one accepts that the first stage as a director would be to understand and demonstrate proficiency in one's craft (and what else could it mean), then these comments would seem to invite a response that constructs *Sonatine* as a far more conventional film than it in fact is. In other words, given his description of its place within his directorial development, it may be thought of as representing the film with which Kitano begins to overcome the supposed limitations inherent in his heretofore ongoing education in filmmaking: a honing of his basic skills as a director and attainment of a veneer of professional (read: basic, conventional film language and grammar) technique.

Kitano would later return to an educational metaphor when describing *Hana-Bi* four years later, likening his seventh film to a university examination. One can thus say that he was conscious of the fact that he entered into filmmaking with no prior experience: that he had learnt, as it were, on the job. One may also surmise that, perhaps owing to several commercial failures – ultimately compounded by *Sonatine's* inability to recoup even 100 million Yen from its 500 million budget – Kitano was becoming uncertain of his continuing viability, even worth, as a director, and as such was put in the invidious position of trying too hard to sell a product he knew only too well would in all likelihood fare badly at the box office.

The apparent indifference of the Japanese public to his films was also, contrary to popular opinion, a further point of increasing frustration and regret for Kitano (something that may well help explain his decision in the wake of *Sonatine* to attempt a 'Beat'

Takeshi film with *Minnā-Yatteruka/Getting Any?* [1994])<sup>i</sup>. As such, he became despondent and dejected with his career. To the extent that his composer, Hisaishi Joe, said: 'I feel that "Sonatine" showed that he (Kitano) was tired of living<sup>7</sup>', something given further credence by Kitano's erratic behaviour at the time: his excessive drinking and his incessant talk of death and suicide. 'I want to die', he is reported to have said on numerous occasions to the members of his *Gundan*, or army<sup>8</sup>, and he almost did less than a year after completing *Sonatine*, when a scooter accident in Shinjuku left him with serious head injuries that required nearly two months intensive hospital treatment.

Whatever the reasons for Kitano's comments about the film, it is accurate to say that, if anything, the obverse of what he says holds true. Far from a summation of his supposed learning of the craft of filmmaking (which in any case one would struggle to see at work in his previous film, *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi/A Scene at the Sea* [1991]), *Sonatine* is in fact Kitano's most subversive work. In it, he rigorously undermines and transgresses the (markedly generic) foundations on which the narrative is predicated. He ruthlessly reduces his Yakuza plot to a series of blank, affectless and violent encounters that are treated as limiting and overtly performative, instead laying inordinate stress on the dead time spent playing games on the beach; Moreover, he ensures from the beginning (with the scene in which Murakawa drowns an uncooperative worker who has refused to pay him) that his protagonist is a remote and almost wholly closed and remote figure.

Similarly, the film's style, as Aaron Gerow has demonstrated in detail<sup>9</sup>, explodes any stable sense of transparency or of a cogent narrated diegesis. Kitano's editing in

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<sup>i</sup>I was told recently by the Japanese filmmaker and critic Fujiwara Toshi that, in his opinion, Kitano has always lamented the fact that popular acceptance of his films in Japan has only sporadically been forthcoming.

particular remains systematically ambiguous with regard to POV shots and spatial orientation. As Chuck Stephens notes: 'Kitano's wilfully mismatched eye-line cues and baffling non-reaction shots further unhinge the proceedings, mimicking the yakuza shell-game of loyalty and betrayal with an ongoing series of gazes that only seem to unify an always uncertain space<sup>10</sup>.'

Yet Kitano's comment is merely one of a competing nexus of perspectives that co-exist and surround the film. In addition to, and contradistinction of, his comments about *Sonatine*'s proficient craft (which was echoed in some quarters, to the extent even of branding it his most conventional work), Kitano has variously described the film as an artistic accomplishment, and one that was bound to fail as a commercial product<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, he has recently looked back to his early Yakuza films, particularly *Sonatine*, with professed shame. One of the aims of his recent film *Takeshis*' is to ridicule these formative films and their violent, minimalist narratives. Unsurprisingly, *Sonatine* bears the brunt of the attack. It is one of only two of Kitano's Yakuza films to be explicitly parodied: most overtly in a cheap, TV studio mock-up of an Okinawa-set suicide scene featuring Kitano as a whining gangster killing both himself and his woman, seemingly on a whim, because the cicadas are too loud and the sun is too hot.

The Japanese press book for *Sonatine* is also worth considering at this juncture. At the time of the film's release, it sweetened what was evidently feared to be a bitter pill: noting, rather apologetically, that it is necessary to be acquainted with Kitano's films before attempting to understand them. Elsewhere, the press notes for the US release implicitly reinforced this notion, attempting as they did to foreground the heroic stature of Murakawa by glossing over his wearied alienation and describing it as a typical

masculine attribute: ‘really tough guys don’t experience a lot of tension: by nature, they’re cool<sup>12</sup>’.

Other opinions of *Sonatine* were also typically mixed. Like a number of other Kitano films, it inspired both great acclaim and equally forceful scorn and derision. Among the latter, a common, pejorative charge related to the aforementioned feature of the film: that of Kitano’s treatment of simple genre material, which was thought by many to be highbrow, pretentious and mellifluous. In particular, *Japan Times* critic Mark Schilling, chief film writer for the publication in English since 1989, began his 1993 review of *Sonatine* thus:

**‘Takeshi Kitano’s *Sonatine* tries to prove that a *yakuza* movie can make a statement on the futility and emptiness of the gang life as powerful as that of the *Godfather* films. But the first adjective that sprang to mind as I watched this story of a gangster caught in a war he never wanted was “pretentious<sup>13</sup>’.**

However, *Sonatine* did have its vocal and vociferous defenders. Japan’s leading film journal, *Kinema Junpō*, which annually compiles a list of the ten greatest films of the year, rated it the fourth best work of 1993, with staff writer Otaka Hiro-o writing that on the strength of this film Kitano should be elevated above the likes of Ozu, Mizoguchi and Naruse in the pantheon of great Japanese directors<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, the critic, poet and architect Watanabe Takanobu argued that, after *Sonatine*, Kitano ‘must be called a genius<sup>15</sup>’ for the way in which he forces the audience to peer into a dark pit of human violence; a view shared by newspaper editor Ishii Makoto, who commented that his hitherto low opinion of Kitano’s work (due largely, he said, to their excessive violence)

had changed with *Sonatine*. He noted that ‘only by staring violence directly in the face could the theme of the film be realised<sup>16</sup>’. The subject of the film’s violence was also scrutinised by the critic Yomota Inuhiko in his book *Nihon Eiga Shi Hyakunen (A Hundred Years of Japanese Films)*. Although he terms the violence a ‘Necrophiliac desire<sup>17</sup>’, on the part of Kitano, he does go on to note that it is integral to the film’s artistic success.

A number of directors have also weighed in on both sides of this argument. In Japan, Ishii Teruo, veteran Yakuza filmmaker and extreme cult director of works such as *Mōjū versus issun bōshi (Blind Beast versus Killer Dwarf, 2001)* and *Neji-shiki (Wind-up Type/Screwed, 1998)*, has been dismissive of Kitano in general, saying in 2002 that his films are a sham and will not last<sup>18</sup>. Of *Sonatine*, he has said: ‘to be honest it bored me. I couldn’t understand what everyone was making a fuss about – why they thought this film was so great<sup>19</sup>’. On the other hand, Fukasaku Kinji, one of the Yakuza film’s most important figures, who has been critical of the direction in which the genre has developed in the 1990s: with the V-cinema market in particular relying on recycled formulas and action, has praised Kitano’s work. In particular, he has championed his former protégé’s desire to do something different with the Yakuza film, to introduce fresh perspectives on generic material as he himself did in the 1970s with his revolutionary *Jingi naki tatakai (Battles without Honour and Humanity)* series.

In the West, filmmakers almost immediately heralded the arrival of a great new talent. On the strength of the recent influx of Hong Kong action directors into Hollywood, spearheaded by John Woo, Kitano was hailed as the next Asian auteur defined both by violence and by stylistic and narrative refinement (after the model of Woo and others). It

was at this time that the by-now common practice of validating Kitano's artistry and authorship by comparing him to notable forebears, from both Japan and the West, began. Directors and critics invoked a host of different filmmakers - from Woo and Sam Peckinpah, to Ozu Yasujiro, Jean-Pierre Melville and Robert Bresson by way of Buster Keaton - in defining Kitano's particular style and worldview.

There was also a more active (and actively damaging) interest taken in Kitano and his work. *Sonatine* was vociferously championed by Quentin Tarantino, at a time when he had reached the zenith of the cult auteur adulation he received on the back of his first two films, *Reservoir Dogs* [1991] and *Pulp Fiction* [1994]. The newly recognised and celebrated face of the filmmaker as *cinéphile* then took it upon himself to 'present' both the film and its director to American audiences. He distributed *Sonatine* through his independent company Rolling Thunder (with his face prominently displayed on promotional material) and firmly put his name behind Kitano, much as he had done for John Woo in the past, and has more recently done for Zhang Yimou, with *Ying Xiong* (*Hero*, 2002), and for Park Chan-Wook and his international hit *Old Boy* [2003].

The context of 1980s/early 90s Hong Kong New Wave action cinema and the Tarantino-led idiom of post-modern, violent, genre-bending, a-linear American filmmaking is important here as Kitano was initially linked with this style of film and filmmaker. It stems from the perceived centrality of violence to his work (in *Empire* magazine in 2001, Kitano was profiled and described as a director who 'does violence better than almost anybody in the movies'<sup>20</sup>). This is, of course, an entirely misleading categorization: Kitano's depiction of violence is the antithesis of Woo, Ringo Lam or any director that typifies the popular 'heroic bloodshed' genre; and unlike the Japanese New

New Wave of the 1990s, who were directly influenced by Tarantino (to the extent that they have sometimes been referred to as the 'Japanese cinema after Mr. Pink' generation), he does not approach his material in a playful, self-reflexive manner or place his subjects in quotation marks.

It is primarily these comparisons that were previously identified as being able to shed light on the perceptions of Kitano and the canonization of his work. What they underline is precisely that isolated, context-less filmmakers are deeply problematic to critics. When Kitano emerged with *Sonatine*, the absence of any viable national context of Japanese filmmaking, any visible or even decipherable network of institutional norms It is perhaps also for this reason that the practice of associating Kitano with so many progenitors arose, to narrate into existence a lexicon of cinema to which he could be said to belong. Even Japanese critics approached Kitano in this way; Abe Casio's *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* contains a detailed expostulation in the introductory chapter comparing Kitano with Oshima<sup>21</sup>.

It is also one of the reasons why accounts of Kitano's work have not, thus far, been forthcoming in general film historical scholarship and criticism. He has been neglected by the likes of David Thomson and Mark Cousins in, respectively, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*<sup>22</sup> and *The Story of Film*<sup>23</sup>. More damagingly, in a recently published guide entitled *East Asian Cinema* (part of a *Kamera Books* series of introductory explications of various national cinemas, filmmakers and genres) Kitano is described as a Korean-Japanese director (famous in Korea as Choi Yang-il), responsible for the film *Where is the Moon Rising?*<sup>24</sup> Since the author, David Carter, offers a brief outline of this film, one can surmise that the director he means is, in fact, the second-generation Korean

director (and sometime assistant to Oshima) Yoichi Sai, and his film *Tsuki wa dotchi ni deteiru* (*All Under The Moon*, 1993).

This is, of course, an exceptional case. But it is nonetheless symptomatic of the lack of care and certainly of detail that has abounded in considerations of Kitano<sup>ii</sup>. It also feeds into the other reason behind his critical neglect. In a further echo of Kurosawa Akira, Kitano's success in the West has helped facilitate this lack of real engagement with his work. That is, his status as a prolific and perennial figure in the pantheon of world cinema has led to him being taken for granted as an understood, already canonized and classified, filmmaker: a known entity, someone of whom further elucidation is not required<sup>iii</sup>. Kitano himself has become increasingly aware of this state of critical affairs. The previously identified transformational nature of his work, culminating in the cathartic, self-excoriating twin peaks of *Takeshis'* and *Kantoku Banzai* (*Glory to the Filmmaker*, 2007), can be regarded as his own reaction to and against such a restrictive and limiting discourse.

This is not to contradict all views of Kitano. In particular, it is not to decry the reference to Kitano's forebears in discourse on his work, either in Japan or in the West. Indeed, he is ideally situated to examine authorship and contemporary Japanese cinema precisely because his status and the specificity of his artistry reflects and refracts a number of earlier, canonized directors, and as such allows one to trace the development of the country's filmmaking over the course of 40 or 50 years. It is, rather, to underline the extent to which he has almost consistently been perceived and positioned in ways that

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<sup>ii</sup> This glaring and unaccountable error is, unfortunately, not the only one in this layman's guide. For instance, Carter's bibliography lists Noel Burch's seminal study *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* as a collection of essays edited by Annette Michelson

<sup>iii</sup> One should also not underestimate the extent to which critics like to discover new filmmakers, especially when a reasonably new field, as Japanese cinema was in the early-mid 1990s, opens up for investigation

suit empirical practices of discourse but fail to take into account the complexities, the essentially amorphous nature, of Kitano's oeuvre.

## **Patterns of Genre and Authorship**

**'In a national popular cinema long accustomed to splatter and grand guignol, Kitano gleefully conforms<sup>25</sup>'.**

Chuck Stephens

Such a comment as the above is fairly typical of the ways in which Kitano has been represented. It usefully and pointedly crystallizes the ways in which the most visible facets of his work - his use of popular genres, emphasis on violence, presentational, elliptical style and blank, affect-less protagonists - have been misunderstood because they are prevalent features of contemporary Japanese cinema in general, and of the New New Wave in particular (the fact that they remained as such throughout the 1990s was in large part because of Kitano's influence).

In this case, there is of course a tradition of Grand Guignol filmmaking in Japan: extremes of violence, and indeed sex, became a mainstay of studio product in the 1970s as a way of cinema combating the encroachment of television, of offering a specificity of the filmic to lure audiences back into theatres and away from home entertainment. Consequently, by the 1990s, in the wake of directors such as Fukasaku Kinji, Ishii Teruo and Ishii Sogo, Kitano entered an industry in which artistry in extreme genre material had become, if not a norm, then at least a visible part of Japanese cinema.

However, to suggest that such excessive material is a pre-existing system into which Kitano neatly slots does no justice to his work<sup>26</sup>. Like Fukasaku before him, Kitano's use of extreme violence is highly idiosyncratic, differing in terms of presentation and thematic conceptualization not only across different films but also in some cases within one and same film. The fact that he has been extremely influential in this regard should not be taken as a reflection on Kitano himself. Rather, it should be accounted for with reference to the readiness with which commentators have drawn on convenient models as a means of understanding and explaining an artist's work.

In actual fact, this is a subject that resonates across a range of Japanese cultural practice, especially in its cinema: for example a film like Teshigahara Hiroshi's adaptation of Kobo Abe's *Suna no onna (Woman of the Dunes, 1964)*. This work has almost exclusively been read along universal lines, as a Sartrean existential parable of individual identity<sup>iv</sup>; in David Desser's words, 'a variation on "No Exit"<sup>27</sup>, and on the 60s notion of the 'transformation of life...into "art"<sup>28</sup>. It is also, as already stated, something that Kitano himself has begun to explore, both with *Takeshis'* and *Glory to the Filmmaker*. These are fantastical, dream (or nightmare)-like narratives predicated on Kitano's perceived problematic canonization, as a filmmaker without a viable national cinematic network behind him who has been received (both nationally and internationally) in ways that position him as artistically in competition with himself. Indeed, *Glory to the Filmmaker* makes Kitano's anomalous position clear by presenting a series of comedic episodes (in apparent response to speculation over his next film) in

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<sup>iv</sup> This particular view and its implicit denial of contemporaneous Japanese meaning has been challenged recently by Nina Cornyetz in her book *The Ethics of Aesthetics in Japanese Cinema and Literature: Polygraphic Desire* (Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2007 PP.58-63). Conversely, and ironically (as David Desser notes), the Western reaction to *Woman in the Dunes* was predicated on the fact that it came from Japan; the taste for exotic Japanese-ness that was born in the 1950s with Kurosawa, Inagaki and Mizoguchi still holding fast in the subsequent decade.

which he undertakes works in various popular genres, only to abandon them when he finds that he cannot extricate himself from the use of violence.

It is for these reasons that *Sonatine* emerges as a key text. It is a test case for Kitano, a summation not so much of his work up to the point of its production (as *Hana-Bi* would later function<sup>v</sup>), but of the extent to which one can use it to begin to map out a nexus of intersecting approaches to authorship that impact upon Kitano, Japanese cinema and contemporary debates about the auteur in film. The very fact that a number of seemingly contradictory, mutually exclusive, perceptions and opinions have built up around *Sonatine* actually underlines the amorphous, shifting nature of Kitano's authorial identity. One needs to consider later texts, particularly *Hana-Bi* and those from *Zatoichi* [2003] onward, in order to fully understand and elucidate the myriad tenets of Kitano's auteur status. However, the most historically prevalent and visible, and also the most fiercely contested, constructions of authorship find succinct expression within *Sonatine*.

The romantic conception of the director as author straining against convention, against the strictures of industrial and commercial confinement is very much to the fore in the ultimately very public conflict with Okuyama and Shochiku. This approach has been labelled by Janet Staiger as 'authorship as personality'<sup>29</sup>: the director's agency entailing both 'causal force (and)...personal idiosyncrasy'<sup>30</sup> in determining the meaning and effect of a film. As is clear from the above account of *Sonatine's* genesis, Kitano's fourth film is the closest he has come in his career (excepting, of course, *Violent Cop* and *Zatoichi*) to taking on a studio project. He in fact had another project at hand at this time, a script

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<sup>v</sup> One Japanese critic, Sadao Yamane, argued at the time of the film's release that *Sonatine* did in fact sum up what had preceded it in Kitano's fledgling oeuvre. But his proposition developed little beyond highlighting the mixture of violence and yakuza gangs (from *Violent Cop* and *Boiling Point*) and the primary setting of the beach (*A Scene at the Sea*).

called *Fractal* (which later became *Takeshis*'), but struggled to get it in production due to its esoteric and overtly enigmatic narrative. Although Kitano wrote the script for *Sonatine*, the project itself was initiated by Okuyama, and was undertaken as a commercial Yakuza film, a potential major hit (signified in the considerable budget) in the now resurgent genre. However, he immediately rallied against the strictures entailed in this method of major studio filmmaking. Like Nicholas Ray or Samuel Fuller (or, for that matter, early Godard), he proceeded to experiment with the material whilst shooting, and to use a variety of means to effect a subversion of the generic precept (the number of reviewers who have commented on the film's pretentiousness reflects this authorial perception).

Another of the most pressing constructions of the auteur pertaining to the study of Kitano, especially with regard to *Sonatine*, is the Peter Wollen model of authorial Cine-structuralism<sup>31</sup>. In this conception it is the director as artist as opposed to auteur that is interrogated, and in which value is placed not simply on commonality of style or theme across the range of a director's work. Rather, the emphasis lies in what Wollen terms the 'esoteric structure'<sup>32</sup>: that is, the specific instances wherein the structural antinomies governing an authorial signature are variegated and subject to development and innovation. It is this model that allows Wollen to prize Ford over Hawks: because, as he says, the 'shifting relation between antinomies'<sup>33</sup>, that governs the true artist's development, antinomies that change positions or emphasis over time, can be seen at work only in Ford.

As has already been inferred (and which will be made clear in the work on *Hana-Bi*), Kitano's is a cinema predicated on a series of structured antinomies. This began in

*Violent Cop*, but even by the time of *Sonatine*, one can see a marked change in Kitano's directorial approach, one bound up with the above noted commerciality of the film's beginning. Already in *Sonatine* the emphasis on action and acting bound up within *Violent Cop*, that then progressed to a tension between acting (in both senses of the term) and watching, performance and spectatorship, in both *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990) and *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi* (*A Scene at the Sea*, 1991) has notably progressed and developed.

In *Boiling Point*, this antinomy is located within the protagonist, whose struggles to play and to fit in with a local baseball team inform his subsequent individuality and unilateral decision making. In *A Scene at the Sea*, this dichotomy is of a different order. It is enacted in the person of two characters, a deaf and mute surfer and his similarly afflicted and handicapped girlfriend. She repeatedly accompanies him to the beach and dutifully watches him practice, whilst he takes her for granted and rarely if ever appears to appreciate her support, so in thrall is he to his sport and his betterment, his performance.

With *Sonatine*, as will subsequently be explored, this particular antinomy undergoes a further revision, in that Murakawa (at least in the Okinawa section of the film) assumes the role of spectator, of the watcher whose gaze falls on others rather than others looking at him, as they do in the opening section when his visibility as a yakuza boss puts him very much on display. Indeed, in the opening shot of the film, he walks through a room into a Mahjong parlour and is observed by a worker who watches him carefully as he proceeds through the space of the bar and into a back room.

In subsequent films, this antinomy will undergo further revisions, in line with both psychoanalytical and existential precepts. What is important here is that, even as early as his fourth film, one is not engaged in an act of simply tracing rigid and set-in-stone commonalities across Kitano's body of work, uncovering the consciously-formed meanings that Kitano has layered into his material to be excavated. Rather, one has to contend with an ever-shifting structure of dichotomies that progress along with Kitano's progression, his development as an artist and an auteur in the fullest, most complete (and most useful) sense of the term.

This is a concept of the author that is particularly useful to stress here because at its heart there is an implicit assertion that the author him/herself may not be fully cognisant of the thematic continuities that pervade their work. Defined by Janet Staiger as an 'authorship-as-signature'<sup>34</sup> approach to the auteur, this is the most prevalent structuralist challenge to the prevailing constructions of cinematic authorship. It postulates that the artist's commonalities remain unconscious because of the place of the individual author within a site of historical contexts and discourses of cultural as opposed to personal expression. Various commentators (such as Stephen Heath and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in addition to Wollen) have expounded on its use value; and even, in the case of Nowell-Smith's study of Luchino Visconti<sup>35</sup>, applied it to auteur criticism.

This is of particular interest to the study of Kitano because it underlines the extent to which he, as a specifically 1990s Japanese director (working at a certain socio-historical juncture: one of post-bubble economy decline and social disintegration), was shaped by the context in which his work was born. It is a feature of auteur revision that helps to emphasise the fact that artists of any description cannot and do not work in a vacuum,

and find it impossible control or define the ways in which their work can be read or consumed. More recently, Kitano's self-excoriating film *Takeshis*' is about this very lack of agency with regard to his cinematic canon, when Kitano's screen alter-ego rises against him. This will be examined in detail later, with regard both to *Takeshis*' itself and Kitano's post-*Hana-Bi* reinvention as an overtly Japanese filmmaker. For now the point to highlight is the complex agency of 1990s Japan that has fed into Kitano's cinema and contributed to a vision of and from his country that should not be attributed to his conscious authorial personality.

Taking this approach a step further, into the rarefied waters of post-structuralism and the death of the author, *Sonatine* is the perfect text within which to extrapolate an approach to Kitano as post-structuralist, specifically Barthesian, auteur. Describing the contemporary author as lacking both agency and continuity, Roland Barthes commented that:

**'The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers (sic) of culture...the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings...does he wish to *express himself*, he out at least to know that the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary<sup>36</sup>'.**

From this perspective, *Sonatine* is significant because, as will be argued in the next section of this chapter, it is a film (like *Pierrot le fou* before it) that makes specific play with its status as a genre film featuring generic characters. That is, it foregrounds the fact that it is imitating certain anterior gestures, working within a frame of reference that has encoded and delimited its salient narrative traits. Kitano then works with this 'ready-

formed dictionary' of characters and action in order to make certain points about them and the world of the film; and in so doing creates a dual-diegesis in which the protagonist Murakawa begins to be defined as a film director as well as a yakuza, a ringleader increasingly unable to assert control over the incidents and meanings (the world outside the liminal space of the beach) that flood into his actions. As such, *Sonatine* foregrounds, narrativizes, a post-structural paradigm that begins to point to Kitano as a modern as well as a traditional auteur figure.

These varying concepts of filmic authorship, in addition to the satirical view of the commerce of the auteur foregrounded in *Getting Any?* highlight the myriad ways that Kitano explicates auteurism not only in the cinema, but in his cinema. Indeed, prefiguring recent works like *Takeshis'* and *Glory to the Filmmaker*, it also demonstrates the extent to which he himself has become all too aware of his own authorial status, something that will later be cemented with *Hana-Bi* and its explicit presentation of 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 7'.

### **The Art of *Sonatine***

**'*Sonatine* is only a gangster movie in the same sense that Moby Dick is only a book about hunting whales and the Mona Lisa is only a painting of a woman with a wry smile on her face<sup>37</sup>.'** Tommy Udo

Filmmakers in Japan have traditionally been, and today are still, more or less obliged to work within the boundaries of genre cinema. The country has no tradition of art cinema: even the New Wave was born within studio and genre filmmaking, and its subsequently

radical texts – the fragmented narratives and bold, self-reflexive conflation of theatrical and discursive styles that characterised the experimental work of Oshima and Yoshida - were entirely anterior productions. They originated in a company, the Japan Arts Theatre Guild, which had exhibited European art-cinema productions, and latterly had begun to concentrate on indigenous filmmakers with comparable artistry and non-commerciality. Even as distinctive a director as Ozu, who ostensibly seems to have worked in complete freedom in refining his unique style and thematic core over the course of at least three decades, was only able to do so because he worked within a popular generic tradition, the *Gendai-geki*, or contemporary life home drama, that would typically perform well at the box office. To underline this point, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, acclaimed by many as the greatest Japanese director working today, has repeatedly asserted that, for him, genre always comes first: that it is the starting point, the foundation, for all his films.

As a result, Japan has one of the most refined systems of genre cinema of any nation: a cache of directors (of various different generations) whose manipulation of generic material stands beside the formulaic works that comprise the bulk of the recently reinvigorated production aspect of filmmaking. Within this milieu, the Yakuza genre has been of particular visibility. Indeed, by 1997, the year in which Kitano won the Golden Lion at Venice with *Hana-Bi* and Mochizuki Rokuro took the best director accolade at the *Kinema Junpō* awards in Japan for his proto-classical *Jitsuroku* Yakuza drama *Onibi* (*Onibi: The Fire Within*, 1997), it had taken its place amongst the pre-eminent Japanese generic entities. It was the form of choice for many established and emergent auteurs in the industry, and in fact began to become a canvas for more idiosyncratic directors (such

as Aoyama Shinji, Yaguchi Shinobu, Ishii Katsuhito and Sabu) to implement their authorship and singularity.

Kitano himself is central to such an artistic approach to working within genre cinema, and it is with *Sonatine* that this (little commented on<sup>vi</sup>) facet of his work comes most overtly to the fore. The significance of *Sonatine* both to Kitano's oeuvre as a whole and to the life and death Yakuza trilogy in general can be seen by the fact that, with regard to the former, it represents the crucial stepping stone between the largely generic identity of *Violent Cop* and the authorial, artistic expressivity of *Hana-Bi*. From the point of view of the latter, following *Violent Cop's* broadly generic framework and *Boiling Point's* irreverent Yakuza (and self)-parody, *Sonatine* was Kitano's first film to really take genre as a serious point of departure in asserting an authorial identity in his work. Kent Jones implies as much when he notes that 'Kitano the artist made his first appearance with *Sonatine*<sup>38</sup>'. Furthermore, the film's ongoing importance can be seen by its inclusion (the only Kitano film to be so honoured) in Platinum Classics and Shochiku Co., Ltd's *Century of Japanese Cinema* series on DVD.

Kitano, along with Kurosawa and Miike, is a prominent example of a filmmaker working within the parameters of genre cinema and adapting its ostensible contours, even confines, to suit his/her own thematic ends. It is here that the aforementioned significance of his films - and of *Sonatine* in particular - resides. Kitano's conception of genre has, typically, tended to transform along with the genre in which he has been working. His use of the Yakuza film is thus of paramount importance as it affords the opportunity to

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<sup>vi</sup> Despite the importance of Kitano's films, Miike and Mochizuki continue to be identified as the decade's (1990s) pre-eminent Yakuza filmmakers

observe and scrutinize different approaches to, and manipulations of, very similar material.

In *Violent Cop*, the tenets of the 1970s *Jitsuroku eiga* are by and large straightforwardly presented, with the sub-genre's typical stoic if flawed lone yakuza among capitalist wolves reconfigured as Kitano's Detective Azuma. He then has to fight the yakuza, who are nothing but cutthroat businessmen whose involvement in gangster activity extends little beyond hiring killers to do their bidding. He must also, again as Sugawara Bunta and Takakura Ken had to do in the 1970s, come into direct conflict with his own corrupt colleagues and antagonistic superiors.

By way of distinction, in the later *Hana-Bi*, the basic (albeit modified and placed by Kitano in quotation marks) narrative model comes from the earlier, 1960s, *Ninkyō Yakuza* era. This sub-set owed much to the samurai film (something Kitano alludes to in his use of traditional symbolism redolent of a samurai's death) and was characterised by a good, traditional yakuza in conflict with a gang, as Nishi is in *Hana-Bi*. The (often lone) protagonist would then beat the rival gang by himself and emerge victorious, frequently with a partner by his side. This was usually someone whose romantic partnership with the hero has been forged during the course of the narrative; and once again is presented in Kitano's film in the development of the relationship between Nishi and his wife, their mutual repairing and building anew their closeness.

*Sonatine*, by way of contrast, follows Godard's (rather than Melville's) lead by merely alluding to the ghost of genre on the periphery of the film, but continually subverting and distorting its structural significance. In this model, Kitano reconstitutes genre as a meta-narrative, an ultimately meaningless performance enacted by a protagonist who has tired

of gang life and cannot engage in any way other than the physical with the conflict that intrudes into his life. The mechanics of the plot thus become a rote performance, a blank, mechanical working through of motions without emotions. The fact that Kitano presents one of the most familiar staples of the Yakuza film - that of rival gangs involved in a turf war - reinforces the sense of a hollow enactment of a plot that is performed by actors.

This is typified most overtly in the shootout that occurs in a bar following Murakawa's gang's arrival in Okinawa. In this scene, a gunfight erupts abruptly between Murakawa's men and a rival gang, with both sets of yakuza simply standing entirely still, firing their guns at each with barely a facial expression to betray the merest hint of emotional involvement, either of fear or excitement. Ultimately, violence engenders no different level of engagement than drinking in the bar in the first place. They are simply going through the motions of characters in a genre film, in this case the set-in-stone strictures of the Yakuza narrative.

This style is then crystallized at the end of the film, in the shootout that completes the generic thread of the yakuza turf war plot. This dénouement, like *Hana-Bi*, appropriates the stock climax of the *Ninkyō* Yakuza form and has Murakawa taking on an entire gang all by himself. It is, in effect, a replay of the scene in *Boiling Point*, when 'Beat' Takeshi's unhinged yakuza boss Uehara guns down several rival gangsters in a room. In that scene, Kitano depicted the violence in detail, even using slow motion to emphasise its graphic, almost celebratory nature (it is, of course, the day dream of the young protagonist).

However, in *Sonatine*, Kitano entirely subverts the scene by remaining by and large outside the office in which the set piece takes place, concentrating on the gunfire

illuminating the darkness of the interior. Even when there are shots taken inside the office, they simply repeat the effect of showing the blacked out room lit by bursts of machine gun fire. Ultimately, Kitano builds up to an expected scene of generic action, only to frustrate its function as spectacle and deny even its narrative import by presenting it as part of a condensed sequence (almost a montage, in fact) of plot exegesis that feels ostensibly rushed and overly-compressed beside the languorous scenes of idling and playing on the beach. The implication is thus that action such as this is not only generic to the point of being beneath conventional representation, but is felt as such by the protagonist – it is a performance of duty by a man whose personal irrelevance is then felt by his subsequent suicide.

This manner of de-centralising not simply genre but also plot will be a recurrent feature of a number of Kitano's later works. It was something that first appeared in the dream narrative of *Boiling Point*; but with *Sonatine* takes on more thematic significance, as the Beckettian precept of the predominance of dead time is successively layered into the film. Quite apart from the time devoted to game playing on the beach, and the similar scenes of performance (the attempts of various members of the gang to learn a traditional theatrical performance) and indeed boredom (the two yakuza waiting for the rain in order to wash their hair) on the part of the characters, the film emphasises numerous quotidian details. The journey to the beach once in Okinawa, for instance, is depicted at inordinate length entirely incommensurate to the narrative information that is relayed. This in turn relates to the film's emphasis on life as flux, as a process, against which Murakawa's role as a master of ceremonies in the game playing that occupies much of the Okinawa section is a reaction, an attempt to assert a measure of control.

This, then, is chiefly where aspects of performance enter into *Sonatine*. Murakawa's behaviour in Okinawa, especially in the stay at the beach, constitutes a performative spectacle that overtly situates and positions his presence as an object of the audience's gaze. This particular aspect of his existence and identity whilst at the beach in Okinawa acts as a correlative to the main plot: the fact that he merely plays at and goes through the motions of being a yakuza as a consequence of becoming so emotionally drained by gang life.

However, there is a reversal as *Sonatine* enters its prolonged, Beckettian section of protracted inactivity and narrative ennui. There is an exchange between two different modes, wherein one kind of performative existence is exchanged for another: a transformation from Murakawa's indifferent acting to the involved, celebratory, almost childlike playacting of his underlings. Kitano stresses this in a structure that stresses repeated actions and motifs, the most pressing with regard to the above being the scenes depicting the classical performance that is first attended by the characters early in their stay in Okinawa, and which is then performed by several of them in their hut by the beach. As the film develops, this is extended to include the beach itself. Like *A Scene at the Sea* before it, the beach in *Sonatine* is reconfigured as a stage, an eternal arena of playing in which Murakawa's role as master of ceremonies, as a director and a spectator of action rather than participant in it.

The infamous, divisive sumo wrestling scene also becomes key to this thematic, as it is here that 'Beat' Takeshi becomes a pro-filmic correlative of Kitano Takeshi the director. The scene begins with the characters playing with paper men, who they move by banging the space around them. The game then moves out onto the beach, where Ken and

his Okinawan counterpart Ryoji initiate what is at first an actual bout of sumo wrestling. However, it soon transforms into a human version of the game with paper fighters, as Murakawa and the others begin banging the ground around the wrestling circle, and Ryoji and Ken become as paper dolls, moving jerkily and haphazardly to the vibrations on the sand. They are thus transfigured as mere puppets before the control of Murakawa, much as all the characters themselves are likewise before the idiosyncratic genre subversion of Kitano.

This is further underlined in the scene in which, following a rainstorm that has caught out Murakawa and Miyuki (the girl who was being raped and who, following Murakawa's killing of her attacker, begins to accompany the yakuza at the beach), they take shelter amongst trees. Here, she removes her top and exposes her breasts for Murakawa, who reacts simply as he did when he saw her being raped: he stares at her, before making a joke that is itself a doubling, a repeat of an earlier line by Miyuki. When they are out together, she says that she likes tough men, and that it's great that he is not afraid of killing people. Faced with her nakedness a short time later, Murakawa can only retort: 'it's great not to be afraid of showing your tits'.

Kitano employs POV editing to emphasise Murakawa looking, with all the shots of Miyuki standing in front of him, both before and after she removes her shirt, being taken from his optical POV. This manner of decoupage stands in overt contradistinction both to the earlier *Violent Cop* and the later *Hana-Bi*. In these films, the lack of subjectivity on the part of their respective protagonists, Azuma and Nishi, is emphasised through a lack of their (in Mulvian terms<sup>39</sup>) explicit or controlling gaze and a concomitant refusal of POV shots from their optical perspective.

However, in *Sonatine*, one is given Murakawa's point of view shots, but only sporadically. As alluded to earlier, the editing of *Sonatine* is amongst Kitano's most explicitly complex and abstruse, and the use of POV shooting is paramount in this regard. One of the clearest instances occurs relatively early in Murakawa's gang's stay at the beach house that comprises the majority of the narrative. Murakawa, unable to sleep, ventures out at night. He stands on the beach and looks beyond the frame, off-screen left. This is followed by what appears to be a corresponding POV shot of a car approaching. However, it is subsequently revealed to be behind Murakawa when the car pulls up behind him in the ensuing shot.

There then follows a series of shots that detail the aforementioned attempted rape of Miyuki. A man drags her, screaming, from the car, and Murakawa turns to watch as he begins to rape her on the beach. In five successive shots, Kitano cuts between Murakawa looking on and the assault itself. The first three shots following the aforementioned obfuscation of the POV structure show the man forcing the woman onto the beach in long shot, Murakawa staring blankly at them, and then the set-up of the long POV shot is repeated as the man begins to rape the woman.

Immediately after this, though, Kitano begins once again to obfuscate the space of the scene. The film cuts again to Murakawa: however this time, in contradistinction to the earlier medium, slightly high-angle and marginally off-axis (to the right) shot, he is now in medium close-up and, the angle of view having lowered and the camera positioned frontally, is staring into the lens. The subsequent shot again shows the rape in progress in what would, without the inter-cut shots of Murakawa, have been an axial edit: the man and woman now in medium-shot but from the same angle of view. Finally, there is a

mirror image of shot 2, with the camera framing Murakawa from the same slightly elevated angle and this time to the left of the axis of action governing the scene.

As contrasted with the first section of the film, then, there emerges a tension within *Sonatine* between looking and acting, watching and performing, and this is reflected in the editorial friction between looking with and looking at the protagonist. Murakawa becomes stranded between the two, something that is underlined almost immediately following the characters' arrival at the beach in Okinawa. Here, Murakawa initiates a supposed game of Russian roulette, before later dreaming that he puts a gun to his head and kills himself. This then becomes a reality at the end of the film, when Murakawa does indeed drive along the road leading away from the beach (where he had earlier crashed with Miyuki: another doubling of scenes), pulls over and kills himself with a shot to the head.

One can relate *Sonatine* profitably to the work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett's theatre of the absurd haunts *Sonatine* in an especially revealing manner. Most obvious in this regard is the notion of waiting. Murakawa in Okinawa simply waits: he waits both for information and instructions regarding the clan war that is his reason for being there, and he waits for death. With the game playing, then, Murakawa is marking time in a nether world that is both literally in-between (Okinawa remains in transnational conflation, as America retains a military presence on this remote Japanese island) and figuratively so, a world away from the life of the yakuza as seen in Tokyo but which is not yet death. Not yet, but which is clearly a disguised Dantean inferno on the road to that finality (in contradistinction to another prominent portrait of waiting, of a limbo between life and

death, in 1990s Japanese cinema: the school in Kore'eda Hirokazu's *Wandafuru Raifu/After Life* [1998]).

Waiting also frequently entails game playing in Beckett. As Michael Worton<sup>40</sup> has noted, chess often figures in his plays, and his characters are conceived of as players in a never-ending, circuitous acting out of a present in which they are torn, as Murakawa is, between a past that never was and an 'unlocatable'<sup>41</sup> future that may well never be. The concept of no past is an especially apposite and reflective example of Kitano's Beckettian design. Murakawa, like a number of other Kitano protagonists (both from the Yakuza films, *Violent Cop* in particular, and from others, such as *A Scene at the Sea*), is cast forth into the world of the film as an entity with no prior existence, no back-story to ascertain or expositional story to relate. He simply walks into a shot and a story that is already in *medias res*, an entity with no past, cast adrift into an unstable future that becomes a protracted dance, or game, with death.

As the chapter on *Violent Cop* suggested, game playing also has a strong psychoanalytical aspect. Worton makes reference to Freud's conception of the Fort/Da game, which is a means for the infant to assert in play (in the throwing of a reel of cotton and then retrieving it) an overt mastery of the body and the world denied it elsewhere in its existence. As already noted, the games on the beach that Murakawa initiates as a ringleader, work along similar lines: here, though, it is less his own body than the world around him that he seeks to control, something that is explicitly negated when the film returns to a number of the beach locations following the credits, connoting not simply the place of Murakawa's (albeit illusory) repose, but more significantly the continued existence and beauty of the world following his death.

Such an explicit characterisation of Murakawa as an infant recalls *Violent Cop*. Even more than that film's protagonist, Detective Azuma, *Sonatine*'s weary gangster struggles with language, something that underlines the psychoanalytical dimension and that is made clear in the opening scene. As Murakawa berates the proprietor of a Mahjong parlour, the man stoically waves away his threats, calling him stupid. To this, Murakawa responds by petulantly saying 'you are the stupid thing', an impulsive and infantile retort that demonstrates his lack of language capability and lack of mastery of himself and his surroundings.

Shortly thereafter, when Murakawa exacts (ostensible) retribution on the same man by hanging him from a crane and plunging him into a river, the protagonist's essential childishness once again surfaces. Here he becomes akin to a child torturing an insect by pulling off its wings or legs, looking on in morbid curiosity and almost studious indifference more than in aggression or revenge. The man is, ultimately, not really killed outright by malicious design. Rather, it is as a consequence of Murakawa being distracted during a conversation and forgetting to pull his victim out of the water that he dies. Indeed, one would imagine that, since he is trying to exact continuing sums of money from this man, Murakawa would not wish him dead (although one may see this point as helping to characterise Murakawa as a man wearied and defeated by his violent yakuza life: i.e. he does not care any longer about his profession).

Rather than this serving to prefigure the latter Okinawa section of *Sonatine*, with Murakawa erroneously attempting to exert control over his world, this relates instead to the existentialism of Kitano's Yakuza films, principally to the question of choice. Again here the spectre of *Violent Cop* presents itself, as Murakawa's wearied, emotionless

protagonist echoes Detective Azuma. However, where questions of action and inaction were brought to bear in the earlier film, in this key scene in *Sonatine*, Murakawa does not make, and one feels has not in advance made, a definite choice one way or another: whether to kill the man or not. The implication at this point is that whether he in fact dies or does not is of no consequence. Decision on Murakawa's part is removed from the equation, placing him in an existential impasse that is even more pronounced than was Azuma's in *Violent Cop*.

This then underlines the characterisation of Murakawa as an infant. If either option at a moment of choice and decision is as good or as bad as the other, then action, inaction and (in the Sartrean model) responsibility lose any inherent meaning and control is wrested from the protagonist. Thus is the Okinawa section of *Sonatine* realized as a site of performance where, away from the serious life and death business of the urban yakuza, Murakawa can assert a measure of childlike, illusory control and establish a series of games in which he acts as ringleader.

Ultimately, the concept of performance cements this particular thematic. The playing and performing of the other characters, both in the games on the beach and in the sporadic scenes when traditional dancing is seen and taken part in, contrast with Murakawa. These performances have a protean vitality, a carnival imperative of renewal and regeneration (apparent most overtly in the fact they bring together as friends the previously distant pair of Ken and Ryoji). Murakawa, on the other hand, performs only when he is thrust into action, into acting, when gang enmity encroaches towards the end of the film, and the concept of genre as performance is re-inscribed as the plot to wipe out Murakawa's gang begins to be put into practice. When the boss of the gang Murakawa

has come to Okinawa to help is killed, it is visualised in slow motion in a static, frontal composition that clashes with the previous high-angle, diagonal shot that details the meeting before it ends in death. In other words, from an inherently cinematic shot – taken from a crane and looking down on the action – Kitano cuts to proto-typical proscenium shot, looking straight at the action as if taken in a theatre. The slow motion then makes an exaggerated spectacle of their deaths, an over-the-top performance of violence that will return Murakawa back to his own generic acting out of his ritualistic plot.

This precept is presented even more explicitly with the introduction of the killer who will assassinate Ken on the beach and finally end the game-playing idyll of the characters. The very first shot of this man is another frontal composition, in which he is immobile, staring straight at the camera, something that lasts for a couple of seconds before he turns and walks left to right towards the beach. This oblique, presentational aesthetic is redolent of nothing so much as an actor waiting in the wings for his cue to action, before receiving it and making his way onto the stage of the beach, to initiate a transference from one mode of playing for another.

When the turf war plot begins again, the fact that Murakawa's final performance, the killing of the gang in the hotel, takes place in complete darkness is pointedly significant. If one follows the conception of genre-as-performance and conceives of this dénouement as the acting out of an allotted role within a prescriptive Yakuza narrative, the blackout in this location is connotative precisely of not being seen. That is, it frustrates the command of lights, camera, action, by specifically denying the first two pre-requisites to acting. For Murakawa it is lights out, camera gone; and only then is there, can there be, action. It is

an apt way of realizing the one meaningful activity undertaken by this man in the whole narrative.

*Sonatine* remains a key film in understanding the specificity of Kitano's art. It encompasses a concise elucidation of his thematic concerns, his approach to genre, his importance within modern studies and conceptions of the auteur and his particular vision, his existentialist theatre of the absurd in which characters-as-actors exhibit performative identities that mask their fundamentally lacking sense of self. It also marked a great leap forward for Kitano's career as well as his filmmaking, being the film that induced not only Kitano's variegated reputations (negative in Japan, very positive and celebratory in Europe), but also the specificity of his authorship, the fact that he elucidates a number of constructions of the cinematic auteur and has himself been compared to a number of others. It is certainly a difficult film, and has proved divisive in both Japan and the West. One feels now that it was a cathartic work, a film that Kitano needed to purge himself of as much as create, spew forth more than direct (the fact that, as *Takeshis'* attests, he now looks back on it with less than fond recall underlines this point). However, whether it marked a death wish on Kitano's part is less significant than its lasting impact, which cannot be denied or underestimated.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kitano, T quoted in the biography section of his official website KitanoTakeshi.com: <http://www.kitanotakeshi.com/kitanobio.html> (Accessed 16/09/08) p.13

<sup>2</sup> Okuyama, K quoted in the biography section of Kitano's official website: KitanoTakeshi.com: <http://www.kitanotakeshi.com/kitanobio.html> (Accessed 16/09/08) p.12

<sup>3</sup> Schilling, *M Contemporary Japanese Film* (Weatherhill, Inc., Great Britain, 1999) p.25

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.11

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p.14

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- <sup>6</sup> Referenced by Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* (British Film Institute, London, 2007) p.102
- <sup>7</sup> Hisaishi, J quoted in the biography section of Kitano's official website: KitanoTakeshi.com: <http://www.kitanotakeshi.com/kitanobio.html> (Accessed 16/09/08) p.12
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* pp.107-116
- <sup>10</sup> Stephens, C *Comedy Plus Massacre Film Comment*, vol.37 no.1 (Jan/Feb 1995) p.34
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted on Gerow, A *Kitano Takeshi* p.102
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Stephen, C *Comedy Plus Massacre* p.34
- <sup>13</sup> Schilling, M *Sonatine* review in *Contemporary Japanese Film* p.341
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Morton, L *Modern Japanese Culture: The Insider View* (Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2003) p.236
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Yomota, I *Nihon eiga shi hyakunen* (Shūeisha Shinsho, Tokyo, 2000) p.228
- <sup>18</sup> Ishii, T interviewed by Mark Schilling in May 2002, published in Schilling, M *The Yakuza Movie Book* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2003) p.68
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Kennedy, C *My Bloody Valentine: Hit that Perfect Beat Boy Empire* (March 2001) p.85
- <sup>21</sup> Abe, C Gardner, W.O. & T. Hori (trans) *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* (Kaya Press, United States of America, 2004) pp.3-44 - Originally published in Japan by Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., 1994)
- <sup>22</sup> Thomson, D *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (Little, Brown, Great Britain, 2002)
- <sup>23</sup> Cousins, M *The Story of Film* (Pavilion Books, Great Britain, 2004/2006) This book contains a detailed section on contemporary Japanese Cinema (PP.474-478), but Kitano's name is not mentioned, even in passing, and indeed the author strays little beyond the realms of new J-Horror
- <sup>24</sup> Carter, D *East Asian Cinema* Kamera Books (Harpenden, Herts, 2007) p.122
- <sup>25</sup> Stephens, C (Jan/Feb 1995) p.32
- <sup>26</sup> See in particular Chris D *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London, New York, 2005) This book features profiles of and interviews with fourteen notoriously extreme Japanese directors, such as Ishii Teruo, Wakamatsu Koji and Kurosawa Kiyoshi. See also Galloway, P *Asia Shock: Horror and Dark Cinema from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2006)
- <sup>27</sup> Desser, D *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1988) p.78
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Staiger, J *Authorship Approaches* in Gerstner, D.A. & J. Staiger (eds) *Authorship and Film* (Routledge, New York and London, 2003) pp.27-57
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.33
- <sup>31</sup> Wollen, P *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, 'The Auteur Theory'* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1972) p.104
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.102
- <sup>34</sup> Staiger, J *Authorship Approaches* in Gerstner, D.A. & J. Staiger (eds) *Authorship and Film* p.43
- <sup>35</sup> Nowell-Smith, G *Luchino Visconti*, third revised edition (BFI Publishing, London, 2003) Some have challenged the structuralist-auteurist approach of this study, and have argued that is it simply a canonical authorial exegesis; whilst for others it is one of the key books in cine-structuralism
- <sup>36</sup> Barthes, R, quoted in Gerstner, D.A. & J. Staiger (eds) *Authorship and Film* pp.46-47
- <sup>37</sup> Udo, T *Sonatine* review in *'Beat' Takeshi Kitano* (Tadao Press/RM Europe Ltd., Great Britain, 1999) p.27
- <sup>38</sup> Jones, K *Takeshi Kitano Film Comment*, vol.36 no.5 (Sept/Oct 2000) p.14
- <sup>39</sup> Mulvey, L *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Reprinted in Nicholls, B (ed) *Movies and Methods Volume II* (University of California Press, Berkeley, California, London, 1985) pp.303-315
- <sup>40</sup> Worton, M *Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text* in Pilling, J (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994) pp.67-87
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.73

## HANA-BI [1997]

**'Opening slightly portentously with a caption identifying it as "Takeshi Kitano Volume 7", *Hana-Bi* turns out to be a highly sophisticated synthesis of everything Kitano has learned from his earlier films<sup>1</sup>.**

Tony Rayns

1997 was a key year in East Asian cinema in general, and Japan in particular. Although the country itself was not subject to the kind of seismic social change seen in Hong Kong, its cinema nonetheless experienced a marked improvement in its fortunes in this year: more marked, in fact, than 1989. It was in 1997 that the commercial performance of indigenous films saw a significant upturn. They recorded the best figures since 1980 in achieving a 41.5% share of box office grosses and a 32.57 billion Yen total from 279 Japanese films released (compared to 29.4 Billion from 239 films in 1990)<sup>2</sup>.

This growth established a minor renaissance in local production and returns<sup>i</sup>, at the same time as Japanese films and filmmakers were (re)-emerging onto the international scene, prompting evaluative comparisons with the golden age of the 1950s. At the Cannes Film Festival, Imamura Shohei shared the Palme d'Or (with Abbas Kiarostami) for *Unagi (The Eel, 1997)*, whilst Kawase Naomi won the Camera d'Or for new directors with her feature *Moe no suzaku (The God Suzaku, 1997)*. Moreover, it was in this year that Kurosawa Kiyoshi was introduced to international audiences with his serial killer

<sup>i</sup> Despite the market share falling and remaining much lower than 1997's 41.5% (it would reach 41.3% in 2005 and then rocket to 53% in 2006) the number of films made increased steadily after 1997 (to 356 and 417 in 2005 and 2006 respectively). Concomitantly, box office grosses increased every year except one (2002) between 1997 and 2006, when they topped at 107.7 Billion Yen, with a market share far in advance of countries like the UK, France and Germany. (From the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, Inc. website) - [http://www.eiren.org/history\\_e/index.html](http://www.eiren.org/history_e/index.html)

films *Kyua* (*Cure*, 1997), and in which Suō Masayuki's *Sharu Wi Dansu?* (*Shall We Dance*, 1996) became the highest grossing Asian film ever in the US, earning \$10 million at the box-office.

Such a reversal of fortune did not go, and has not gone, unheralded. The leading Japanese daily newspaper, *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, reported shortly after the nationwide release of *Hana-Bi* early in 1998 that films such *The Eel* and *Princess Mononoke* could be seen as leading what they termed: 'The year of the Japanese film phoenix<sup>3</sup>'. That is, their success should lead to the rising of a long moribund national cinema from the depths of its own ashes. Indeed, a recent book entitled *Nihon eiga sangyō saizensen* (*Japan Movie Now*) by the Japanese critics Murakami Yoshiaki and Ogawa Norifumi, cites it as marking the beginnings of the renaissance of the Japanese film industry<sup>4</sup>.

In another echo of the transformation and turnaround of 1989, the work of Kitano Takeshi can be seen to have played a central role in re-shaping the direction of his country's cinema. Before the cameras, in the guise of 'Beat' Takeshi, it was his face that appeared on the posters urging Japanese to return to the cinema and see films in the correct way. However, it was in his capacity as a filmmaker, and with his seventh picture, *Hana-Bi* [1997], that his most important work was done, and with which he (literally and symbolically) figure headed the revival of the cinema of Japan.

*Hana-Bi* was Kitano Takeshi's return to the Yakuza/Cop film after four years and two markedly contrastive films in *Minnā-Yatteruka* (*Getting Any?* 1995) and *Kizzu ritān* (*Kids Return*, 1996). However, it is a different entity altogether from its progenitors in Kitano's Life and Death trilogy: *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki* (*Violent Cop*, 1989) and *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993), albeit one that builds on these works in a very marked way.

The majority of Kitano's films can be seen, in varying ways and to various ends, as calculated products, works made at a particular time for a particular reason (be it commercial, artistic or otherwise). *Hana-Bi*'s subtitle, 'Takeshi Kitano Volume 7', suggests its director's intentions to tailor his film for international consumption. That is, to adapt his violent Yakuza film format to the framework of a stylized auteur film easily assimilable into the pantheon of both European art-cinema and occidental perceptions and canonizations of Japanese filmmaking that date back to the West's discovery of Japanese cinema after the success of *Rashōmon* [1950] in the 1950s.

This is why *Hana-Bi* can be understood as the film that variously cemented Kitano's auteur status in the arena of transnational filmmaking, at the same time as it opened up further fissures in the divergent perceptions of this director. The subject of transnational cinema is one that, as the previous chapter detailed with regard to performance and 'Beat' Takeshi, is an important one for Kitano, as it is for Asian national cinemas in general. In an essay entitled *Salute to Mr Vengeance!: The Making of a Transnational Auteur Park Chan-Wook*<sup>5</sup>, Nikki J.Y. Lee explores the divergent responses to the director of *J.S.A* [2000] and *Oldboy* [2003] in South Korea and in the West. In particular, she employs Timothy Corrigan's discourse on the commerce of auteurism<sup>6</sup> to detail the ways in which the difference in release patterns has figured in the reception of the director both nationally and internationally.

The spectre of violence, Tarantino and film festival recognition and celebration arises once again in the example of Park. Although, unlike Kitano in Japan, South Korean audiences have been more than receptive to their own director's auteur status, there is nonetheless a comparable example in the way in which international canonization helped

shape domestic responses and attitudes. The fact that *Hana-Bi* was the first of Kitano's films to achieve any real distribution and visibility in America, in particular at a time when the West was in the throes of discovering and celebrating Hong Kong cinema and a new generation of action filmmakers, coloured responses to his oeuvre.

As David Desser has noted, the 1990s saw the emergence of a new 'global action genre'<sup>7</sup>, and Kitano, because of the prominence of violence in his work (culminating in *Hana-Bi*) and the association with Tarantino, was included in this generic category. Similarly, because in the US *Hana-Bi* was the first Kitano film to be widely distributed and seen, and because it introduced the perceptions of traditional Japanese spiritual precepts in 'Takeshi Kitano Volume 7' has led to commentators straining to read those features into his other work. Even *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990) has been perceived along these lines, with beauty and lyricism read into its textual specificity.

This international acclaim then fed back into *Hana-Bi's* domestic success. It must not be underestimated that Kitano chose to present the film in Europe and the US before it opened in Japan. In addition to Venice in September 1997, the film played at the Toronto and New York Festivals in the same month, before playing at the São Paulo Mostra de Cinema in October 1997 and the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece in November 97. Furthermore, before its Japanese release on 24 January 1998, it had already opened theatrically in France, Germany and Portugal. Therefore, *Hana-Bi's* international success could be (and was) used in selling it in Japan, a country that has a marked history in deferring to opinions of others as regards its art and artists. Thus, critics in Japan only celebrated *Rashōmon*, as a masterpiece after its success abroad (it was famously denounced by its producer, Daiei chairman Nagata Masaichi, who, echoing

Columbia's Harry Cohn and his mystified reaction to Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* [1948], said he had no idea what the picture was about).

Similarly, Shindo Kaneto's poetic, wordless documentary *Hadaka no shima* (*The Naked Island*, 1960) remained, as an independent production, unseen in Japanese cinemas. That is, until it won a festival prize in Moscow and suddenly found itself booked into theatres owned by the major studio Toei. Kitano himself commented on this with regard to his film at Cannes 1999. He noted that 'I thought if my films became popular overseas, they'd be like Hermès bags and Japanese people would soon be very keen on them<sup>8</sup>'.

*Hana-Bi* repeated Kurosawa's triumph by winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1997, becoming only the third Japanese film to claim this award after *Rashōmon* and Inagaki Hiroshi's *Muhōmatsu no issho* (*The Rickshaw Man/Muhomatsu the Rickshaw Man*, 1958). This fact accounts for the aforementioned significance of Kitano and *Hana-Bi* as a key film and filmmaker in re-popularising Japanese cinema in the West (especially in the US), in effect, re-opening Western eyes as Kurosawa had initially opened them in 1951. In a feature in *Film Comment* at the time of its release in 1998, Dave Kehr wrote that 'I didn't realise how much I'd missed Japanese movies until I saw Takeshi Kitano's *Hana-Bi*<sup>9</sup>', before going on to note: 'here was a film...that captured a sense of sublime transcendence not much felt since the golden age of Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Naruse<sup>10</sup>'. Darrell William Davis acquiesces to this view by beginning a 2001 essay on *Hana-Bi* with the statement: 'For Western critics, Kitano "Beat" Takeshi is the greatest filmmaker to come out of Japan since Akira Kurosawa<sup>11</sup>'.

*Hana-Bi* is, then, Kitano's most important film from the point of view of crystallizing his international status as a major auteur figure. Moreover, in addition to opening in Japan on a wave of Western critical approval and opprobrium, it re-packaged and re-contextualised his particular brand of cinema for Japanese audiences by way of (ostensibly) working within a popular generic form. As such it became successful in Japan, in fact becoming by far Kitano's most successful film to date in his native country. The director himself noted that: 'Usually when a screening ends people start walking out during the credits, but after *Hana-Bi* ended the audience stayed until the lights went up in the theatre, so they had to delay the next screening until everyone left<sup>12</sup>'.

Furthermore, it was ranked first place in *Kinema Junpō*'s ten-best list for the year 1998 in Japan, a first for Kitano, and it was with this film that he was awarded a prize at the 1999 Awards of the Japanese Academy. As such, Kitano's now secure international reputation as an important director was given some weight and popular acceptance in Japan. He himself noted that the success of *Hana-Bi* opened doors that were previously closed to him in Japan, even if it was just the respectability to film in certain locations<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, following the release of *Hana-Bi* in January 1998, a feature by Kitano appeared in *Japan Quarterly* entitled *Takeshi Kitano, "Respect at last? Hold your tickets"*<sup>14</sup>.

In the US, at a time when *Anime* were routinely the most widely seen Japanese films, Kitano and *Hana-Bi* were seen as paradigmatic of a new Japanese cinema as revelatory as its golden age precursor. In addition to the academic essays already noted, many reviewers seemed determined to link Kitano with the great Japanese filmmakers of the past, and thus was yet another feature of Kitano's authorship (the comparison between him and significant other filmmakers that he emulates) cemented. Dave Kehr not only

invokes Ozu and Mizoguchi, he also states that Kitano's fractured sense of modernity is indebted to such new wave luminaries as Oshima Nagisa and Imamura Shohei<sup>15</sup>; whilst G. Allen Johnson concludes that *Hana-Bi* contained 'A formal polish worthy of the classic Japanese movie masters like Kurosawa or Mizoguchi<sup>16</sup>'. Scott Tobias, writing in 2002, acquiesced with this view, noting that Kitano employs 'The lyrical, meditative beauty of classical Japanese cinema<sup>17</sup>'. In the *Village Voice*, *Hana-Bi* was named one of the ten greatest films of the 1990s. It opened in America in March 1998 and achieved a reasonably commendable \$59,508 opening weekend on just nine screens across the country, eventually going on to gross almost \$234,000 on a limited three week run<sup>18</sup>.

The success of *Hana-Bi* in America led to three of Kitano's earlier features - his previous Yakuza/Cop films *Violent Cop*, *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990) and *Sonatine* - opening in cinemas in America in a little over a year. Consequently, a situation not dissimilar to that surrounding the birth and development of film authorship at *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s - the immediate post-war release of a substantial back catalogue of US films in France - was almost immediately facilitated. Kitano quickly became a cult figure, and critics had the opportunity to consider his generically similar films in rapid succession. As such, they were ideally placed to discover (and overuse) the ample stylistic and thematic similarities of these works, to discover Kitano as auteur.

Unsurprisingly, given such acclaim, it was with this film that Kitano felt that he had finally perfected his filmmaking craft. As he has said:

**'The story, the camerawork - the whole process of making films has its own rules, like baseball. When I made my first film I tried to learn the rules and I followed them until *Hana-Bi*. I had pretty much**

**figured out how to make a movie by then...if I compare *Hana-Bi* to an entrance exam for a public university...I think I scored an average of sixty points on all the subjects and passed<sup>19</sup>.**

The degree of faith one places in this statement is open to question (as already noted, one may well take issue with Kitano's apparent belief that in *Sonatine* he was following established rules of filmmaking). What is more certain is the fact that with *Hana-Bi* Kitano achieved a supreme command of his craft, indeed elevated it not simply into the realms of art, but into the realms of the art of Kitano Takeshi. That is to say that, although several earlier Kitano films could well be said to be perfectly crafted, meaningful, intelligent works, featuring many thematic and stylistic features associated with Kitano's cinema, it was only with *Hana-Bi* that these elements were synthesized into a coherent and organic whole.

At the same time as this eye on Western canonization, *Hana-Bi* also proffers itself as an intrinsically Japanese narrative, a recognisable and resonant thematic exploration of the breakdown of the family unit and the attendant pressures on self and personal identity in a society in which the individual is always measured against the group. Moreover, after paring down the generic façade and exposing the clinical functionality of the Yakuza film in *Violent Cop*, and subverting, almost mocking, the same in the Godard-inflected experiments of *Sonatine*, Kitano ensured that the auteur indulgences that many commentators in Japan had seen as detrimental to the latter were now reconfigured in service of, and subservience to, *Hana-Bi*'s story and protagonists.

This respect for genre, and in particular to the *Ninkyō* Yakuza form of a lone avenger taking on a whole yakuza gang, is coupled with a progressive modulation into the

territory of the road movie. As Ian Buruma has noted, road narratives are a highly appealing form to the Japanese: ‘A large number of popular (Japanese) heroes are drifters, outsiders with no fixed abode<sup>20</sup>’. In addition to the representations of Japanese-ness in the film, one may also point to the overt images of Japan in *Hana-Bi*, entirely new in Kitano’s work, which had until this time tended to stress a blank anonymity of locale as an exterior manifestation of alienation and interior lack. *Hana-Bi*, in contradistinction, depicts famous Tokyo landmarks throughout: from the famous Rainbow Bridge, to a Shinjuku intersection sign and, most obviously, the Tokyo Tower. There are also the very prominent shots of Mount Fuji, which seem to herald a turning point in the film following Nishi’s successful bank robbery and the beginning of the journey he takes with his wife.

Furthermore, in addition to the popular *Ninkyō* form of the yakuza sub-plot and its attachment to an equally popular (and inherently Japanese) *Gendai-mono* family drama, there are a number of traditional Japanese symbols, images and concepts that elucidate the drama in *Hana-Bi*. Nishi and his wife’s almost picaresque journey takes them to a rock garden, a *ryokan* (traditional inn) and a temple, whilst the marked changes of weather attest to the Japanese predilection for different seasons<sup>21</sup>.

Even more significant is the earlier sequence that includes the stakeout and the shooting of Horibe. This fateful incident, which is intercut with Nishi visiting his wife at the hospital, begins with an isolated close up of a Camellia bush (*Camellia japonica*), and in the subsequent shot of Horibe arriving at the stakeout vehicle it is again prominent in the composition. When Horibe is shot, the bush can be seen beside his attacker, and following the gunshots that cripple the detective a single flower falls noticeably to the ground. The Camellia is traditionally regarded as a symbol of the samurai warrior. This is

because when the blossom of this flower falls, it falls whole, not petal-by-petal, and is thus presumed to represent the head of a samurai falling in battle or after the ritual of *seppuku* (hara-kiri). Its presence in this scene therefore symbolically re-configures Horibe as a warrior falling in the line of duty.

In addition to this imagery, Nishi killing himself and his wife potentially conjures very potent images of the Japanese *Shinjū*, or double suicide. This is a commonplace subject on the classical stage in Japan, and most famously depicted on film in Shinoda Masahiro's *Shinjū ten no amijima* (*Double Suicide*, 1969), although it also figures in works as ostensibly different as Oshima's *Muri Shinjū: Nihon no natsu* (*Japanese Summer: Double Suicide*, 1967), Kurosawa's *Hachigatsu no rapusodī* (*Rhapsody in August*, 1991), Hou-Hsiao-hsien's *Hai shang hua* (*Flowers of Shanghai* 1998) and Kitano's own *Dōruzu* (*Dolls*, 2002).

Thus, whilst not straightforwardly linear or even unified in narrative, *Hana-Bi* nonetheless offered to the Japanese an (ostensible) exploration of Japanese-ness within a controlled and fundamentally generic framework: within a narrative in which form enriches content. The very fact that it respects these precepts whilst at the same time working to subvert or at least mould and manipulate them is testament to Kitano's ease with and mastery of the Yakuza form. It also demonstrates his intelligence and subtlety in drawing on his past films, abstracting from those works aspects that can feed into the present film and help to elucidate its specificity in contrast.

*Hana-Bi*, then, marks a decisive artistic as well as commercial watershed in its director's oeuvre. As such, the title 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 7' becomes more than a self-conscious auteurist provocation, it describes perfectly a film that not only stands as a

summation of Kitano's previous films (as Tony Rayns stresses), but also anticipates his subsequent work and the direction his career would thereafter take.

Rayns' statement can certainly be best illuminated with regard to Kitano's earlier Yakuza works. *Hana-Bi* draws but also builds on *Violent Cop* and *Sonatine* (especially the former) to complex enlightening effect, to the extent that Bob Davis has suggested that it could well be approached as a remake of Kitano's debut<sup>22</sup>. Overt parallels with *Violent Cop* abound. The plot thread of the lone cop against a yakuza gang is present in both films, with the similarity further emphasized in the characterisation of the yakuza as a business enterprise and in the casting of Hakuryū in an almost identical role in both films, that of a psychotic henchman. *Hana-Bi* also draws on and works against Kitano's Yakuza film progenitors in its presentation of 'Beat' Takeshi as a world-weary figure whose behaviour constantly strains against the bounds and regulations of his professional group, ultimately alienating him from those with whom he works and associates.

In returning to and building so markedly on his debut film, Kitano makes clear the extent to which *Hana-Bi* will represent a critical juncture in his development as a director. This debt suggests the extent to which 'Takeshi Kitano Volume 7' is designed both to close off and complete one feature of his oeuvre (that of Yakuza films and violence) and simultaneously to open up new avenues of creativity and commerce, new directions for future works.

It was argued in the chapter on *Violent Cop* that there is a seemingly hermetic seal to Kitano's filmic, 'Beat' Takeshi persona. That there is a closed and centripetal dynamic to his image in which insular points of reference perpetually float around and inform without ever quite defining the character as other than a blank slate, a hole at the heart of

the film. This is something that is cemented here in the way that the aforementioned images of Azuma and Murakawa, in *Violent Cop* and *Sonatine* respectively, feed directly into *Hana-Bi* and its alienated protagonist Nishi. Those earlier Kitano protagonists are often seen in movement and transit, walking purposefully as if to underline their singular drive and ambition, all shot and edited to emphasise the inimitable 'Beat' Takeshi gait that Gerald Sim has likened to that of John Wayne<sup>23</sup>. Both characters are introduced in this way, striding confidently into frame to confront an adversary. Azuma in particular remains likewise until the very moment of his death: he strolls, seemingly unperturbed, into a hail of bullets from the yakuza hit man Kiyohiro, and after killing him simply begins to walk away. He is only stopped (whilst still in motion) by a shot to the head.

Following *Violent Cop*, *Sonatine* begins in the same way, with movement through space defining the protagonist. But as the film develops any movement on the part of its yakuza protagonist Murakawa is progressively reduced and undermined. In contradistinction to *Violent Cop*, *Sonatine's* action scenes increasingly depict Murakawa in complete stasis, blankly firing at his opponents with scarcely any discernible action on his part. Elsewhere, he becomes more like a circus ringleader (or a film director) than a yakuza boss. He begins to conduct and control the movement of others more than actually moving himself, orchestrating games for his amusement in which his underlings are variously manipulated and humiliated. Moreover, when Murakawa is shown engaged in activities, such as playing Frisbee by himself on the beach following the assassination of his protégé, the scene is presented in a static extreme long shot that works against any real sense of energy or movement.

This cumulative stasis then feeds directly into *Hana-Bi* and its protagonist, Nishi, but accrues thematic depth in building on Kitano's pre-occupation with violence in tandem with the typical 'Beat' Takeshi protagonist. From the very first scene of this film, action is elided and Nishi is shown to have a bodily immobility as pronounced as that of the facial features and expressions that had heretofore marked out the 'Beat' Takeshi film persona. He is repeatedly seen in complete stasis, often slumped down in a chair as though physically incapable of movement, as when the partner of a deceased colleague explains the economic pressures attendant on her sudden bereavement. The feeling is that such problems as these (and Horibe's disability) are entirely new and out of the reach of this man, for whom violence (like his progenitors in *Violent Cop* and *Sonatine*) has been the sole and only necessary recourse to whatever obstacles he has faced. Violent behaviour may solve Nishi's immediate dilemma at the very beginning of *Hana-Bi*, but (as in the later, rhyming scene, in which he attacks a man who berates Miyuki) this is a small and narratively irrelevant problem that ultimately means and achieves nothing.

If, as Kitano has said, his subsequent film *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1999) is about a man finding and living with himself, then *Hana-Bi* is surely about a man who cannot: a man who struggles and ultimately fails to reconcile himself with the world around him and can but annihilate both he and his wife as a result. This, like *Dolls* and Kurosawa's *Yume* (*Dreams*, 1990), is what gives his seventh film its ambiguity, its *Aimai*<sup>ii</sup>. In the press kit for *Hana-Bi*, Kitano stated that he was frustrated with stereotypical Asian directors and images of Japan:

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<sup>ii</sup> The concept of *Aimai* is seen as a typically Japanese conception of ambiguity. It is principally seen as one of the effects of the (perceived) Japanese mindset and language (its group-oriented nature, etc) that direct expression is generally discouraged, and thus relatively neutral comments that don't forcefully state individual positions predominate.

**‘I feel like when anybody calls me an “Asian director” it’s loaded with preconceptions...I would really like to get rid of the typical Asian traits, cultures, and aesthetics in our films...I hate seeing people sell a blatantly stereotypical Asian look. I realize that this is what sells right now, but that’s what I am trying to get away from<sup>24</sup>’.**

Quite whether one can talk of an Asian look in cinema is debatable. However, what can be deduced from this comment is that it is certainly therefore misleading to regard *Hana-Bi* as uncritically promulgating its overt Japanese-ness: to suggest, as one contemporary review of the film did, that it is ‘very Zen<sup>25</sup>’ and uplifting in its positive portrayal of suicide. As Roland Barthes argued in *Empire of Signs*<sup>26</sup> (and as documentaries by Chris Marker and Wim Wenders have explored<sup>iii</sup>) Japan is a post-modern society, a culture of surfaces that ultimately resists the exotic narratives attendant upon the gaze of others, most prominently the Eastern-looking gaze of the West.

If one looks at the second half of the film, in particular - the road-movie section in which *Hana-Bi*’s overt Japanese-ness comes most clearly to the fore – one can see that Nishi and Miyuki’s actions and feelings arise in almost every instance from a frustration or subversion of tradition and the classical, picturesque Japan on offer. The titular fireworks stubbornly refuse to light early in the couple’s trip, and thus remain discordant with the painting at the beginning, of a happy family watching a firework display (the fact that that the fire in this display resembles a flower suggests an idealized harmony of opposites that does not materialize in the film). Furthermore, Nishi falls into the gravel at the rock garden; he rings the temple bell at the incorrect time; Miyuki falls into the snow whilst attempting to urinate; and the urban violence of the city, in the person of the

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<sup>iii</sup> See especially Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (*Sunless*, 1983) and Wenders’ *Tokyo-Ga* [1985] and *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* [1989].

yakuza to whom Nishi was in debt, follows them and interrupts their time at both the beach and the *ryokan* inn.

The example of the temple bell is a significant one in this context. Unlike in Kurosawa's aforementioned *Dreams*, in the final segment of which a lone traveller places an offering on a bridge in a remote rural village (there is no specific deity to worship, it is just the simple fact of feeling oneself a part of a custom, a vaunted tradition, that is valued), this scene countermands any comparable spiritual subterfuge. The point in this moment of *Hana-Bi* is to demonstrate how fundamentally remote such traditional and religious paradigms are from the reality of people's everyday lives. The fact that the bell is only sounded at certain times meant that the child would have missed hearing it. By breaking with these strictures, Nishi makes not only the bell, but also the temple in which it is housed and its attendant spirituality, accessible for everyone to enjoy and perhaps find meaning in.

The emphasis on game playing or ostensible leisure-time activity is something that has variously structured and unified several earlier Kitano narratives (from the baseball games in *Boiling Point*, and the whole of *A Scene at the Sea's* story of self-betterment through surfing, to the games on the beach that increasingly dominate *Sonatine*). It is one of the fundamental tenets of Kitano's status as a proto-typical carnivalesque director that he subverts and undermines notions of work and professional activity, a very potent thematic in capitalist, post-economic miracle Japan. In *Hana-Bi*, there is a marked discourse of work and play as representative of normalcy and deviation.

In the early conversation in the car on the way to the stakeout, even though the English subtitles refer to Detective Nishi and Detective Horibe, in the Japanese dialogue

no such information is forthcoming; they are simply Nishi-san and Horibe-san (Mr Nishi and Mr Horibe). Similarly, what is translated in the subtitles as stakeout is, in Japanese, nothing more specific than 'place' or 'location', and it is not clear until the scene of the stakeout more than five minutes into the film that these characters are police officers. Quite apart from the fact that this re-inscribes in *Hana-Bi* the theme of *Violent Cop*, of the fragile dividing line between law-enforcer and law-breaker (one's immediate impression of Nishi, especially given Kitano's persona, may well tend to the latter), this further serves to underline the thematic point that these characters are not defined by their profession; nor, as in the work of Naruse Mikio, are their identities shaped by their various social roles and responsibilities. On the contrary, their respective constructions of self are delineated around an absence of work as representative of a personal time and space for reflection and recuperation.

Going further, Horibe is shot whilst on the job, where he has remained in place of a younger colleague who insists on leaving for a date. Nishi himself leaves the site of the stakeout in order to visit his wife, and has little in the way of professional action or responsibility throughout the film. Indeed, the most one sees of him in his capacity as a detective is when he rashly attempts to capture Horibe's assailant, something that indirectly leads to more deaths before Nishi is able to kill the gunman. Elsewhere, Nishi acts more like a criminal than a cop. Indeed, he explicitly becomes the latter in a transformation that is crystallized when he robs a bank and goes on the run, ironically at the point when he is most clearly identified (visually) as a policeman. That is, when he procures the surface signifiers (a uniform and car) that were noticeably absent from the

beginning of the film, when Kitano took pains not to identify either Horibe or Nishi as cops.

The mute relationship between the two young protagonists of *A Scene at the Sea* also reverberates within *Hana-Bi*, in the awkward, initially estranged (non)-marriage between Nishi and his wife. So too does the insistence in the former film of the inevitable imbalance in male/female relations, the conclusion that patterns of domination and submittal will ineluctably materialise. Indeed, like Miike Takashi, the default Kitano view of heterosexual coupling under the advanced capitalistic society that Japan has become tends to the pained and masochistic. It is a view that is visualised literally in both *A Scene at the Sea* and *Dolls* in stories that feature couples conjoined by, respectively, a surfboard and a length of red cord, but many of his films also feature similar women submissively attached and subservient to a man, and ultimately, for him, a burden to bear.

*Hana-Bi*, like the aforementioned works, does include moments of warmth and intimacy, particularly in its final moments, but these are at best ambiguous. Although there is evidence for reading Nishi's journey along similar lines to that of the titular thief Michel in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* [1959], Nishi's reaching out and holding Miyuki should not be construed as akin to the dénouement of Bresson's celebrated work. In this famous scene, the heretofore reserved and distant Michel seems to finally open himself to love and human contact after being imprisoned for his crimes.

In *Hana-Bi*, this moment of togetherness (not quite the first instance in the film of a bonding between them) is implicitly undermined by the sense that a proximity to death is affecting and colouring the couple's relationship, facilitating the expression of feelings that would otherwise have remained suppressed. Death in Kitano's work is almost always

a (self-conscious and self-absorbed) last act aimed at retrospectively validating a life. Unlike in Bresson, where death is sought (whether achieved or not) as an escape from a debased world, in Kitano it is an insular, calculating, often selfish act intended to confer meaning on a preceding way of life. This holds true not only for his lone cop and criminal protagonists, but also for his couples. Nishi and his wife can thus only achieve peace and mutual affection when faced with death and annihilation.

Further underlining the weight of encumbrance that woman represents for man in Kitano's cinema is Nishi's wife's final line before her and her husband's death at the end of *Hana-Bi*. In a line curiously mistranslated in the film's English subtitles, Miyuki says to Nishi '*Arigatō...gomen ne,*' which appears in the subtitles as 'Thank you...Thank you for everything' (this line became the title of the penultimate musical cue on the International release of Hisaishi Joe's score). In actuality, what she says to Nishi is: 'Thank you...I'm sorry,' the archetypal, and most representative, statement of burden and debt in Kitano's work as regards the relationship of woman to man.

In addition to the above, *Hana-Bi*'s narrative strategy is also prefigured in earlier work in Kitano's career. In particular, the parallel structure contained within *Kids Return* - wherein the respective fates of two school friends following divergent career paths are explicitly contrasted - can be seen in *Hana-Bi* in the stories of Detectives Nishi and Horibe after the latter is shot and crippled. Just as *Kids Return*'s delinquent protagonists are closely juxtaposed for their respective appropriations of a violent lifestyle (legally sanctioned and otherwise; individually ordained and undertaken and otherwise), so Nishi and Horibe's family lives are similarly underscored. It is made clear that both have, or have had, a wife and daughter. The shooting of the latter initiates contrapuntal

transformations in their respective lives – the irrevocable breakdown of Horibe’s family counter-pointed by the tentative steps towards the resurrection of Nishi’s. These trajectories are then contrasted in that they lead, respectively, to life and death, creation (in the sense of Horibe’s painting and learning to live) and destruction. Horibe’s journey through the film is from death toward life, whilst Nishi moves from life toward his death at the end. Similarly, Horibe, because of external circumstances, loses his job and his family and has to re-evaluate his life and purpose. Nishi, on the other hand, loses his job due to his own wayward actions, and moves thereafter toward rebuilding his relationship with his wife and putting together what remains of his family.

Moreover, specific scenes within the film draw parallels between these two characters. The clearest example is the inter-cutting between Horibe as he begins to find artistic inspiration before starting to paint and Nishi spray-painting the taxi he has bought to make it look like a police car so it can be used in his bank raid. This highlights a specific correlation between the former’s path to inner, spiritual enlightenment, and the latter’s method of material gain.

Further underlining the centrality of *Hana-Bi* within the Kitano canon (as the above comparison with *Dolls* alludes) is the fact that, as much as it encapsulates and summarises his earlier work, it also anticipates the development of his career over the ensuing decade. Indeed, just as *Hana-Bi* can be seen to close one trilogy in Kitano’s oeuvre (the life and death yakuza trilogy), so too does it begin another. This thematic and stylistic tripartite further comprises *Kikujiro no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1998) and *Dolls*, and may broadly be termed the ‘art and autobiography’ trilogy for its appropriation of aspects of other art forms, as well as the fact that the three films resonate powerfully with

Kitano's own life. In *Hana-Bi*, the narrative trajectory of Horibe – of discovering painting whilst convalescing in the wake of an almost-fatal incident – recalls Kitano's own scooter crash on August 2 1994, and the fact that he took up painting himself whilst recovering (all the paintings in the film, both those produced by Horibe and the ones that can be seen in several of the film's locales, are by Kitano).

This trilogy, like other post-*Hana-Bi* Kitano works, is further united in another sense: it is built around Kitano's newly acquired status as an international auteur and an intrinsically Japanese artist (the one facilitating and feeding into the other). The aforementioned road narrative aspect of *Hana-Bi* has, in one form or another, figured in almost every Kitano film since his seventh, even if, as in *Kikujiro* and *Brother* [2000], it is only as a generic base from which Kitano departs. It was a narrative mode that was present before *Hana-Bi*, in the carnivalesque works and especially in *Getting Any?* However, in the wake of Kitano's international breakthrough and subsequent canonization, this aspect of his films becomes somewhat different: more marked, certainly, but differently motivated, more elusive and ambiguous.

With the partial exception of *Kikujiro*, there ceases to be a defined, external goal that drives the journey. There is a need to procure guns that serves as a catalyst for pro-action in *Boiling Point*, and to have sex is the same in *Getting Any?* In *Hana-Bi* and subsequent films, travel and wandering become either reactive - a response to an external crisis or threat - or variously the goal becomes negated as the continued determinant of the journey. Thus in *Hana-Bi*, the travel undertaken by Nishi and his wife is a necessary response to Nishi becoming a wanted criminal following his robbing a bank. However, even though the police and the yakuza pursue him throughout this overt road movie that

occupies the second half of the narrative, it is the interior precept, the importance of spending time away from their daily milieu in order to repair their marital relationship, that one feels is propelling the journey.

As was stressed elsewhere, the road movie and wandering hero are particularly prevalent Japanese cultural signifiers. So it is with Kitano that attendant upon the centrality of this mode to his oeuvre from *Hana-Bi* onwards is a textual inscription of Japanese-ness that had, by and large, remained absent from his career until his breakthrough seventh film. With the exceptions of the by and large generic foundations of *Violent Cop* and *Kids Return*, Kitano worked distinctly idiosyncratic variations on the generic material with which he worked, something best evinced in his desire to reconfigure Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* [1965] into the narrative of *Sonatine*. However, beginning with *Hana-Bi*, Kitano follows the trajectory of novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and (re)discovers Japan as an aesthetic and historical entity: to the extent that (as the aforementioned features of *Hana-Bi* attest) the resulting Japanification becomes almost a manifesto of stylistic and thematic intent.

## Discourses of opposition

**‘Musicians everywhere make their sounds to capture silence (and) architects develop complex shapes just to envelop empty space<sup>27</sup>’.**

From the introduction to Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*

**‘Even the Westerner whose familiarity with Japan is limited to Ruth Benedict's problematic work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) knows enough by now to look for the warrior when confronted with an insistence on the peaceful artist alone<sup>28</sup>’.**

David Pollack

The term life and death trilogy that this study has used to categorize *Violent Cop*, *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi* means rather more in the context of Kitano's career than that the films are concerned with characters' lives and deaths. It foregrounds and crystallizes the fact that Kitano's work is predicated on a complex, interwoven series of structural and thematic antinomies. A cursory glance at much of the discourse on Kitano's cinema will almost immediately throw up one prominent dichotomy that has been perceived to structure and define his work: that between supposed Zen tranquility and visceral violence, between calmness, quietude and stasis on the one hand, and brutality and graphic bloodletting on the other.

It has become something of a cliché within Kitano criticism to make reference to what Tommy Udo describes as 'Scenes that are like still tableaux, punctuated by spurts of action'<sup>29</sup>. Or to state, as the introduction to the review section of the book *Beat Takeshi Kitano* does: '(Kitano's) films (are) beautiful and elegiac as well as exciting and violent'<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, so prevalent is the notion of violence and tenderness that it has even gone on to exceed critical discourse and be used to sell and promote Kitano's work. In particular the British, Tokyo Bullet-released, DVD box set of what is described as 'the "Beat" Takeshi trilogy' (*Violent Cop*, *Boiling Point* and *Sonatine*) carries the prominent quote: 'Zen like tranquillity meets skull-shattering violence'.

Kitano himself has recognised this discourse of opposition, and has stated that it remains an important aspect of his Yakuza work and his presentation of violence: 'It seems to me that life and death have very little meaning in themselves, but the way you approach death may give a retrospective meaning to your life'<sup>31</sup>. Visual and thematic antinomies such as these are in fact a constant in much traditional Japanese art: from the

carefully delineated empty spaces in traditional Zen ink paintings (it is a concept referred to as nothingness, or ‘unknown space<sup>32</sup>’) to the contrastive structure of the Haiku:

**‘Haiku are tiny seventeen-syllable poems that seek to convey a sudden awareness of beauty by a mating of opposite or incongruous terms. Thus the classical Haiku characteristically fuses motion and stillness<sup>33</sup>’.**

Edward Seidensticker

*Hana-Bi* is a film built around a series of structural and visual dichotomies. It is, indeed, structured around overt doublings, of characters, scenes and motifs that echo one another. As already noted, Nishi and Horibe are closely contrasted. But in addition there are repetitions of specific motifs (the shot of the police car and the sound of the horn from the scrap yard, seen from both Nishi and the yard owner’s perspective but identical in detail); repeated incidents (Nishi both playing and transgressing games with different people: the baseball youths at the beginning and the little girl with kite at the end) and also repetitions of shots (the descending crane shot that occurs when Nishi acquires the taxi that will be made over into a police car so he can rob a bank and at the end as Nishi leaves the car in which he has just killed all the remaining yakuza who have been pursuing him).

More than simply containing a series of different dichotomies, however, *Hana-Bi* is a film about them: about opposition and the ways in which antinomies can and do engender (cultural, artistic, social) meaning. As the film develops, the central characters become much more self-aware than previous protagonists in Kitano’s Yakuza films. They themselves come to perceive their own need to fill in the desperate lack that afflicts them,

and to engage in an interaction and relationship with those elements that help to complete their lives and alienated existences. That is, those features that can be seen to run counter to the specificity of their own narrative travails and tribulations, their opposite and complimentary traits.

The aforementioned tenets of psychoanalysis can be re-inscribed here, as it contains another dichotomy central to *Hana-Bi*. In the chapter on *Violent Cop* the specific trajectories of Lacan's theory of the process by which infants achieve subjectivity was laid out as a possible model for that film's central character, Detective Azuma. Inherent in the mirror stage that governs this Lacanian process and the selfhood (or lack thereof) of this protagonist is a complex whereby identity become inextricably bound up not simply in the child's perception of its own reflection as other, its ego ideal, but in the mother's implied judgement. Thus, it is in the external perception of itself that the infant enters into the crucial phase of its development toward selfhood and subjectivity.

The similarity between *Hana-Bi* and *Violent Cop* has already been explicated, so this psychoanalytical and existential precept is particularly fitting. It relates to a notion of looking, the horror of looking and the desire to be seen, something that is central to several Kitano works (particularly *Kikujiro*), and which is initiated from the outset of *Hana-Bi*. Nishi is introduced simply staring at the youths he is confronting. However, the lack of a reciprocal POV shot to answer the one of them looking at him suggests the essential impotence associated with this character, the fact that he has no mastery of the gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey as a defining feature of the Hollywood cinema<sup>34</sup>.

Moreover, the separateness of Azuma from the world around him in Kitano's first film feeds directly through *Sonatine's* Murakawa and into Nishi in *Hana-Bi*. For him, it is a

reconnection with his estranged wife that opens up a path to his rediscovery of a positive identity, with regard to which there is an immediate dichotomy signified in the title of the film itself. Although most often translated into English as fireworks, the two Chinese characters that make up the Japanese title of *Hana-Bi* mean, literally, flower and fire. Some commentators have, quite logically, used this to reinforce the aforementioned violence/tranquility opposition. But in a specifically Japanese context this dichotomy is broadened and enriched by deeper metonymic associations. In Japanese poetics, especially in literature, the flower is often a symbol of womanhood, its delicate transience in ripening and fading away a potent metaphor of femininity. For example, in an 1892 short story entitled *Yamizakura*, or *Flowers at Dusk*<sup>35</sup>, the popular and celebrated Meiji writer Ichiyō Higuchi describes the failing health of a young girl using a myriad of references to the natural world, particularly flowers and trees.

One can see ample evidence of this in the titles of female-centred films by Mizoguchi, Kinoshita, Shinoda and especially Naruse. *Zangiku monogatari* (*The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*, 1939) by Mizoguchi; Kinoshita's *Nogiku no gotoki kimi nariki* (*She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum*, 1955); Shinoda's Yakuza film *Kawaita hana* (*Pale Flower*, 1964); and Naruse's *Tsuma yo bara no yō ni* (*Wife! be like a Rose!* 1935) and *Bangiku* (*Late Chrysanthemums*, 1954). Indeed Naruse's *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*, 1955), which in a centenary pole in *Kinema Junpō* was voted the third greatest Japanese film of all time, ends with the following quote: 'The life of a flower is so brief, it is so fragrant, yet filled with grief'. This connotes the mortality of existence, of all things, but with a beauty in passing inherent in the gently scattering petals.

Against this feminine discourse, the symbol of fire has accrued similarly connotative associations in the cinema of Japan. It is, particularly in the Yakuza film, representative of masculine rage and violence, the burning, all-consuming nature of honour and revenge, and is likewise signified overtly in the titles of a number of films. Miike Takashi's *Jitsuroku andō noboru kyōdō-den: Rekka* (*Violent Fire*, 2002) and Mochizuki Rokuro's *Onibi* (*Onibi: The Fire Within*, 1997) are standout examples. In addition, such prominent non-Yakuza antecedents as Ichikawa Kon's Mishima adaptation *Enjō* (*Conflagration*, 1958) and Yanagimachi Mitsuo's *Himatsuri* (*Fire Festival*, 1985) also have titles that similarly reflect the violence that is enacted by their respectively intense and driven protagonists. As does *Zatōichi abare-himatsuri* (*Zatoichi at the Fire Festival*, 1970), the 21<sup>st</sup> film of the popular series. Directed by stalwart samurai filmmaker and original series director Misumi Kenji, this features Nakadai Tatsuya as a crazed antagonist for the blind swordsman, and it is he that fulfils the explosive potentiality inherent in the title: a scorned and jealous husband who erupts into violent action against the titular blind swordsman.

In *Hana-Bi*, the clear demarcation within the title signified in the constituent Kanji characters of fireworks - flower and fire - has a further dimension in underlining the separation of the two figurative elements within the film. The violence enacted by Nishi in the explicitly *Ninkyō* thread of the plot is conceived of as a distinct acting out, a performance, of an identity that has little if any bearing on the domestic relationship and its process of repair as the second, road-movie section of the film develops.

This is symbolized by the fact that Nishi repeatedly has to leave one space, where he and his wife are spending time together (the beach, the *ryokan* inn), and walk to a

different and separate space, or stage, to enact his rituals of violence and retribution. In contradistinction, when Nishi in the final scene has to leave one space (his car) for another in order to confront a different pursuer in the person of the two cops who have also traced his journey, his movement to meet them is elided in its entirety. In so doing, Kitano homogenizes, unifies, the filmic space and removes the sense of an alterior world of violence as distinct from Nishi's domestic life and world.

It is not so much that violence forms this character's method of self-expression, as one could say of his progenitors, *Violent Cop's* Detective Azuma or *Sonatine's* Murakawa. Indeed, this is another notion contained within the film's opening, in the elision rather than the presentation of violent action. Rather, it is a regressive default mode, a residual instinct, that represents how closed off he has become, how empty of identity and selfhood., and the heightened violence of scenes such as the one in which he jams a chopstick into the eye of a yakuza in a bar underlines this point. Although noted for extreme violence, Kitano's earlier Yakuza films did not extend into the stylized excess of moments such as this. As such, in *Hana-Bi*, although presented naturalistically (unlike the later *Zatoichi* [2003]), this violent incident nonetheless becomes redolent of an artificial aesthetic that subverts Nishi's apparently absolute composure and mastery of the situation.

The violence in *Hana-Bi* is treated throughout as a distinct and fundamentally unproductive entity within the totality of the film. This is something that has generally been ignored or marginalized, as the topic of violence (both here and in other films) has so rapidly passed into received wisdom on Kitano that it has seemingly required little further elucidation. Its treatment in *Hana-Bi* makes a lie of the views of commentators

such as Donald Richie, who have only seen what he terms its ‘trendy anarchy<sup>36</sup>’ and ‘Jacobean...bloodbath excess<sup>37</sup>’.

The narrative begins and ends with images of vastness in the sky and the sea, framing the characters as small beings, transient and impermanent in a larger, cosmic context. The fact that Nishi is contrasted with the sky in the opening dramaturgical dyad (something Kurosawa also used in *Ran* [1985] and *Hachigatsu no Rapusodī/Rhapsody in August* [1992]) in which he engages in an entirely insignificant encounter, configures the violence as ultimately meaningless. Indeed, it is often essentially pointless with regard to the main line of Nishi’s emotional trajectory (that of his rebuilding of his relationship with his wife), a pointlessness that is effectively connoted in what is in many ways the central scene of the film, where Nishi and several others attempt to apprehend the man responsible for shooting Horibe. After one colleague has been killed and another one shot and severely injured, Nishi shoots the criminal in the head and kills him with one shot. However, he then proceeds to empty his gun into the corpse. He shoots him repeatedly in a moment that will later be remarked upon by Nishi’s underling Nakamura as an especially frightening moment, characteristic of Nishi’s darkness and capacity for violence.

Other, related antinomies also arise from the opening of the film - significant structural and thematic dialectics that not only inform *Hana-Bi* but later mark out and enrich what are otherwise (ostensibly, at least) among Kitano’s most generic efforts: *Brother* and *Zatoichi*. As previously noted the openings of Kitano’s films are extremely, often deceptively, connotative and revealing. With *Hana-Bi*, the editing is of particular note. The credits of Kitano’s films, from *A Scene at the Sea* onwards, state that Kitano

writes, directs and edits his own work. *Hana-Bi* amends this common practice by dividing the credits for editing; in addition to Kitano there is another, separate credit for Ōta Yoshinori as editor. In a further example of the change signalled in Kitano's career by *Hana-Bi*, this would become the norm following 'Takeshi Kitano Vol.7' (*Dolls* is the only subsequent film to credit only Kitano as editor), but was a significant break from his heretofore-common practice. Kitano, like a majority of directors, considers editing the most important process:

**'Having someone else do the editing for you is like having the people at the factory build your model for you. The job of putting the parts together is mine and for me it's the most interesting part of the whole process...sometimes when my mind is really clicking, I'll be cutting in my head'<sup>38</sup>.**

He has further expanded on this statement:

**'When I write a script, I have the entire film in my head, so when we start shooting, I just do it. I'm more interested in the editing process, so I tend to shoot in a hurry. Maybe you don't always have enough footage, but how you play around with it, is what is interesting'<sup>39</sup>.**

In *Hana-Bi*, then, the editing is emphasised before the film even begins as occupying a privileged position. Kitano, in effect, provides a dual credit that calls attention to editing's dual nature, and tips the balance in favour of artistry as opposed to basic craft; art cinema as opposed to commercial filmmaking; once again, deviancy against normalcy. It is an extra-filmic antinomy that gives birth to other, thematic, dichotomies that are succinctly embedded within *Hana-Bi's* ostensibly innocuous, narratively

irrelevant beginning: dichotomies between action and reflection, activity and contemplation; and between classical filmmaking transparency and subtle self-reflexivity.

The introductory scene of *Hana-Bi* consists of ten shots detailing a skirmish between Nishi and a pair of unruly-looking youths who have apparently maltreated his car. It is a scene that perfectly encapsulates Kitano's assertion in the above quote that it is how you 'play around' with material editorially that truly counts. After opening on the aforementioned shot of the sky, the film then cuts between entirely static shots of the youths and Nishi looking at each other in apparent POV reverse-field set-ups. The location of this meeting (a multi-storey car park) and the precise spatial relationship between the two parties are only clarified in shot No.6, in an extreme long shot. These exchanges are pregnant with anticipation and enmity, but when the expected violence occurs and Nishi attacks one of the youths, the attack is elided completely (reinforcing its essential uselessness). Only the aftermath of the youths cleaning up the mess they have made is depicted in two shots: a low angle from within the car as the windscreen is washed by one of the thugs, and an exterior long shot as Nishi kicks this youth onto the ground.

The tension between action and reflection, involvement and detachment, is visually established in the static shots that predominate in this opening, shots that prevail at the expense of detailing the violence with which Nishi overcomes his antagonists (which would be the conventional point of a scene such as this, over and above the narrative information that this protagonist is a violent character not to be trifled with). It is also present in the editing, *mise-en-scène* and the choice of shot scale in this introduction, which opens out the antinomy at hand to include the audience. Kitano, in effect, positions

them as active participants in constructing the drama and reflecting on its meaning, working to construct spatial orientation, indeed, what is actually happening (or what has just happened in the case of the youth cleaning the car), rather than simply passive consumers of violent spectacle and narrativized action.

What this then implies is the facilitation of distance, of a contemplative distance on the part of the audience, a looking at the action of the film rather than a vicarious partaking in it. This is borne out later in the film in several striking scenes, particularly the single take that details Nishi being told by a doctor of the extent of his wife's condition. Here, in a static long shot showing Nishi and the doctor in profile, facing one another across a table, Kitano stresses the world around Nishi and his physical separation from it by emphasising prominent action in the three planes of the visual field. In the immediate foreground is a nurse's head that sporadically obscures much of Nishi; whilst in the third plane, outside the window beside which Nishi and the doctor are sitting, a cluster of plants blow from side to side in the wind (another image of the natural world taking precedence over the protagonists).

It is a picture of a seated, static, seemingly lifeless Nishi that will appear throughout *Hana-Bi*, and which contrasts with the moments of violence, which become the only moments where he is able to command the situation in which he finds himself. Otherwise, at least throughout the first part of the narrative, he remains a detached presence, and this detachment is mirrored in the fact that the audience is held at a distance from him, even as the structure of the film reflects his disturbed and alienated mindset. This in fact reflects a traditionally Japanese precept: a presentational import whereby the diegesis is not offered through the typically Hollywood technique of the

window on the world, but is explicitly mediated through the overt presence of a controlling consciousness.

This oblique opening also succinctly establishes the complexity of structure within the first half of *Hana-Bi*, which is such that it requires considerable effort on the part of the audience to reconstruct the story in linear chronology from the way the plot is assembled. The initial lack of spatial cohesion graphically prefigures this construction. In moving from a shot of vastness and enormity (the sky) to the minutiae of human specificity in the spatially ambiguous alternating close-ups of characters, Kitano in effect creates a psychological rather than a physical space. He introduces a subjective rendering of the diegetic world that thereafter takes precedence as an intrinsic norm of the film's style (something borne out by the a-linear structure of the first half of the narrative).

More than Bresson, Keaton or Scorsese, there is a palpable Soviet aesthetic to *Hana-Bi's* opening passage that has been overlooked by commentators (like Geoff Andrew<sup>40</sup>) eager to connect Kitano with forebears such as those named above. In particular, the way in which the shots and centripetal compositions rigidly compartmentalize the action and characters recalls late-period Eisenstein films such as *Alexander Nevsky* [1938]. Here, Kitano's characters are frequently locked (visually) into shots whose autonomy within the design of the overall scene is repeatedly stressed. This design then becomes symbolic of the discrete and isolated worlds that will ultimately collide throughout the narrative, as characters entrapped within their own private spheres of existence begin to reach out and connect with one another.

Following this opening skirmish, Nishi is seen driving away, and the camera takes in a prominent view of Tokyo under the title of the film (in English, like *Sonatine* and *Kids*

*Return*). One of the manifold ways in which *Hana-Bi* departs from Kitano's earlier work, and not simply his Yakuza and Cop films, is in this specificity of locale. His first six pictures tend to lay stress on blank, determinedly anonymous spaces, something Casio Abe uses to argue for their universality<sup>41</sup>. His seventh, by contrast, almost immediately identifies itself as taking place in Tokyo through the aforementioned shots that include the Tokyo Tower, Rainbow Bridge and the Shinjuku intersection sign. Abe refers to this difference in *mise-en-scène* by describing *Hana-Bi* as 'the first of his (Kitano's) films that could be characterized as "colourful"<sup>42</sup>. However, as already noted, one should regard this with diligence and caution, not simply as Kitano providing a sense of Japanese exoticism to help his film become a more saleable product in the Western marketplace, much as directors such as Kinugasa Teinosuke, with *Jigokumon (Gate of Hell, 1953)*, and even Mizoguchi did in the 1950s.

Rather, this specificity of locale figures in another prominent dichotomy. The third act of *Hana-Bi*, when Nishi and his wife take to the road in an attempt to repair their lives and relationship, contrasts with the earlier sections of the film set in Tokyo. In this particular antinomy, the initial urban milieu is juxtaposed with the seasonal and traditional beauty of Japan. And with this antinomy is entailed a difference from earlier Kitano films, one pertaining to Nishi's relationship with the environment, the milieu, in which he lives and works.

Through the presentation of Tokyo as Tokyo, Nishi becomes a fundamentally different being from his forebears in Kitano earlier Cop and Yakuza works. This is because it is made explicit that he is not a simple product of his milieu as Azuma in *Violent Cop* and Murakawa in *Sonatine* both are. At the outset, it appears as though this is

not the case. There seems to be a clear connection, a link established and made manifest by the camerawork. This is especially so in the shot of Nishi driving outlined above: it is a high-angle long-shot (itself of a type absent from previous Kitano films), in which the camera tilts upwards to trace the path of the car, before craning and panning left to take in a panorama of Tokyo.

It is a shot that seems to link Nishi to his environment, to Tokyo. However, there is a subtle thematic at work here. Tokyo is located in eastern Japan - its name in fact means, literally, 'Eastern Capital' – and Nishi in Japanese means west. By setting the early part of the film unambiguously in Tokyo, there is thus a prevalent dichotomy, at the level of the protagonist himself: one between Nishi and the city in which he lives and works. As such, rather than Nishi being a character defined his locale, the violence inherent in the milieu to which he has too long been exposed, the discreet opposition prevalent in *Hana-Bi* connotes the fact that it is Nishi's particular situation is of a more insular nature. It is, conversely, Nishi's own life and actions in the narrative (especially his overly hasty attack on Horibe's assailant, and his failure to then act further when his colleagues are shot<sup>iv</sup>).

There is also a further underlining of the contrast between Nishi and Horibe here. The latter, living as he does by the sea, responds and reacts openly to his own environment with his painting, inducing a more symbiotic relationship between the two. Horibe's physical imperilment, and his reaction to both that and his immediate milieu, contrasts with Nishi's psychological malaise, his guilt and insularity. This interior nullification has

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<sup>iv</sup> This is a further example of *Hana-Bi's* particularly close relationship to *Violent Cop*. Both characters' actions and lack thereof cause harm and death to others. The difference and development from the former to the latter arises from responses to this action and incident. Specifically, Azuma's actions in Kitano's debut do not carry the attendant feelings of remorse and guilt that Nishi experiences.

a possible further correlative, one that has thus gone un-remarked upon by commentators on Kitano and *Hana-Bi*: the precise problem with Nishi's wife, Miyuki. The nature of her illness is ambiguous within the film. It is never explicitly stated in the Japanese dialogue of the film that his wife is suffering from leukaemia or any physical ailment: Nishi's colleagues simply presume this to be the case, but it is never explicitly, independently, verified. Indeed, when the doctor talks of Nishi taking her on a trip, he simply refers to her condition as one that medicine can no longer help to cure (certainly, her physical condition does not at any point appear to be that of a woman in the final stages of a terminal disease).

Reading the film in this way, one can extend the existentialist line of inquiry from earlier Kitano films and hypothesise further about choice and action on the part of Nishi, especially regarding the reasons for the suicide (double suicide?) that he embarks upon. This act suddenly becomes wholly ambiguous within the narrative, and in many ways crucial to the meaning of the film (which is another pertinent reason for considering *Hana-Bi* as a detailed re-working and summation of *Sonatine* and especially *Violent Cop*, as it not only separates out much of the film's violence but also makes one question and probe that which is intrinsic to the plot).

However, in order to fully comprehend the film's strategy, the ways in which it leads to this complexity, this questioning of violence and action, it is necessary at this juncture to interject with a brief consideration and elucidation of something already touched upon in this chapter: the issue of Japanese-ness and the *Hana-Bi's* perceived qualities of Zen and classical quietude. In any event, given the preponderance of critical commentary stressing this aspect of the film, especially as contrasted with golden age directors like

Ozu (Dave Kehr explicitly likens the end of *Hana-Bi* to that of *Tokyo Monogatari/Tokyo Story* [1953]<sup>43</sup>), it is worth looking at and expanding upon. Indeed, it can become a means not only to understanding both Kitano and *Hana-Bi*, but also to highlighting some of the problems inherent in occidental perceptions and constructions of Japanese filmmaking.

To this end, the review of *Hana-Bi* that appeared in the now defunct UK film magazine *Neon* can, unfortunately, stand as representative of the substitution of broad clichés in place of any real consideration of the text that so cripples much Kitano criticism. After a few paragraphs detailing the plot, perfunctorily celebrating the beautiful compositions and bluntly comparing Kitano to Robert Mitchum, the final sentence reads thus: 'If for nothing else, this film should be watched for the ending. Never has something so violent been so uplifting. Which is all very Zen, very Beat Takeshi'<sup>44</sup>.

This reviewer's curious and facile sentimentalizing of *Hana-Bi's* complex and disturbing dénouement (a succinct encapsulation of the aforementioned tendency in some Western critics to lazily refer to Eastern and Japanese tenets) is as marked and problematic as Donald Richie's reading of the close of Ozu's *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949). Richie describes this film's desolate final scene - in which the daughter, pressured by various factions into a marriage against her will, has left her home and beloved father all alone and thus facilitated the irrevocable breakdown of her hitherto close family unit - as one of 'untroubled serenity'<sup>45</sup>. In fairness, Richie is not alone in his view. Even so different a voice as the cultural critic and historian Ian Buruma has talked of Ozu in similar terms, noting in his book *A Japanese Mirror* that *Late Spring's* dénouement represents Ozu's commitment to the 'Great beauty in the melancholy inevitability of its (life's) passing'<sup>46</sup>. Or, to quote a Japanese response to Ozu, the New Wave director and

author of the book *Ozu's Anti-Cinema*, Yoshishige (Kiju) Yoshida, has described *Late Spring* as 'a heartwarming family drama concerning a father and daughter'<sup>47</sup>.

And so it has been with Kitano, especially with *Hana-Bi*. Ozu himself, in one of the most telling of his own remarks, said of critical perceptions of his work that: 'they don't understand, that's why they say it's Zen or something like that'<sup>48</sup>, and this could be as apt a comment on Western discourse on Kitano as on that of Ozu. Again, it is not that such elements are nowhere in evidence in Kitano's work, just that they haven't been adequately analysed or even defined, instead being taken as received opinion and never challenged, never examined. Indeed, as Isolde Standish notes in the introduction to her book *Myth and Masculinity in Japanese Cinema*, the orthodox occidental view of Japanese cinema in general has been one of 'a unique aesthetic form'<sup>49</sup>, which in the West has 'only added fuel to the myths surrounding *Nihonjinron*'<sup>50</sup> (constructions of Japanese-ness). This has, in Standish's view, led to an 'othering' of Japanese cinema in which difference has been equated with originality, and which has all but crippled discourse in the West.

To take the Ozu analogy a little further, it is not insignificant that the sea features prominently in both *Late Spring* and, especially, *Hana-Bi* (as, of course, it does in all Kitano films). Images of water, generally of rivers and streams, have long held an important place in Japanese art, particularly the work of Kenko Shokei and the prints of Hiroshige. This is something that has often been read into the country's filmmaking by critics, both Western and Japanese, eager to define Japanese cinema as one with its progenitors in the visual arts. Traditionally, as Tadao Satō has explicated, water

represents the ‘Buddhist concept of flux and impermanence<sup>51</sup>’, with rivers portrayed as ‘Places conducive to expressing and confronting one’s emotions<sup>52</sup>’.

This is, broadly, fair enough: and Satō’s examples from films by Yamada Yoji (the *Tora-San* series), Ozu and Mizoguchi quite convincingly bear out his thesis as far as they go. However, one immediately becomes aware of the dangers of taking this approach too far when confronted with the concluding paragraph of this section of Satō’s essay:

**‘In the films of such directors as Kurosawa Akira, Imamura Shohei, and Oshima Nagisa, all of a younger generation than Mizoguchi and Ozu, effective use of river and lake imagery is relatively rare. Perhaps this relates to these directors’ distance from traditional Japanese culture<sup>53</sup>’.**

If one takes such an assertion - that ‘effective’ (the fact that this value judgement appears is critical) use of river imagery is rare in post-golden age filmmakers - to its logical conclusion, one is surely left to conclude that water imagery which doesn’t relate to Buddhist principles is somehow not ‘effective’. That is, such pictorial depictions of rivers and lakes are not worthwhile, certainly not worth serious critical attention, if not of a traditionally Japanese nature. Given this, can one then infer anything else but that images of water must work thematically to reinforce concepts of flux, impermanence or the serenity or melancholy or beauty in life’s passing? This seems extreme, but in fact is in keeping with a certain tendency both of Japanese commentators to emphasise such interpretive tenets, and for Western critics to almost unthinkingly repeat and rehash these as evaluative models, even norms.

Kitano and especially *Hana-Bi* has figured strongly in essays detailing its *nihonjinron*, or exploration of a specific Japanese identity. It is a work whose particular images of water can be seen to implicitly figure in these readings. However, rather than simply jumping to the conclusion that it is symbolic of a Buddhist or Zen worldview, as Richie does with Ozu in his commentary for the Criterion release of Ozu's *Bakushū* (*Early Summer*, 1951), one should look at how exactly these images work in the context of the narrative itself.

The case of *Hana-Bi* is complex, especially so given the preponderance of images of water in the film, and the fact that one can relate Satō's notions (broadly) to its thematic core. But what must be remembered is that this connection to water is not in relation to Nishi; it applies centrally to Horibe more than to the film's protagonist, as he spends his time convalescing and painting at the sea front. Indeed, it is through Horibe that the free motif of the sea is primarily focused and with whom it is most overtly associated. As will subsequently be elucidated, one can connect this to the structural parallel between Horibe and Nishi on which *Hana-Bi* is predicated and which elucidates much of their respective characters and emotional trajectories.

If one traces a thematic of water imagery, it becomes immediately apparent where *Hana-Bi* appears both in concordance with Sato's argument and, more importantly, where it departs from and subverts it. The thematic association of Horibe with the sea is, from this perspective, almost a self-conscious appropriation of the Buddhist notions outlined by Satō in that Horibe's most pointed moments of contemplation and reflection come when he is by the sea. It is here that he looks solemnly to his future and wonders exactly where his life will go, what will become of him. It is also this locale that initially instils in

him the desire to paint and to reach into himself and discover his soul and inner being in the wake of the crippling of his physical body (again a contrast with Nishi is made manifest, in that, in contradistinction to Horibe, he has an able body that can take and dispense physical violence but is, as stated above, entirely paralysed and unfeeling on the inside).

One could argue that this is designed to offset Nishi and his particular connection to the sea at *Hana-Bi's* dénouement - which has been most readily identified as crystallizing the film's Zen thematic. Independently of Horibe, Nishi is only seen at the sea in this final scene, when he shoots himself and his wife. Here, it is just as valid to say that, as with Ozu's film, much of the resonance of its place in the narrative of the film comes from specific associations accrued throughout the film that can be regarded independently of any connotations of spiritual contemplation.

Yet the ending of *Hana-Bi* has still been regarded as transcendent and 'uplifting'. It has still been lazily perceived as redolent of such vague notions of Zen as Western critics have been only too eager to read into a multitude of Japanese films and filmmakers. In truth, given the ostensible uniform, the explicit level of Japanese-ness worn and examined by *Hana-Bi*, such a reading is perhaps not without a certain justification. But given the subversion of this thematic core and stylistic predominance elsewhere in the film, it is a mistake to simply take it at face value here at the end.

To return, then, to the question of the suicide and the meaning of *Hana-Bi*, one can pose the question: if it is not because his wife is going to die anyway - and the attendant fact that he cannot stand to have a further close family member taken from him - that Nishi kills himself and Miyuki, then why? Could it be that he feels will be captured and

convicted of the bank robbery? This is indeed arguable. Nakamura's motives in following Nishi become a further instance of ambiguity in the narrative. He appears pensive and resigned, possibly at having to arrest his one-time superior. However he ultimately appears to act more as a friend than as a cop, something that is inferred when he orders the bodies of the yakuza that Nishi has killed to be placed back in the car in which they were shot.

Nishi, though, does not know this. All he sees when Nakamura and his partner arrive at the beach at the end is that, like the yakuza, two cops have followed him, and one would then imagine that he thus expects to be arrested, something that is underlined when Nakamura says to Nishi that he has seen the bodies. Significantly, this final scene not only begins with a visual re-inscription of the Heideggerian conception of *Dasein* as existing in a marked temporality incorporating present (Nishi in the car), past (Nishi's past as a cop, which is represented by Nakamura behind him) and future (his possible future with his wife, who has left the car and is standing in front of him on the beach).

Thus Nishi is placed explicitly in-between two competing forces, in an agonized present that is located and contextualised, indeed defined, by what has gone before and what is still to be. For the first real time in the film, Kitano (as he will do in his next film, *Kikujiro*) moves explicitly into POV editing in connection to his protagonist only at the end, as though to emphasise the birth of some kind of subjectivity within his detached mindset.

Elsewhere in the film, there has been an explicit denial of Nishi's gaze, not simply at the beginning but on numerous occasions, and most overtly in the shooting of Horibe's attacker. In this scene, implicitly related by Nishi in one of the film's few overt

flashbacks (the a-linear structure, though subjectively ordered, is not built around flashbacks so much as figurative ruptures of temporality that are subjective in effect but not literal recollections). This scene, though, is a key exception, figuring first in snatches of single images before being related as a whole, and always keyed in by shots of Nishi remembering. Here, POV shots from the perspective of Nishi's colleagues immediately prior to Nishi attacking the man give way, when they themselves are forced into action and subsequently shot, to an explicit denial, a wrenching away, of POV on the part of Nishi. Kitano moves from an anguished close-up of Nishi (in slow motion and with all diegetic sound removed), which appears to be cuing in an optical POV, to a stark, high-angle composition that looks directly down on the cops wrestling with, and being shot by, the criminal.

This represents the absolute crystallization of Nishi's figurative impotence, the horror of looking, of seeing, events over which one can exert no control or influence. It is, though, a shot taken from Nishi's mental POV, and from this regard what is important is that it figures in the totality of *Hana-Bi's mise-en-scène* as a painting. The figures in their agonizing struggle are placed against an all white background, a canvas, against which blood splashes, as it will later when Horibe throws red paint over his suicide canvas. As such, this juxtaposition further entails a pejorative contrast on Nishi's part with Horibe. In painting, the latter can express, and thus potentially move on from, his despair. Nishi's actual life work of destructive art is something that will continue to haunt and infest his soul.

However, this editing precept is changed at the end, when there are clear point of view shots from Nishi's perspective, in the above noted shots of Miyuki standing alone on the

beach before Nishi and Nakamura and his partner arriving behind. This is significant because it is at this precise moment that Nishi carefully places two bullets in his gun, and one must question: at this point in the narrative, are these two bullets for the cops? Or are they for himself and his wife?

What must also be taken into account here, and again it is something which has thus far gone un-remarked upon in critical discourse on *Hana-Bi*, is the fact that Nishi kills both himself and his wife in full view of a little girl who has been playing on the beach. This girl, played by Kitano's own daughter, is playing with a kite until Nishi, as he had done earlier with the youths playing baseball, pretends to join in with her. However, he goes on to cruelly break her kite by holding onto it as she runs away, before proceeding with his double suicide as the girl looks on, confused and perturbed in medium-shot, with the sound of the waves lapping the shore remaining the sole aural accompaniment. It is a scene in which the timelessness and enormity of nature is once again counter-pointed the transience and mutability of human life and existence.

One could hardly miss this aspect of the scene, as the film closes on the above-noted shot of the girl, fading out on her astonished, and uncomprehending visage. Kitano further emphasises the desolation of the scene in another doubling and recapitulation. In a Sergio Leone-esque moment, the crane shot that rises above Nishi and his wife is synched to the final burst and crescendo of Hisaishi's score. However, all sound is temporarily removed as the two gun shots that kill Nishi and Miyuki ring out (the sound of the lapping waves noted above can be heard only after several seconds' silence). This then recalls the moment in the hospital when Nishi is informed of the shooting of Detective Horibe. Here, in another prominent descent, Nishi and Nakamura walk down a

staircase into darkness, and Kitano removes all diegetic sound whilst holding on the empty frame.

As stated earlier, Horibe's tragedy is the film's inciting incident: a moment of seismic change after which the lives of the major characters are irrevocably transformed, informing and colouring their feelings and actions throughout the remainder of the film. Just as the lighting of a cigarette by Nishi segues immediately into the shots that cripple his partner, beginning the detailed juxtaposition of the two characters: so, at the end, the two gun shots that kill Nishi and Miyuki echo the two gun shots that cripple Horibe. The silence that follows in the aftermath of both scenes then serves to cement the connection between these moments of death and devastation.

Moreover, it also underlines not only the tragic import of the respective scenes and incidents, but also the evasive cowardice of Nishi in comparison to his partner, who moved on from his own suicide bid to attempt the far more difficult task of negotiating life over death, living over dying. This is where the question of the location, and the use of water, returns. The suicides take place beside the sea, and this refers one back, ironically, to Horibe and the specificity of his situation, his openness to the immediate environment in which he lives and the fact that this is juxtaposed with the opposite example of Nishi. Ultimately, the beach is the site and space for Horibe to begin to contemplate his life and take his first tentative steps on the road to recovery. That it should also be the site where Nishi chooses to end it all is thus particularly meaningful. It encapsulates the dichotomy between the two men, representing as it does, life for Horibe and death for Nishi.

In the last instance, what should be understood by this troubling and probing dénouement is that it relates back to the event that became the catalyst for the breakdown of Nishi's family and his and Miyuki's state of mind: the death of his young daughter. From this perspective, one can return to *Hana-Bi*'s preoccupation with the views and perceptions of those characters outside the main core of the action and looking in and read the extreme long shot as a point of view from Nakamura's perspective. In so doing it can be regarded as a (potential) picture of an idyllic family life. Indeed, Kitano's trademark tableau composition can be juxtaposed with the oft-seen painting of a happy family beside a firework explosion that resembles a flower. However, this is then shattered by the double suicide, by the violence and death that ruptures the façade and illusion of a happy family as a previous death had ruptured a real one.

It should be remembered that the film begins with a number of the characters talking overtly about their families as they embark upon the fateful stakeout, almost parading their familial situations in the same overt, visible way as other aspects of the film are paraded, particularly its tourist picture of Japan. So to return to this scene at the end is a logical step as a means of recapitulating this thematic core. And from this perspective it is nothing less than a revenge on the world and his fate on the part of Nishi, cementing both the tragedy and pettiness of the character.

With this is also highlighted a further reason for the suicide. One can conceive of Nishi not deciding on his fate when he loads his gun in the car. But, rather, only making up his mind to take his and Miyuki's lives when it can become, for him, a performance, of self and of his remorse and his suffering. In other words, one could argue that it is only upon seeing the double audience in attendance (the cops and, a little later, the girl) that he

finally, definitively, makes up his mind and decides to proceed with his devastating act of violence.

*Hana-Bi* thus ends as it began: with a moment of elided violence and a shot of the enormity of the world contrasted with the actions of the characters within it. Indeed, it is even more explicit in recapitulation as the camera moves away from Nishi and Miyuki to frame the sea all in one shot, whereas the shot of the sky at the beginning cut away to Nishi. It is something that returns to the question of performance and the overt facade of reality. *Hana-Bi* is not, of course, the first Kitano film to offer a figurative stage on which his characters act out rituals of despair and destruction. It is, however, along with *Dolls*, the one that applies this precept in its most complete form.

*Hana-Bi* is Kitano Takeshi's most important film, summarising and extending the parameters and the nature of his art and variously inducing and cementing perceptions of him as a serious auteur director. It is also an important work from the point of view of Japanese filmmaking, becoming for the 1990s what *Rashōmon* was for the 1950s: the country's foundational cinematic text abroad and a popular hit in the domestic market for an experienced but not commercially successful or widely accepted filmmaker. It is a picture that remains at the heart of Kitano oeuvre, the body around which his other works orbit. It is also a paradigmatic auteur text, a great work of genre cinema, and a tellingly, revealingly Japanese narrative. That Kitano immediately signalled his intent to move away from violent subject matter in his work pointedly connotes the extent to which his seventh film, 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 7', crystallizes his use of this material, the artistic expressivity he had honed over the course of his Yakuza and Cop pictures. However, the

fact that Kitano has continued to draw on *Hana-Bi* in other ways, particular regarding its structure and *mise-en-scène*, is further testament to its potent vision and canonical centrality. It is a film that, in carnival terms, marks at one and the same time both the death and (re)-birth of the cinema of Kitano Takeshi.

## Notes

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