UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

KITANO TAKESHI: AUTHORSHIP, GENRE & STARDOM IN JAPANESE CINEMA

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The Return of the Kids!

A Scene at the Sea [1991], *Kids Return* [1996] & *Dolls* [2002]

It is possible to sub-divide and compartmentally categorise the oeuvre of Kitano Takeshi in several distinct and mutually compatible ways. Thus far, the tendency in the critical discourse on his work has been, rather too readily and too easily, to focus on those aspects of his films deemed salient authorial determinants - such as the violence and tenderness - and apply this to the body of work as a whole. Thus, for better or for worse, one repeatedly finds in reviews of films such as *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi...* (*A Scene at the Sea*, 1991) and *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1999) a focus on their lack of the violent material found in other, better known Kitano films. Similarly, a number of reviews and essays about *Hana-Bi* [1997] concentrated on its perceived Zen qualities, and in the US this quality of quietude and *mono no aware* was then read into other works that were released in the wake of 1997, even *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990).

It is, of course, the central tenet of film authorship to evaluate one of a perceived auteur's films against the oeuvre in general. However, as the aforementioned example of *Hana-Bi* can amply attest, it is nonetheless the case that the common critical conceptions of Kitano Takeshi or even 'Beat' Takeshi that have gained consensus opinion have often been lazily employed, rehashed and repeated. This has been true even when they have

been at odds with the film themselves; or when (as in *Kikujiro* and its treatment of childhood and the road movie) there are empirical practices of analysis and national cinematic scholarship that are, again too readily, seen to elucidate the work in question. It is a problem associated with the prominence of and easy reliance on auteur studies in general that these tenets were rapidly identified as authorial signifiers and employed as such.

What is really at stake here, and what will be one of the chief arguments in this chapter, is a re-configuring of the criteria of Kitano's authorial identity. One of the key means of evaluating the director as such is by concentrating on those films that have thus far been (implicitly or explicitly) considered marginal, peripheral in the totality of his cinematic output. In the case of Kitano, this also ties in to the aforementioned re-ordering of his canon, as one can group together the films he has directed but not appeared in: works that can further be seen as forming a revealing parallel to, and inverted images of, their better known counterparts.

Like the films with which Kitano's cinematic name was made - *Sono Otoko, Kyōbō ni Tsuki...*(*Violent Cop*, 1989), *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993) and *Hana-Bi*, *A Scene at the Sea*, *Kizzu Ritān* (*Kids Return*, 1996) and *Dōruzu* (*Dolls*, 2002) are genre-based works. Furthermore, like the former Yakuza pictures, these latter films also belong to a genre that in 1990s Japanese cinema was once again coming into vogue following a period of golden age prosperity, subsequent decline and a relative paucity of production: the Youth genre, or *Seishun eiga*. In considering these films together, this chapter will seek to demonstrate the extent of Kitano's artistic personality. That is, to test his authorship with

less well-known and ostensibly very different films to those that made his name, and to

validate the importance of these against these more famous works.

Important films in the Kitano canon

The three films in question in this chapter, though largely well received both in Japan and

in the West, have received far less critical attention than Kitano's Cop and Yakuza works.

However, in several important regards they can be considered of equal importance in his

canon. *A Scene at the Sea*, though his third film, was the first which Kitano edited

himself, something that would thereafter become the norm in his filmmaking. When

asked about this decision by Hasumi Shigehiko in an interview conducted at the time of

the release of the film, Kitano's response was that he could not possibly entrust the job to

anyone else. As he said:

> **'At that time, I was more or less conscious of my own
> heartbeat, and so I saw the picture as my heart beating
> and the blood circulating through my body...This was
> a really selfish film, and so I cut it to fit me comfortably.
> If I had turned the material over to someone else, they
> would have cut it at an entirely different pulse[1]'.**

A Scene at the Sea is thus a very personal work for its director, and as such saw other

crucial developments that established the norm for almost all the films that were to

follow: especially the beginning of his partnerships with producer Mori Masayuki and

composer Hisaishi Joe. The former has produced every Kitano film since his third.

Conversely, Hisaishi would become one of the director's most important and enduring

artistic collaborators. With the single exception of *Minnā-Yatteruka* (*Getting Any?* 1994),

he would go on to score every one of Kitano's subsequent films up until *Zatoichi* [2003], and in fact picked up a prestigious Japanese Film Academy award for his work on *A Scene at the Sea* (the only one it was awarded despite nominations for direction, editing and screenplay).

Kids Return was Kitano's sixth film, and first since the near-fatal motorcycle accident he suffered in August 1994 (after which its departure from previous Kitano films in its focus on living and moving forward in life can be seen as particularly meaningful). It was his most important work until that time with regard to his commercial standing and national profile as a filmmaker. Indeed, it is the film that laid the base on which the huge success of *Hana-Bi* would be built in the following two years. With the partial exceptions of *Violent Cop* and *A Scene at the Sea*, which became modest successes, all Kitano's films preceding *Kids Return* were commercially unsuccessful in Japan, with several (most clearly *Boiling Point* and *Sonatine*) proving box-office disasters. However, with his sixth he finally was able to reverse this trend and make a film that struck a chord with audiences: a film that managed to establish a foundation of success in Japan and to consolidate the western triumph of *Sonatine* on the international stage.

The case of *Dolls* is a more complex one. Like *A Scene at the Sea*, its importance relates much more to Kitano's artistry - specifically his status and identity as an inherently Japanese artist - that to his commercial brand (to which the film contributed little by proving a box-office disappointment and garnering largely negative notices around the world for its empty stylization and sentimentality). As has been elucidated elsewhere, the nature of Kitano's filmmaking changed with and after *Hana-Bi*. That film reworked the generic foundation of his early films into a much more specifically Japanese narrative

pattern and thematic core. At the same time it simultaneously made over his *mise-en-scène* in line with the kind of visibly exotic Orientalism that had (in different ways and to different degrees) helped in popularising Japanese cinema in the West in the 1950s[2].

Following *Hana-Bi*, Kitano's stated aim was to distance himself from the one element of his films that had afforded him the most notoriety, particularly abroad: their violence. Thus, his career trajectory from *Kikujiro* onwards has seen Kitano become a much more marked, much more inherently Japanese filmmaker. Whereas many of his films before *Kids Return* had tended to take genre as a point of departure in the assertion of an authorial identity (culminating in *Sonatine* and Kitano's desire to rework Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* [1965] as a Yakuza narrative), those from *Kids Return* and *Hana-Bi* are fundamentally different. They have tended to remain by and large faithful to Japanese genres, narratives and archetypes. Even *Brother* can be read as an exploration of Japan's place in the international community, and as a programmatic exploration of the classic yakuza themes of duty, honour and brotherhood as they pertain to paradigms of Japaneseness.

It could thus be argued that the under-acknowledged *Dolls* represents the culmination of this dimension of Kitano's filmmaking, as well as marking the apex of Kitano's inscription of his authorial presence within his *mise-en-scène*. If *Hana-Bi* is 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 7' and *Kikujiro* 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 8' (its working title), then *Dolls* is most certainly 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 10'. From this perspective, far from being a minor and 'shamelessly gorgeous (and) impersonal[3]' film as Jonathan Romney wrote in *Sight and Sound, Dolls* becomes one of his most important and significantly personal works. With it, the two aforementioned, post-*Hana-Bi* strands of Kitano's cinema   - its visual

stylization and inherently Japanese subject and thematic - find their logical and organic point of convergence and climax.

Cruel Stories of Youth

The *Seishun eiga* can be said to twice have died and been reborn: and the two major flowerings of the genre have coincided with the aftermath of seismic social events, with a time when the country was itself in a formative period of development and growth, of figurative adolescence. The immediate period following defeat in World War II was obviously the first such period. At this time, Japan underwent immense change, devastation and transformation, being literally destroyed and subsequently rebuilt from the ashes.

The manifestation of the *Taiyōzoku*, the most prevalent sub-set of the *Seishun eiga*, was heralded by the publication of the novella *Taiyō no kisetsu* (*Season of the Sun/Season of Violence*) in Japan in 1955. The author of this work, Ishihara Shintaro - who was awarded Japan's most prestigious literary award, the Akutagawa prize (after the author of *Rashōmon*) - became the figurehead of the *Taiyōzoku*. The following year the paperback publication of a collection of Ishihara's novellas (one of the biggest sellers of the year) and three film adaptations of his work brought about a true turning point in Japanese culture and cinema.

Season of the Sun and the works that followed immediately in its wake effectively established the abiding characteristics of the genre. In several novellas and films - such as *Taiyō no kisetsu* (*Season of the Sun*, 1956), *Kurutta kajitsu* (*Crazed Fruit*, 1956), *Shokei no heya* (*Punishment Room*, 1956), adapted by Ichikawa Kon and the story *Yotto to*

Shōnen (*The Yacht and the Boy*) - minimal plots focus on the bored, aimless and hedonistic offspring of wealthy, absent parents. These youths indulge in vicarious sex and violence as leisure time pursuits at upmarket locations such as their homes, holiday homes, trendy seaside resorts and nightclubs and fairgrounds.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the war, women had become central to the Japanese workforce. This continued throughout the occupation with the enforced constitution which granted them political and legal autonomy and the right to choose a partner for marriage. Women and femininity thus began to pose a much more overt threat to masculinity and the social hegemony than ever before, and in the *Taiyōzoku* films one can detect a response to this particular crisis that takes into account both female (narrative and sexual) agency and, as Isolde Standish notes 'a re-negotiation of the binary, active/male-passive/female gender dichotomy[4]'.

As such, these films exerted a marked influence, in particular pre-figuring the youth films of the New Wave in introducing a female-centred narrative focus and a concern with the materialism (rather than the spiritualism) of the body[5]. However, the films of Oshima and his generation built on these immediate progenitors in a multitude of ways, to the extent that the *Taiyōzoku* was relatively short-lived as a cinematic genre. By the time of the first flowering of the New Wave and their films about disenfranchised youth, it was all but over, and the new *Seishun eiga* began almost immediately to subvert and politicise its archetypical characters and narratives.

In films by Oshima, Shinoda Masahiro, Hani Susumu and Yoshishige Yoshida, the thematic treatment of youth really became apparent in Japanese filmmaking. As David Desser makes clear in his study of the New Wave *Eros plus Massacre*, concerns with

youth were fundamental to the new Japanese cinema of the late 1950s/1960s[6]. Oshima, who heralded this revolutionary series of films with *Ai to kibō no machi* (*Town of Love and Hope*, 1959), had been outspoken in his praise for works such as *Crazed Fruit* and Masumura Yasuzo's similarly groundbreaking debut *Kuchizuke* (*Kisses*, 1957). Of the former, he observed that: 'in the rip of a woman's skirt and the buzz of a motorboat...sensitive people heard the heralding of a new generation of Japanese cinema[7]'. Of Masumura's neo-realist inspired film he remarked: 'I felt now that the tide of a new age could no longer be ignored by anyone, and that a powerful irresistible force had arrived in Japanese cinema[8]'.

The key directors of the New Wave all made films concerned with youth. Shinoda emerged as a director with *Koi no Katamichi kippu* (*One-Way Ticket for Love*, 1960) and *Kawaita Mizuumi* (*Dry Lake/Youth in Fury*, 1961). Yoshida made his mark with *Rokudenashi* (*Good for Nothing*, 1960[i]), and *Chi wa kawaiteiru* (*Dried Blood*, 1960), which both centre on juvenile criminals. Hani in many ways pre-empted the above in his work as a documentary director. Beginning in 1954 he made two documentary shorts entitled *Kyōshitsu no kodomotachi* (*Children in the Classroom*, 1954) and *E o kaku kodomotachi* (*Children who Draw*, 1956) before going on to direct films like *Furyō Shōnen* (*Bad Boys*, 1961) that used real delinquents as actors.

Oshima's own early films served to cement the youth film in its New Wave manifestation. His second film, *Seishun zankoku monogatari* (*Cruel Story of Youth*, 1960), takes its cue from Masumura's *Kisses* in its frank tale of two young lovers on the

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[i] This film also features a number of scenes in which the couple at the heart of the narrative – an affect-less youth and the young secretary who represents a hope of salvation - drive around in his car, encased in their shell away from the outside world.

margins of society. This debt is made overt in Oshima's copying of the famous hand-held, free-form shot of the amorous protagonists on their motorbike, in which both their passion and their arrogant indifference to society is made manifest in the liberated energy of their speeding through the streets.

Oshima signals his intent in this film by beginning with several scenes that subvert the iconography of the *Taiyōzoku* sub-genre. A young man rescues the female protagonist from a potentially violent incident, and the two casually, indifferently attend a student demonstration (connoting their alienation from the contemporary specificity of their society then). Following this, they proceed to the waterfront, where the girl is raped by her erstwhile saviour in a scene that begins with a shot of the sun before tilting down to the young couple arriving by the water. This is a significant shot that immediately makes it clear that what follows will play out in the same figurative world as the *Taiyōzoku* films, but that it will twist said films' typical situations of the almost endless pursuit of fast sex and draw it out to its dark, logical conclusion: rape.

The fundamental vision in the New Wave youth films is one of disaffection and alienation. Their protagonists are cut off from almost everything and everyone around them, and often lash out blindly at the world in acts of violence. Sex features heavily in works by all the New Wave directors, often as a retreat or attempt at liberation from social malaise (in Oshima especially) or as an act of violence in itself, but as in Kitano's work it is rarely a healthy expression of love. Rather, it is a means of marking out individuality, and of marking time in otherwise aimless lives. Like the number of young children who figured in Italian Neo-realist films, these youths become paradigmatic of a

lost, corrupted generation, and represent an unviable future for a country hurtling in a new direction with its economic miracle.

Following the New Wave and its preoccupation with youth, it is perhaps fitting that this subject and generic form should only return to a similar level of prominence and visibility of production in Japanese cinema in the 1990s, as it was at this time that the second of the aforementioned periods of change and re-birth took place. The death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989, and the bursting of the miracle bubble economy shortly thereafter in the early 1990s (after several decades of unparalleled prosperity) led to another decisive break from the past. Indeed, this is quite literally the case, as a new Emperor (Akihito) entailed an official change of era, one with its own aims and defining characteristics.

Once again, then, these occurrences heralded the end of one age and the start of another, of a figurative new era of national youth. However, before the re-emergence of the genre attendant upon this transformation, there are notable and important precedents to consider, both in literature and in the cinema. With regard to the former, the clearest examples are Murakami Ryu's first novel *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (*Almost Transparent Blue*), which like Ishihara's *Season of the Sun* was the recipient of the Akutagawa prize following its publication in 1976, and Murakami Haruki's bestseller *Noruwei no mori* (*Norwegian Wood*), which appeared in 1987. Of the latter, one can point to several films that appeared alongside the New Wave, most significantly by two directors generally considered on the periphery of the movement: Suzuki Seijun's *Kenka erejī* (*Elegy to Violence/Fighting Elegy*, 1966) and Masumura Yasuzo's *Nise Daigakusei* (*A False Student*, 1960).

These works both deal in different ways with students and the intense and imposing environment of the school and university. In the ensuing decade, the feature debut by Ishii Sogo, arguably Japan's most prominent counter-cultural filmmaker, related a story of the pressures inherent in the Japanese education system in *Kōkō dai panikku* (*Panic High School*, 1978). This recapitulates *A False Student*, which concerns a habitual academic failure who pretends to have passed the entrance exam to a top university to avoid disappointing his mother, but who falls foul of the radical student movement on campus. *Panic High School* similarly focuses on the stresses and strains of high school, this time leading to violence and murder as one pupil snaps under the pressure to conform and to succeed.

In the 1980s, several directors began to specialise in marginally high concept offshoots of the *Seishun eiga*. The work of Sawai Shinichiro is now little-seen, but his films *W no higeki* (*The Tragedy of W*, 1984) and *Sōshun monogatari* (*Early Spring Story*, 1985) depict scenarios in which Youth film precepts are bound up in other generic formats. Similarly, Somai Shinji's *Sērā-fuku to kikanjū* (*Sailor Suit and Machine Gun*, 1981) concerns a figurative youth film narrative in the guise of a Yakuza picture, whilst the same director's later *Taifū kurabu* (*Typhoon Club*, 1985) is one of several films in the 1980s and early 1990s to be set almost entirely within a high school, and which concerns a group of adolescents who become trapped when a typhoon rages outside (the weather an outward manifestation of the raging and unstable emotions inside the building, and inside the characters).

Comparable works, such as Kaneko's Shusuke's 1999:-*nen no natsu yasumi* (*Summer Vacation: 1999*, 1988) and Nakahara Shun's *Sakura no sono* (*The Cherry Orchard*, 1990)

also remain within the heady locale of the high school, in the case of Kaneko's film a boarding school (and surrounding environs) at which four students remain throughout the summer vacation when it is otherwise entirely deserted. All three films have elements in common, especially their concern with time and youth, with special moments that will soon pass and come to an end. However, they are, by and large, isolated rather than representative examples of the Youth genre.

In the 1990s, like the Yakuza form, the *Seishun eiga* once again returned to prominence. Indeed, it did so not simply beside the Yakuza film, but often interrelated with it in works that conflate the two generic categories. There is a precedent for this in a number of New Wave films, such as Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth*, Yoshida's *Arashi o yobu jūhachinin* (*18 Youths who Cause a Storm*, 1963) and Shinoda's *Namida o shishi no tategami ni* (*Tears on the Lion's Mane*, 1962). Latterly, one can point to the early work of Aoyama Shinji: *Herupuresu* (*Helpless*, 1995) and *Chinpira* (*Two Punks*, 1996); and several Miike Takashi films: *Naniwa Yūkyōden* (*Osaka Tough Guys*, 1995), *Gokudō Sengokushi: Fudō* (*Fudoh: The New Generation*, 1996), as well as Kitano's own *Kids Return* and *Dolls*.

These twin genres are highly compatible, as both explore rigid and hierarchical environments in which individuality is strictly subordinate to the group, and in which notions of power and violence are ritualistically enacted As noted earlier, Suzuki's film *Fighting Elegy* is a particularly important work with regard to this strain of the *Seishun eiga*, its representation of high school as a perennial war zone looking forward to such films as *Bī-boppu haisukūru* (*Be-bop High School*, 1985), *Fudoh: the New Generation*, Toyoda Toshiaki's *Aoi haru* (*Blue Spring*, 2001), *Haisukūru: Hīrō* (*School Wars Hero*,

2005) and, perhaps most overtly, Fukasaku Kinji's *Batoru rowaiaru* (*Battle Royale*, 2000).

Like the previous decade, the 1990s also saw several filmmakers emerge that, whilst not concentrating exclusively on the Youth film, certainly returned to this generic form on a number of occasions and made a significant contribution to its re-emergence. Directors such as Toyoda, Miike, Shiota Akihiko, Hashiguchi Ryosuke, even Miyazaki and Takahata at Studio Ghibli (and, of course, Kitano) all contributed significant *Seishun eiga*. Their films focus on those children who slip through the cracks and become marginalised and alienated, their identity crises emblematic of a country that in the 1990s had lost all stable points of self-definition.

Kitano's Cinema and the *Seishun eiga*: Scenes by a tranquil Sea

A Scene at the Sea was Kitano's first film away from Shochiku, the studio for whom he had made *Violent Cop* and *Boiling Point*. It was also his first under the auspices of his own *Ofisu Kitano* (Office Kitano) Media Company, which has since gone on to produce not only Kitano's films but also films by other notable directors (including the Chinese sixth generation luminary Jia Zhang-ke). Kitano reportedly made it quickly and simply, without even a finalised script, in order to put 'black ink[9]' in the books following the commercial failure of *Boiling Point*.

It was noted at the start of this chapter that the significance of *A Scene at the Sea* has generally been overlooked[ii]. In addition, its meaning and thematic core has also tended to

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[ii] This has been confirmed recently, with the release in the UK of a DVD box set containing Kitano's first six films (everything from *Violent Cop* to *Kids Return*). This is the DVD premiere of *A Scene at the Sea* in Britain, and a review in *Empire* magazine does little more than gloss over the film, noting that it represents

elude a number of commentators, to be obfuscated by critics presumably confounded as to what to make of its ostensibly anomalous status within Kitano's oeuvre, especially its lack of violence and stylization of editing and *mise-en-scène*. Even Tony Rayns, who has remained arguably the most perceptive and important Kitano critic in English language discourse, has seen in the film 'a truly rapturous love story[10]', a curious assertion for a film that evinces little sense of a healthy, mutually-fulfilling relationship based on reciprocal affection.

At its heart, *A Scene at the Sea* is not a love story, but an existentialist parable bound intricately up with the vagaries of the Youth film genre. Like Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth* and *The Sun's Burial*, Kitano's film represents an important and entirely logical updating of the essential tenets of the youth genre, in particular its *Taiyōzoku* sub-set, for a new and vastly different social milieu. It transposes the scenarios of rich and hedonistic youths chasing sex at the start of the economic miracle to the post-bubble environment of Japan at the beginning of the 1990s. As such, while the characters of *Season of the Sun* and *Crazed Fruit* live their lives for the moment in pursuit of immediate gain and gratification, the handicapped (deaf and mute) protagonist of *A Scene at the Sea* is diametrically opposed. His emotional trajectory is the gradual betterment of himself through his devotion and dedication to surfing, to applying himself and working hard for long-term gain and (spiritual) advancement.

Thus the materialism of the body outlined by Isolde Standish[11] in *Season of the Sun* and its generic counterparts, their emphatic sex and performative masculinities, are replaced by impaired physicality and a progression of the soul. For this reason, *A Scene at*

Kitano's 'lighter side', and is about a 'deaf dustman (who) takes up surfing'. (Errigo, A *Takeshi Kitano*

the Sea is as significant a film of and for its time as its *Seishun eiga* progenitors of the 1950s, something reinforced in its presentation of the defining *Taiyōzoku* locale: the beach and seafront. In *Season of the Sun* and *Crazed Fruit*, this is a place devoted entirely to leisure activity and sexual conquest, a pleasurable locale to be savoured. In Oshima, by contrast, it is subverted as the symbolic site of sex's violent mirror image, rape, and becomes a place of conflict to be endured. In further contradistinction, Kitano depicts the sea as an active participant in the narrative, a space to be mastered and an obstacle to be overcome. Indeed, this diametrically opposed presentation of the central, defining *Taiyōzoku* locale is underlined by the fact that Shigeru's (nominal) girlfriend Takako is ever-present whilst he is practising his surfing.

However, as is typical with Kitano (and, moreover, what is a recurrent feature of his work seen here for the first time), the relationship between the pair never admits any sexual dimension. It is thus the case that, in the space almost entirely given over to varieties of sexual conquest and immediate gratification in an entire sub-genre of filmmaking, Kitano's fated protagonists are as removed from sex as it is possible for an ostensibly healthy relationship to be.

One can, then, relate *A Scene at the Sea* to the time in which it was made, just as one can with the first flowerings of the *Taiyōzoku* films in the late 1950s and the New Wave manifestations shortly thereafter. Whereas the youths in *Season of the Sun*, *Punishment Room* and *Crazed Fruit* can stand as representative of the new consumer Japan of the early years of economic prosperity, of chasing immediate gain and (sensory and material) fulfilment, Shigeru in *A Scene at the Sea* is diametrically opposed. As a garbage man, he

is paradigmatic of a Japan that has lost its wealth, its prosperous and florid façade; whilst as a dedicated surfer determined to better himself at all costs he reflects a nation that has to take time in pursuit of the advancement of something more important than immediate surface gain and gratification: namely, the self; the soul.

Given this thematic focus, one can uncover a marked, Kurosawa-like existential element to *A Scene at the Sea*. This aspect of Kitano's work has often been raised and ticked off as though it were self-evident and self-explanatory, requiring no elucidation. Yet this, as with the much vaunted Zen qualities of his oeuvre, has never been adequately defined. Indeed, the assumption seems to be that there is only one school of existentialism, and that this covers philosophers (Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Berdyaev), novelists (Camus, Sartre, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Peter Handke, Jean Cayrol) dramatists (Beckett, Pinter, Jarry, Ionesco, Genet) and filmmakers alike (Michelangelo Antonioni, Kieslowski, Werner Herzog, Michael Haneke, Michael Mann).

Kitano has himself explored several different existential paradigms. The existential basis of the Cop and Yakuza films, especially *Violent Cop*, has already been covered. That film could be broadly be argued to conform to the atheistic existentialism of Sartre in presenting an anguished, alienated character cast adrift in a godless universe. However, this is something of a simplification of Sartre's views, not least because he stresses the humanism of existentialism, the fact that men act not just out of self-interest but also for mankind as a whole, taking implicit responsibility therein for the way they act[12]. Azuma in *Violent Cop* and especially Murakami in *Sonatine* are shells of ultimately inconsequential men whose non-commitment to any code of behaviour and impulsive

instinct for action and violence deny a meaningful existentialist foundation in these terms. They have existence but not essence, and neither do they seek it. Responsibility and choice for Murakawa are largely meaningless: one course of action ultimately becomes as worthwhile or, more properly worthless, as another.

In contradistinction, *A Scene at the Sea* follows such Kurosawa films as *Akahige* (*Red Beard*, 1965), *Rashōmon* [1950] and, most overtly, *Ikiru* [1952] in featuring a protagonist who strives to behave, to act, in a way that gives essence to existence and meaning to an otherwise empty or morally distorted life. Kitano pares away the narrative and characterisations in order to stress this point even more emphatically than did his progenitor. From the striking opening to the film, which in its editing, static compositions and abrupt entry into the diegesis looks forward to *Hana-Bi*, Kitano presents Shigeru as a blank, affect-less figure. He opens with a shot of the sea as a veritable visual *tabula rasa*, or, more significantly, a Sartrean 'void' (*le néant*[13]), which functions both as a figurative clean slate on which he can build his particular vision and a mass of nothingness from which the protagonist develops his humanity.

From this Kitano unfolds the story of Shigeru's single-minded determination to improve at surfing, and quite uniquely for this director never strays from or even distorts the present tense of the narrative, not even to psychologize or venture inside either of the protagonists. One never learns anything about Shigeru or Takako save for their handicaps and the respective devotion that each shows: Shigeru to surfing and Takako to Shigeru as he surfs.

This latter point alludes to the reasons why it is a misconception to conceive of *A Scene at the Sea as* 'rapturous love story[14]', or as 'the happiest of his (Kitano's) films[15]'.

Romantic relationships in Kitano's films are generally sour and most often begin in *medias res* following the decay of any closeness between the man and woman. In several instances, such as *Hana-Bi* and *Dolls*, some sense of togetherness and tenderness is momentarily regained, but this is a fleeting moment, typically followed by the deaths of both characters. It is, in the last instance, somewhat telling that the only Kitano film in which a romantic union is witnessed from its inception through to its successful flowering is that of the young couple in *Boiling Point* which, of course, takes place entirely as fantasy in the mind of the young protagonist as he idly sits on the toilet.

Obviously, this does not quite cover *A Scene at the Sea*: there *is* closeness between Shigeru and Takako, and their relationship is not already disintegrating when the film begins. However, as Kitano begins to focus more on Takako there is also a sense in which the couple anticipate the bound beggars of *Dolls*. A recurring feature of their trip to the beach has Takako clinging to the surfboard that Shigeru is holding as he strides purposefully along, which looks forward to the couple literally tied together wandering through Japan's four seasons. Shigeru and Takako, unlike the fateful, destined and doomed union of Matsumoto and Sawako in *Dolls*, are tied by circumstance, bonded by their common disability that reinstates the isolation of Japanese youth. Indeed, this is another way in which Kitano subverts the *Taiyōzoku* genre and works as a particular rejoinder to the film of *Season of the Sun*.

As already noted, that film made specific use of the female gaze upon male action, in that case boxing, as a means of negating the homo-erotic undercurrents implicit in the exclusively male boxing club. The protagonist in *Season of the Sun* is thus (temporarily) positioned as the object of a sexually desiring female gaze at a socio-historical moment

when the traditional subservience of women was being challenged. In *A Scene at the Sea* there is once again a predominantly male sport in which the male performer is the object of a female gaze. However, in this film there is no desiring, sexual dimension to the look, no reversal of the Mulvian power structures of the gaze[16]. As often as not, the camera stays with Takako as she watches Shigeru, approximating rather than replicating her optical point of view, as if asserting her inability to be a desiring subject. The camera's distance from Shigeru when he is surfing thus emphasises not the gaze of Takako but the actual physical and figuratively emotional distance between the couple, between his activity and her passivity.

Takako's behaviour in these scenes reinforced this notion. She spends time folding Shigeru's hastily and messily discarded clothes and smiling affectionately at his clumsy early attempts at the sport, more akin to a mother or sibling than a lover or partner. Kitano underlines this sexless-ness by contrasting Takako with a girl whose gaze is overtly desirous of Shigeru, a girl who twice accosts him on the beach when he is not surfing with clear romantic intentions that are signalled by POV shots from her perspective. For his part, Shigeru is only explicitly positioned as bearer of the gaze when surfing is involved, such as the opening POV shot of the sea, or when Takako goes into the surfing shop for him to try and buy a surfboard.

Kitano has focused on many characters with disabilities and infirmities, usually the sibling (*Violent Cop*) or girlfriend/wife (*Hana-Bi*, *Dolls*) of the protagonist. Here this is elevated to a central, double affliction, and carries more figurative weight than do the aforementioned examples. It is the sense of isolation that is engendered that is crucial to *A Scene at the Sea*, relating as it does to Japanese youth in general. This is succinctly

established in the opening shots in a detail that may be termed the window on the world: the dominant mode of centrifugal compositions that emphasise the small view of the world offered by the camera and, as in Oshima or late Mizoguchi, work to bring off-screen space into play as a defining element of film style.

In the case of *A Scene at the Sea*, a recurring composition has Shigeru (later another young man) and the head garbage collector sitting on a wall eating lunch in front of their van, only the back of which is visible in the frame. To underline the presence of off-screen space inherent in the particular design of this shot, the camera then remains static as the van disappears and the action leaves the frame altogether, holding for a time before cutting away to the succeeding action (a stylistic element that will later become a central tenet of *Hana-Bi* and *Dolls*).

This compositional feature is further underlined by Kitano's decision to sporadically highlight the presence, the inexorable continuation, of day-to-day life as distinct from the protagonist. Shigeru is physically removed from those around him because of his handicap, but also thematically removed from Japan in his painstaking pursuit of self-betterment. This is then connoted in scenes such as the one in which Shigeru and Takako are separated after having gone out shopping because Shigeru cannot ride the bus with his new surfboard. Here, there is a brief, static shot following Shigeru departing the bus to return to Takako that simply shows the bus passing from left to right across the frame. Similarly, a much more pointed moment occurs towards the end of the film. It is a repeat of the aforementioned shot in which Shigeru and his supervisor were eating lunch by the sea with their van only partially in the frame. This time, the same supervisor is engaged in

the same activity, eating lunch, now with another youth who has replaced Shigeru as his assistant, much as Takako will soon replace him as her partner.

Again like Kurosawa, especially in *Ikiru*, society by and large fails to recognise such individual deeds, and continues as before. In the dénouement of *A Scene at the Sea*, it is significant that Takako's memories concern Shigeru more as a partner rather than as a surfer, as her boyfriend rather than as someone who dedicated himself to self-betterment and succeeded. Indeed, the implicit assertion in this final montage is the need for but the concomitant unreliable selectivity of memory. The Japanese title of the film, *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi* (which only appears onscreen at the end of the narrative) translates literally as *'That Summer, the most tranquil sea'*. This encapsulates the sense of looking back, of remembering and misremembering (Shigeru, one must not forget, dies in the sea), and of the notion that the future, any future, must be built on a past. From this perspective, Kitano suggests, the fact that we often invent this past (as characters in Beckett tend to do[iii]) is perhaps not a bad thing. Shigeru had no past, and died; Takako now has her own basis for living.

This feeds into a thematic of time in *A Scene at the Sea*: temporality as a progression towards death and of time away from time (that is, the official time of daily living) associated specifically with the beach. This is cemented when Shigeru is forced from this location by his co-worker, back to his job as a garbage man, which the protagonist is obliged to do in his wetsuit. Here again the film can be regarded as a key Kitano work as its narrative becomes an extension and enlargement of what in other Kitano films are

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[iii] The work of Samuel Beckett, especially *Waiting for Godot*, becomes an important reference point for *Sonatine*.

small scenes and moments where the protagonists escape from their lives and oppressive urban worlds.

The opening dyad of the POV shot of the sea followed by a shot of the bearer of the look, Shigeru, establishes this thematic. It is a juxtaposition of the timeless, the unchanging, with the comparative minutiae of human life, and offers a connection that already carries an implicit assertion of temporality and death in that it alludes to the transience of life within the unchanging world (something that will later figure in the endings of *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*). Thereafter, life for Shigeru becomes an explicit embracing of death as a means to his self-improvement, a means to him actually living. It is ambiguous at the end whether or not he has committed suicide, but one thing emerges clearly: his situation, his example and his life is an anomalous one. He is out of synch with the country and times in which he both existed and, finally, lived.

In *A Scene at the Sea*, like *Violent Cop* before it and *Dolls* later, the separation of the protagonists from the society around them, and the imbalance in their relationship, is visualized with a theatrical reconfiguration of space. The spare *mise-en-scène* of *A Scene at the Sea* in the beach scenes, dark sand and blue sea, works like a transposition of the classically blank *Nō* stage, usually made up of nothing beyond plain, undecorated wood with only a simple panel with pine tree that serves as a backdrop. Tellingly, when for a fleeting instance Sigeru and Takako achieve a certain integration within a group of surfers, it is at a surfing contest on a different beach, wherein the hustle and bustle of a great many people and the abundance of the bright colours of many wetsuits create a telling contrast to the near-monochromatic palette of the scenes at Shigeru's local beachfront.

Furthermore, the simplicity that characterises the *Nō* stage similarly applies to its narrative drama. Plays in the *Nō* repertory feature a very limited number of characters, usually only a *shite* (protagonist) and *waki* (deuteragonist). One may reasonably conclude on the surface that Shigeru and Takako occupy these roles in *A Scene at the Sea*. However, the relationship between *shite* and *waki* is generally a thematically unified and enlightening one not particularly built around roles of equal narrative weight or agency. Furthermore, subsidiary characters tend to fall into equally prescribed roles and types as those at the heart of the drama; as may be apparent from their designated titles of *shite-zure* and *waki-zure*, they are considered physical extensions of the main characters.

One of the ways in which this is typically shown is through performance, as the minor, *zure*, characters take their dutiful place as audience members whilst the protagonist(s) perform (usually a dance). This is perhaps best exemplified on film by Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-jo* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957), not simply when the protagonist Washizu commands an audience of his samurai, but in those scenes in which either Washizu's wife sits motionless as her husband stalks around the (bare) room contemplating his action and his fate, or when the roles are reversed and she prowls through her space (even dancing as the murder is being carried out off-screen) whilst Washizu sits, seemingly frozen on the spot.

One could relate this as profitably to *A Scene at the Sea* and argue that Takako is simply the *shite-zure* to Shigeru's *shite*: that she is simply an extension of him in a bond based on a common handicap. The fact that the bulk of the film concerns Takako taking her place on the beach to simply watch as Shigeru progresses with his surfing confirms this view, as do the frequent shots showing her gripping the rear of his surfboard as they

walk together, literally holding on as she is pulled behind her boyfriend. They are, in effect, akin to two sides of a single person, one character fractured into two constituent elements, and in this respect the death at the end of the film is the death of Takako's inhibitive side. As detailed above, if Shigeru embraces death to live, then his death then allows just that with regard to his erstwhile partner. It is a complex thematic that negates any simple assertion of *A Scene at the Sea* as a love story.

Kids Return: Kitano Takeshi and paradigms of a new cinema

Kids Return concerns two variously delinquent youths, Shinji and Masaru, who after struggling in school pursue respective paths in boxing and the yakuza. In so doing their exploits are contrasted with several of their classmates, including a shy, lovelorn student, two prospective Manzai stand-up comedians and a gang of bullies whose actions at times ape those of both Masaru and Shinji. The film is thus Kitano's most direct study of the topical issues of youthful disaffection and institutional malaise, his exploration of these subjects highlighting several familiar and distinctive Kitano tropes. Chief in this regard are two alienated protagonists; the diffuse, contrastive narrative structure; and the themes of the limits of individuality and individual identity, violence and the masculine psyche, the ties that bind in close relationships and the existential questioning of choice, responsibility and self-definition.

Also recognisable as a Kitano trait is the avoidance of a single point of view on the protagonists and the diegesis by dramatizing characters on the periphery of the narrative that in some way shed light on the heart of the drama. This narrative device has been something of a Kitano staple from the beginning of his career. It can be seen in *Violent*

Cop with Azuma's timid protégé who ultimately becomes the corrupt drug pusher inside the force, It is also present with Kitano's unhinged yakuza Uehara in *Boiling Point*, whose rampant, monstrous disregard for any limitations on his behaviour throws into relief the temerity of the adolescent protagonists in the highly regimented worlds through which they move.

However, the film is otherwise a marked departure for Kitano. In particular, the narrative structure and the storytelling of *Kids Return* differs pointedly from earlier Kitano works. His previous genre films, most especially those of the Cop and Yakuza mould that made his name, had tended to pare down the Fabula and in many ways emphasise its distortion by the Syuzhet: in other words, to foreground the presentation of the story, the fact that is being told and controlled. *Kids Return*, by way of contrast, eschews the minimalism and formalism of Kitano's other work. It is heavily character and plot-driven in a simple, understated and transparent way not seen in any previous Kitano film, with character and story development commensurate to a feature-length mainstream narrative. It also gives the audience recognisably human, fully fleshed out, three-dimensional characters with which they can identify and empathise.

This tension between anomaly and conformity with regard to place of *Kids Return* within the Kitano canon can best be illustrated through a comparison with *A Scene at the Sea*. The comic supporting characters common to both *A Scene at the Sea* and *Kids Return* (the copycat bullies) are but one instance of a complex of contrasting elements between the two films. In many ways, *Kids Return* is as marked a companion piece to *A Scene at the Sea* as *Hana-Bi* is to *Violent Cop*. In both cases there is a comparable, symbiotic contiguity between the films in which the former sketches a tangible schematic

that is then taken up and reworked in an ostensibly different context and with a broader trajectory (of narrative and character) in the latter.

Like *A Scene at the Sea, Kids Return* focuses on two young outcasts whose bond together is central to their lives and their identities, and which is a positive element in an otherwise difficult existence. In another explicit recapitulation of Shigeru and Takako in *A Scene at the Sea*, there is a marked imbalance in the relationship between Masaru and Shinji, whereby one's need for the other outweighs any similarly reciprocal need. Although there is undeniably a mutual affection between the two, it is nonetheless the case that Shinji's devotion to his friend is stronger and more of a necessity for him than is true of Masaru. He seemingly thinks little, after twice being humiliatingly on the receiving end of violence, of abandoning his supposed best friend without a word and ignoring all Shinji's attempts to contact him.

In addition, whereas the former takes place almost entirely on the beach, by the sea, the latter is the one and only Kitano film thus far to omit any such scene. Not once in *Kids Return* do the alienated protagonists leave or find release from the confines of the urban anonymity that is their day-to-day environment. They never experience the particular, alternative, carnivalesque, time away from everyday life associated with characters and their moments by the sea in almost all Kitano's other films.

Similarly, the treatment of youth, and the narrative style and structure, of both films is diametrically opposed. The former has a minimalist design and an allegorical, symbolic narrative that is pared down in realization of the single-minded purpose and entrapment within himself that characterises *A Scene at the Sea*'s protagonist Shigeru. *Kids Return*, by contrast, is much more denotatively naturalistic (in tone and effect) and more bound

up in a causal narrative structure. Furthermore, whereas Shigeru in the former film exists as a blank entity in time and space, a signifier for existential existence and death, Masaru and Shinji are fully rounded and developed characters. Each has a distinct and tangible personality that Kitano succinctly and subtly elucidates. For instance, following Masaru's initial beating and subsequent absence from school, there is a short scene on the school roof (the pair's favoured hang-out when skipping class) of Shinji sitting alone and contemplating taking up smoking. Earlier in the film, there is a scene with both characters in which Masaru, who himself smokes, questions Shinji about why he does not, and asks why he does not try it. The later scene, then, by showing Shinji thinking about smoking in the place he happily frequents with Masaru, demonstrates Shinji's devotion to his friend whilst saying everything that needs to be said about his own lack of self-esteem and weak sense of self, his need for a dominant partner in a friendship. In other words, Shinji takes Masaru's absence personally, and imagines that by acting more like his friend (i.e. by smoking) his friend will like him again and return to school.

Kids Return is also by far the most overtly naturalistic of Kitano's youth films[iv] with regard to detailing and exploring specific rather than symbolic or abstract problems. As several commentators on this work have noted[17], many of the incidents depicted in the film have a peculiarly antiquated feel. Details such as the rice delivery that Shinji is undertaking in the very first scene, in addition to the popularity of both boxing (contemporary with the initial *Taiyōzoku* boom and an important aspect of the film adaptation of Ishihara's *Season of the Sun*) and porn films all clash with the 1990s. They

[iv] That Kitano turned directly to the Youth genre is not surprising as he had already published a collection of short stories, entitled *Shōnen* (*Boy*), all concerned with the trials and tribulations of young characters

speak more of Japanese social fads of the 1960s and 1970s than the decade in which the film was made and is ostensibly set.

One reason for this is that there is an autobiographical import to the film, especially the prospective Manzai comedians whose lives turn out arguably most successful of all, and whose show opens the film. It is difficult not to relate this to Kitano himself, whose break in show business came by this very route (Kitano has also said that the two protagonists were based on youths he knew at school[18]). What is more important, however, is the role of these characters in the precise progression of the narrative and its cumulative impact and meaning. There is no simple message that show business is a preferable route to more conventional means of employment. The essential point, rather, is one of the limits on individualism. The problems of the protagonists are diametrically opposed: Shinji is too dependent on a dominant figure to fall in line with, and Masaru (seen wearing a bright red jacket over his uniform at the beginning) is, like Uehara before him, too dominant a personality, too free of restraining influences. Indeed, it is one of the film's central ironies that in many ways each boy would have benefited from the chosen path of the other. Shinji could potentially have thrived in an ordered environment where emphasis is placed on subservience, whilst Masaru's aggression, individuality and taste for violence might, he if had possessed self-discipline and a strong work ethic, have made him a great boxer.

Similarly, the shy young student who becomes a company employee and, later, a taxi driver, is a victim of the complete suppression of individuality inherent in Japanese social groups and magnified in schools and the work force. Measured as part of this thematic,

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Kitano, T, Karashima, D.J. *Boy* Vertical, Inc., New York, 2007 (originally published in Japan by

the Manzai duo represents a picture of a harmonious professional relationship between two people built around the intricacy of the work they perform together. It is this defining aspect of their work, their status as performers in an act that requires both in a closely bound relationship, which makes the difference to their success.

Beyond this, and what makes *Kids Return* among the most prominent, most influential examples of the *Seishun eiga* in the 1990s, is the exposure in several key scenes of the nature of the educational system in Japan as symptomatic of the particular malaise affecting the country as a whole. The recurring criticism of Japanese schools in recent decades has been that students are taught simply how to pass exams, that they breed automatons geared only to take their place in the future as dutiful company employees in the regimented hierarchy of Japanese working life, as part of the force that has built up the country's industrial might. Alex Kerr, author of *Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan*, quotes from a Japanese psychiatrist who refers to the effect of the Japanese educational system as 'castration[19]'; while Kerr himself notes that: 'school in Japan is monochromatic...the whole regimen makes sense only if one is determined to battle through "exam hell," go to college, and become an obedient blue-suited salaryman[20]'.

Masaru and Shinji may be problem kids, but they clearly receive no help from their teachers, even in the form of discipline or punishment. Rather, these authority figures are content to ignore them so long as their behaviour does not disrupt classes too much. They offer nothing constructive, and are themselves shown to be selfishly concerned with their own image based on how many of their students made it into top universities.

Shinchosha in 1987)

Kids Return, again like *A Scene at the Sea*, bears fascinating and fruitful comparison with the *Taiyōzoku* sub-genre in its presentation of the male arena of the boxing club. Two important locations in *Season of the Sun* are the boxing gym where the protagonist trains and the arena where he fights. The boxing scenes in that film are central to the narrative's symbolic discourse on masculinity, gender relations, and the shift in the typical structures of power in patriarchal society (where males are active, desiring subjects and women passive objects of the male gaze). Isolde Standish relates this aspect of the film to the emergence in the post-war years of women as autonomous, independent subjects. It connotes, she says, the commodification of the male body, its star status as consumable entity, and the possible homoerotic subtexts inherent therein[21].

As was outlined in the first section of this chapter, the balance between gender relations is disturbed in the film when the girl, Eiko, actively pursues the protagonist Tatsuya, in particular when she enters the all-male world of boxing to watch Tatsuya fight. Like the central female character Eri in *Crazed Fruit* (who disrupts the harmony of the all-male group by becoming involved with two brothers), Eiko is ultimately punished for her transgressions. As Standish concludes[22], the twin problems of the containment of newly independent women and the homoeroticism of the display of male bodies for male consumption (which is then displaced onto the desiring female) are worked through and naturalized, eradicated.

Kids Return engages with similar problems and questions. However, the terms of the discourse are fundamentally different in that here there is no real female presence in the film. In actuality, one of the central tensions summed up by Standish as being at the heart of *Season of the Sun* - that of the transgressive female gaze brought to bear on male

performative activity - is fundamentally subverted in two scenes featuring characters on the periphery of *Kids Return*. During Shinji's first bout, a fellow boxer named Eagle is seen preparing for a fight and showing off to the encouragement of a female fan. Similarly, towards the end of the film, one of the school bullies who copied Shinji in taking up boxing is sparring in the gym and engaged in precisely the same behaviour, explicitly making himself a spectacle and performing for the evident pleasure of a woman watching him.

Here, the awkwardness and discomfort experienced by the protagonist of *Season of the Sun* as the desiring female looks on, is transformed into enjoyment of an objectifying gaze (the woman supporting Eagle not only watches, but watches inside the dressing room, an even greater transgression of boundaries than in *Season of the Sun*). However, as befits an era of greater independence still for women, this gaze is ultimately shown to be based entirely around prowess and success (the woman leaves when Eagle loses), and harmful to Eagle in that he loses his fight, in part because the pleasures of which he has partaken have damaged his training and his body. The unmistakeable implication at the end is that the bully is beginning a journey down the same road: that, unlike Shinji but very much like Masaru, he is using the sport for the wrong reasons.

This discourse on the commodification of desire and of the performance of the male body exists on the margins of *Kids Return* as part of the same diffuse method of structure and narration described above. From this perspective, it differentiates and sets in relief the relationship between Shinji and Masaru, which is crystallized towards the end in a succession of scenes at the gym. Masaru, having risen to a rank in the yakuza he feels (by his standards) is respectable, pays a visit to Shinji as he trains. The lingering gaze he casts

on his friend is mirrored soon after when Shinji arrives at the gym to find Masaru already there, stripped to the waist and sparring in the ring.

There is no other overt indication that the relationship between these characters is anything other than as good friends: nothing, that is, to encourage reading any homoerotic subtext into their feelings. They do not show any sexual interest in men. But by the same token neither do they show any real sexual interest in women. Sex is seemingly a marked absence in their lives. However, the fact that a desirous gaze defines the structures of looking at two different boxers on the periphery of the film serves to throw this central look, and relationship, into relief by way of contrast.

In the last instance, this ambiguity can be read as the ultimate point of the film. The emphasis in *Kids Return* on burgeoning subjectivities in teenagers naturalizes such an approach, in that confusions and uncertainties of identity and self are central to adolescence. Moreover, with particular regard to sexuality, this defining uncertainty represents precisely what is repressed in the institutional arena of the school, especially in characters who have remained visible as the object of other students' looks (at their unruly behaviour) and who thus have reputations and images to uphold.

Kids Return, unlike *A Scene at the Sea* with its ultimately linear conception of time, ends with a marked image of temporal circularity, as Masaru and Shinji return to the schoolyard to be watched by other students and dismissed once again by the teachers. 'Do you think we're finished?' asks Shinji, to which Masaru replies 'no, we're just getting started'. They have figuratively suspended the flow of time and returned to their student days. Now, again, they are cast adrift into the future. In contradistinction to Takako in *A Scene at the Sea*, there is no concrete basis for a better new life for these characters.

However, the fact that there is, and will be, life is itself something to believe in within the images of death that dominate in Kitano's body of work.

Kitano Takeshi's Dreams: the stages of *Dolls*

In many ways, *Dolls* presents a more difficult and contentious case to assess as regards the youth film. It is not a film that features overtly youthful, and certainly not teenage characters. Neither does it explore subject matter in common, or present a style consonant, with *Kids Return* or *A Scene at the Sea*. Certainly *Dolls'* status as a Youth film has not been alluded to in either Japanese or Anglophone criticism: commentators (understandably) more eager to discuss its stylized *mise-en-scène* and appropriation of a number of tenets from the classical Bunraku puppet theatre.

This is without doubt a legitimate and fruitful line of enquiry. The theatrical film is a Japanese model that stretches back as far as cinema itself. Moreover, that Kitano should turn to it when he did is wholly logical, as it connects him once again to the golden age of the 1950s and the subsequent decade's New Wave. It was in these eras that prominent Japanese filmmakers made the most explicit use of the visual and narrative tropes not only of the classical Japanese stage, but also of the contemporary, post-war new theatre, the so-called Shingeki, or Western-influenced modern theatre that flourished in the 1960s.

The nature of *Dolls* as a theatrical as well as a Youth film makes it an especially potent work to consider as part of a tripartite grouping along with *A Scene at the Sea* and *Kids Return*. *A Scene at the Sea* employs a spare *mise-en-scène*, elliptical narrative structure and particular concepts of *dramatis personae* derived from the Nō theatre to

augment its existential fable of life and the flux of human identity through youth. *Kids Return*, by contrast, has no recourse to a theatrical paradigm, presenting as it does an essentially naturalistic portrait of the trials and tribulations of Japanese youth and the pressures of the high school. In further contradistinction, *Dolls* adopts the tropes of Japan's venerable puppet theatre of Bunraku (in addition to the visual opulence associated with Kabuki) and is Kitano's most overtly stylized and formal film to date.

Similarly, *Dolls* extends the boundaries and parameters of the particular thematic worlds of its *Seishun eiga* progenitors in Kitano's oeuvre. Where *A Scene at the Sea* allegorises youth in an existential parable of self-betterment, and *Kids Return* is concerned with the social problems and pressures of Japan's high-school teenagers in the post-war era, *Dolls* broadens the horizon by exploring the personal and inter-personal consequences of youth. It explores how actions associated with youth can colour a life in the future (something that is, of course, especially potent in Japanese society, in which, as noted, the whole educational system is geared toward the passing of exams and the attaining of a good job, a secure future). In this sense, the strict emphasis on the present in *A Scene at the Sea* and the myopic reaching out toward a future in *Kids Return* is complimented by the structure and theme of *Dolls*. Like Oshima's *Nihon no yoru to kiri* (*Night and Fog in Japan*, 1960), it emphasises the past and its corrosive and oppressive encroachment on the present.

That the youth aspect of *Dolls* has received no critical consideration is not surprising when the film itself has received scant sympathetic treatment by critics, Japanese or otherwise. The film is doubtless the most maligned entry in Kitano's directorial canon - the critical refrain regarding its empty visual opulence and prescriptive, schematic

sentimentalism being proffered not only by Jonathan Romney, but Chuck Stephens in *Film Comment*[23] and by *American Cinematographer* and *Senses of Cinema* journalist Bob Davis in an overview of Kitano's oeuvre[24].

It is thus necessary here, partly in the interest of re-dressing the balance and chiefly as it feeds directly into the youth-aspect of the film, to answer some of the spurious charges that have been levelled at *Dolls*. At this juncture, the allusion to another Kurosawa film seems inescapable, his *Yume* (*Dreams/Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, 1990). Like *Dolls*, Kurosawa's very personal work was derided for its weightless visual opulence, self-indulgent sentimentality and, according to Kurosawa biographer Stuart Galbraith IV, the fact that 'Kurosawa has distanced himself from the material[25]'. It has also been felt that there is a marked autobiographical element to both films, that each work was especially personal for the respective directors.

Of course, given the literal basis of Kurosawa's film in his own dreams, one would presume the film to have been very close to his heart (for the first time in 45 years he wrote the screenplay by himself); although there is ultimately little that seems to relate to Kurosawa's life in any concrete way. Indeed only the fact that the home of the little boy in the first story is based on Kurosawa's childhood home (the sign clearly reads Kurosawa) and Baisho Mitsuko, who plays the little boy's mother, was apparently shown photos of Kurosawa's mother and instructed by the director how to model her performance after her. With regard to Kitano, several of his films, including *Kids Return*, have been read as containing elements of autobiography. In *Dolls*, the near fatal traffic accident and subsequent facial disfigurement of the pop idol Haruna reflects the similar fate that befell Kitano in 1994.

In a bold statement that seems to echo much of the vehement criticism of *Dolls*,

Donald Richie, in his book *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, notes that:

> **'*Dreams*...might be compared to...Jean Renoir's *Le Petit Theatre de Jean Renoir*...(in its) lessening concern for the realist style, a predilection for the stage, a tendency to tell rather than to show, and an inclination to moralize[26]'.**

Quite apart from the curious assertion that Kurosawa only turned away from realism

(itself something never adequately defined) in his later years - in which case one can but

wonder at exactly what is realistic about, say, *Kumonosu-jō* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957),

Dodes'kaden [1970] or even *Rashōmon* - the remainder of Richie's argument seems

tenuous at best. What is implicit here, and what Richie singularly fails to elucidate, is

why exactly such elements as realism and naturalism are to be valued above all others;

why artificiality and a 'predilection for the stage', are inherently negative qualities in a

film - especially in a cinematic and artistic tradition so overtly presentational and anti-

illusionist as that of Japan.

One could also point out here, with regard to Kurosawa as much to Kitano, that later,

overt manifestations of theatricality have their progenitors in earlier films built around the

aesthetics of the Nō theatre: in Kitano's case with already-discussed *A Scene at the Sea*;

for Kurosawa, the King Lear adaptation *Ran* [1985], the Macbeth adaptation *Throne of

Blood* and (to a lesser extent), the earlier *Tora no O o Fumu Otokotachi* (*The Men Who

Tread on the Tiger's Tail*, 1945).

This kind of quasi-Bazanian aesthetic is a strange weight to bring to bear on a film that is, after all, a visualization and externalization of subjective fantasy. And so it is with *Dolls* that, whilst not exactly criticised for its lack of realism, certainly garnered a host of vitriolic notices for the overt stylization of both the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. This is due in no small part to the fact that such techniques have generally been anathema to Kitano's oft-described minimalist cinema, with spare, almost functional camerawork and a palette composed of little beyond pale blues and blue-greys.

Bob Davis, in his study of Kitano, states as much when he discusses the anomalous, 'ugly', zooms in *Dolls*[27], something that he finds 'technically juvenile'. In a related criticism, he also makes reference to the distinctive semi-circular track around the Dolls and the chief couples that permeates the film, noting that the 'camera movement takes on an all-too-obvious thematic function[28]'. Unfortunately, quite what Davis means here is not entirely clear: does he wish to suggest that the thematic effect, the end of the cinematographic means, is too obvious? In which case, his failure to elucidate this theme on any level is most telling. Clearly, if this is true, the theme is beneath Davis' consideration.

On the other hand (perhaps, to give Davis the benefit of the doubt, the more likely option), does he mean to suggest that the fact the camerawork is clearly serving *some* thematic function is too obvious, and is thus to be castigated? If this is so, one could point to earlier Kitano films in which cinematography and editing are, quite obviously, highly meaningful and connotative (the spiralling overhead shot following Nishi's killing of the yakuza in *Hana-Bi*, for example, or, in the same film, the cut from Nishi firing his gun to

Horibe splashing red paint over his suicide canvas). However, this goes entirely un-remarked on in the text.

Ultimately, what is especially juvenile about this technique is presumably thought to be so obvious as to be beneath repeating in black and white. One can but infer that what is meant here is that Kitano has betrayed the mature minimalism and understatement of his most famous, self-starring films. Davis hints as much when he compares *Dolls* unfavourably to *Sonatine*. Of the latter, he notes that the protagonist's inner turmoil remains the more moving for remaining internal. *Dolls*, however, features characters 'so external...there's nothing left for an audience to feel[29]'.

This leads to the second major criticism of the film - one expounded by Davis and Chuck Stephens (and Romney) with equal venom: that of its hermetic and prescriptively hollow narrative style and the sentimentality of the individual stories therein. Once again, as with Davis' feature, one can deduce from a description offered by the author that he was perhaps not paying the required attention to the film - a discrepancy only in a plot synopsis, but suggestive of the lack of care taken with the film as a whole. Stephens outlines the bound-beggars strand thus: 'a callous career-climber...tries to reunite with the girl he's jilted only after she's lost her mind over him[30]'. There is very little, if any, room for ambiguity on this point. The film makes it absolutely clear that Matsumoto was pressured into marriage with the daughter of his boss by his parents, who are far more anxious for his career-advancement than he himself ever appears to be. The girl's friends presume the worst of him, and berate him for his heartlessness regarding Sawako. But they simply do not know the reasons for his decision; and during the day of the ceremony, he looks and behaves as though it is a funeral he is attending, not a wedding (which, one

could argue, it figuratively is - the death of his old self, the death of his *giri* at the expense of *ninjō*). Would Matsumoto have abandoned this wedding so readily and without so much as a second thought - the wedding that will secure his long-term future - if he were simply the 'callous career-climber' Stephens describes?

The conclusion in this review is, not unlike Davis', that *Dolls* represents a work in which the viewer is offered little room to manoeuvre. The film, Stephens says, amounts to a 'heartstrings plea of sympathy for the plight of the broken people, the crippled people, the wheel-chaired[31]' (in reference to the comic duo of the idiot and the quadriplegic who sporadically cross the various protagonist's paths). Yet is the film really this prescriptive: to again quote Stephens, is *Dolls* really this 'curlicued with filigree[32]'?

Rather than appearing to wring sympathy or pity from the audience, surely the opposite (if anything) is the case. In the universe turned on its head that is the diegesis of *Dolls*, underlined most overtly, of course, by the dolls controlling the human-as-puppets, these characters serve as a barometer of reality, of normality, against the ridiculousness of the protagonist's actions in the main stories. Indeed, rather than Kitano easily pleading for sympathy for these characters, he uses them as an inverted Greek chorus who, as opposed to commenting on the action, do little beyond point out how crazy the bound beggars are, how odd their behaviour is. The physical ailment of the cripple simply provides an objective correlative to the three central stories in that his outward disability contrasts with the emotional deficiencies and disabilities of the central characters in these stories.

His review further notes that the film is about the 'things-we-do-for-love[33]'. But under closer scrutiny one can uncover less idealistic and sentimental reasons for the characters' behaviour in the various narrative threads of *Dolls*. Arguably the purest act of love in the

whole film is the one undertaken by Sawako, which is conspicuously the one we are not shown - her suicide attempt. Matsumoto, on the other hand, could equally well be argued to act in a supremely selfish way. He leaves the girl he was pressured into marrying without a second thought for her (and Kitano cuts back to her to show that this girl *was* marrying for love, and is at least as much of a victim as Matsumoto was in being coerced into marrying her). Moreover, he immediately removes (kidnaps?) Sawako from the hospital, which, given she has tried to take her life and has suffered a complete mental collapse, is likely not the best course of action. He then proceeds to drag her across the whole country bound to his side in what could as well be a visible sign of his guilt rather than his love, a performative act for the eyes of the world that he is moving towards making himself feel better through a potentially redemptive act.

Sawako, for her part, could be argued to act in no less selfish a manner. There is a scene on a beach soon after the couple's travels commence. Sawako plays a joke on Matsumoto by tying his foot and pretending to have lost her hat so that he will attempt to retrieve it for her and fall over. With this, one may well conclude that she has come to her senses; and that for the remainder of the film she, like Matsumoto, is simply acting, putting on a show and punishing Matsumoto until she believes his sufferings have been commensurate to hers.

Of course, one could as easily argue that Matsumoto's boundless love for Sawako is such that all other considerations are necessarily peripheral, and that for him to reconnect with Sawako is more likely to heal her particular wounds than any physical or mental treatment (that Matsumoto heals her heart, the only organ in need of recuperation, and not her mind). But this simply underlines the contention here that there are several ways of

reading the characters and their actions in *Dolls*, and that decisions and motivations are open to interpretation and are not simply foisted on the audience as received and complete, hermetic emotional paradigms.

The same could be said of the two other stories in the film. The tale of the otaku, an obsessed fan, who deliberately and willfully blinds himself so that he might be able to meet his idol, pop singer Haruna, who herself has been involved in a car accident and has subsequently shut herself off from the outside world. One of the driving points of this story is the fan, Nukui's, intense rivalry with another male fan who also idolizes Haruna. Thus, one could very well read the former's decision to take his own sight not as the ultimate declaration of love, but rather as his desire to outdo his rival. This fan has on two previous occasions been shown getting closer to Haruna than Nukui himself has done, and his actions can therefore be seen as selfish, as his desire to prove to others and to himself that he is Haruna's number one fan.

Similarly, is the aging Yakuza boss Hiro's old girlfriend really acting on her immortal feelings for her lost love? Or, conversely, is the idea of someone eternally waiting for a long-gone partner something she, consciously or otherwise, is really attached to? After all, she freely admits to Hiro, whom she perhaps tellingly does not recognize, that he is never coming back to her, and it seemingly takes little time for her to become attached to another man. Significantly, there is here, as in the bound-beggars story (where it occurs at the very beginning), a scene showing onlookers watching and commenting on the protagonists. Are they simply passing judgment? Or are they viewing them as the actors, as the performers in a play/film that they are? Given the already argued centrality of

looking and being looked at in Kitano's films, this thematization of watching becomes especially important and connotative, much as it does in *Dreams*.

Several of the stories in Kurosawa's film concern the privileged viewing of a special, sacred or sacrosanct event. In the first, the young boy, in classic fairytale tradition, disobeys strict orders to the contrary and wanders into the woods to watch the wedding procession of The Foxes. In the second, another boy is given a unique performance by the colourful spirits of fallen peach trees in his family's orchard; whilst in the third a mountaineer is the sole person to see the menacing *yuki-onna*, the 'snow-woman', famous from Japanese folklore and also witnessed in the woodcutter's story in Kobayashi Masaki's *Kwaidan* [1964]. The fifth story has the protagonist enter the world of Vincent Van Gogh through his paintings, literally seeing the world through his eyes; and in the final story the same character is blessed to witness, as an outsider, a funeral procession through the remote, harmonious village of the watermills.

In *Dolls*, every aspect of the film relates in one way or another to looking, being or not being seen, vision and performance. Indeed, each of the three stories concerns two characters where one is literally or figuratively blind to the other. Sawako's descent into mental illness means she does not recognise Matsumoto for who he is. Hiro's girlfriend sees him after many decades but, again, is ignorant of his true identity: she cannot really see him; whilst in the meeting between Haruna and Nukui on the beach, the latter's self-blinding means he can no longer look at his idol.

The theme of vision is explicitly introduced during the play that opens the film, when a marked POV shot from a Doll's perspective opens the Bunraku performance. Thereafter, a number of different competing gazes are made manifest, between the two

sets of characters that occupy the centre of each story, between perceptions of these characters within the diegesis (both from other characters and, in the story of Haruna and Nukui, from the incessant glare of the cameras that record her image) and between Kitano's camera and the characters.

It is in this last area that Davis' objection to the cinematography of *Dolls* further misses the point. Shots such as the protracted zoom-in on Matsumoto and Sawako serve a self-reflexive purpose that underlines (in tandem with the *mise-en-scène*) the artificiality of the film as a film, a construct, and therefore to the fact that these characters are constantly under surveillance. The zoom-in on Matsumoto and Sawako in this example represents just this precept, the bound beggars being observed at a distance, with the highlighted view of the camera and of the audience serving to emphasise the lack of a private realm into which these characters can retreat. They are always being watched, perhaps always being controlled, whether by fate (in the guise of the dolls) or by their own self-serving feelings.

Attendant upon notions of performance and the look are those of gender and of power and control. Here again the story of Haruna and her fan explicitly contrasts with the two other stories. Both the bound beggars and the yakuza threads revolve around one person's figurative lack of vision and thus their submissive, oppressed position in the relationship as it stands. Sawako, as her friends warn Matsumoto, does not recognise her former fiancé, while the yakuza's boss's former girlfriend does not recognize who he really is when they meet in the park. In contradistinction, Haruna knows exactly who her fan is. She sees him even though he can no longer see her.

It is in this sense that vision equates to power and control, and here one can see *Dolls* as extending the critique implicit in *Kids Return* towards Japanese patriarchal, capitalist society. Most obviously, the obsessed fan blinds himself, thereby divesting himself of one of the central tenets of his phallic power over women - his gaze that positions her as passive object (Haruna, as a pop-star, clearly exists as a sign for consumption, and it is telling that, rather than records that she is signing in one of the key scenes of her story, it is a new book of photographs of her). His death immediately after his meeting with Haruna can then be read as a damning statement on the fundamental lack that is masculinity when robbed of its control and power. That is, either masculinity asserts its dominance or it ceases to be.

This extreme vision, in all three stories the death that results from close relationships, means that one could argue the case for *Dolls* being a horror film. Just as Robin Wood has argued that American films such as *Taxi Driver* [1975] and even *Looking for Mr Goodbar* [1978] bear more thematic points in common with horror films of the time[34], so too does Kitano's film (which was, after all, contemporaneous with an explosion in Japanese horror cinema) bear comparison with films such as Miike Takashi's *Ōdishon* (*Audition*, 1999) or past works like Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* [1954] in its emphasis on the terror released from love and longing.

Ruth Goldberg has argued that intense romantic passion has acted as an inciting catalyst for monstrosity in a number of Japanese horror films[35]. Indeed, in her essay in the anthology *Japanese Horror Cinema* she quotes from a story in a text on sex and Buddhism: 'Why is it that even the most clear-eyed monk cannot sever the red thread of passion between his legs?[36]'. The red thread here has marked religious connotations,

relating to the cravings of the flesh and the binding of man to carnal desire (that which should be resisted, detached from the soul to free the self from the otherwise endless cycle of death and re-birth[37]).

The Buddhist precepts applied here are in no way anathema to *Dolls* in the same way they are to certain aspects of *Hana-Bi*. The Chikamatsu Bunraku play *The Courier from Hell* that is performed in the opening scene directly relates a text based on Buddhist notions of impermanence and the flux of time. Kitano thus establishes a basis for reading such precepts into the subsequent stories, especially when one considers that it is the dolls that narrate these different threads, that (in a succinct image of carnival) turn the established order on its head and themselves become the puppet masters.

Thus, the red thread that is discussed in Buddhist texts becomes, literally, that which binds together Matsumoto and Sawako. This then becomes not only the bind resulting from masculinity and patriarchy ensnaring woman: it is Matsumoto bound to his own base self, not so consumed by sexual desire for Sawako as by his desire to possess her as his own and assuage his feelings of guilt. It is this that leads him away from life and into a Japan that becomes a vision of hell as marked as that into which the protagonist of Nakagawa Nobuo's *Jigoku* (*Hell*, 1960) descends following his own romantic travails. Indeed, the horror in *Dolls* occurs as Matsumoto is about to get married, which overtly echoes Nakagawa's film (and, as Goldberg points out, a number of classic Western horrors[38]).

Thus, it is explicitly posited that the horror arises from commitment and romantic union. However, the catalyst for the tragic initiation and development of this story can also be regarded as the placing of Matsumoto in a position of desired object. One can

infer that the daughter of his boss chose Matsumoto and her father organised the marriage, that it was her desire that propelled the breaking-up of Matsumoto with Sawako. Thus, following his surrender to *ninjō* over *giri*, Matsumoto attempts to re-assert his active masculinity by rescuing Sawako and binding him to her in their journey.

The ultimate fate of these characters is then marked by the (re)-formation of the heterosexual couple when they both seem to think about their happy engagement after finding a small bar. In a majority of mainstream films, the coming together of the romantic coupling, which is a norm of patriarchy, is the point of resolution, the happy ending. However, Kitano subverts this precept by having their re-connection and re-union lead directly to their deaths on the cliff (deaths that seem under-motivated from a narrative perspective given that they simply slip down the hillside).

It was noted earlier in this chapter that one of the principal reasons behind the misunderstanding of *Dolls* is the failure to acknowledge Kitano's aims and means. To complain, as Jonathan Romney has done[39], that beggars would not be expected to dress in ornate and designer kimonos is to miss entirely the film's symbolic progression. Indeed, it is very much to reject the film on its own terms (the fact that said kimonos magically appear before the characters from nowhere goes entirely un-remarked upon by Romney).

The visual stylization of *Dolls* has several important functions within the totality of the film text, such as its aesthetic correlative as subjective manifestation to the extremity of the character's various emotional states. It is in this sense that the film becomes the prototypical horror narrative, with the superficially picturesque landscape ultimately trapping the characters (particularly the bound beggars) in iconographic artificiality whose connotations of romantic splendour crush their confused attempts at self-

expression. To this end, it is significant that the key moment of apparent closeness between the couple, when they seem to share a happy memory of their engagement, occurs when the landscape around them has been literally drained, pared down to black (darkness) and white (snow). Their moment of intimacy is then followed by their deaths in the very next scene, the abject horror of romantic attachment and of youthful isolation in Japan finding succinct summation in a scene of complete visual nothingness. To this end, *Dolls* can stand as Kitano's final word on the Youth genre and its typical vision of alienation and estrangement.

Notes

[1] Kitano, T talking to Shigehiko Hasumi, quoted in Casio, A, Gardner, W.O. & T. Hori (eds) *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* (Kaya Press, United States of America, 2004) p.147 - originally published by Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., Japan, 1994

[2] The perceived visual exoticism of filmmakers such as Kurosawa, Inagaki Hiroshi, Mizoguchi and Kinugasa Teinosuke in their 1950s *jidai-geki* pictures can be seen as a decisive factor in their considerable success in the West, with a number of films (like Mizoguchi's *Ugestu Monogatari* [1953]) specifically tailored for overseas success

[3] Romney, J *Dolls* review *Sight & Sound* vol .13 n. 6 (June 2003) p. 42

[4] Standish, I *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, London, 2005) p.224

[5] Ibid. p.223

[6] Desser, D *Eros plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988) pp.39-75

[7] Oshima, N, Lawson, D (trans), Michelson, A (ed) *Is it a Breakthrough? (The Modernists of Japanese Film)* in *Cinema, Censorship and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima 1956-1978* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1992) p.26

[8] Ibid. p.27

[9] Quoted in the biography section of Kitano's official website – http://www.kitanotakeshi.com/kitanobio.html (Accessed 12/09/08) p.10

[10] Rayns, T *A Scene at the Sea* review in J. Pym (ed) *Time Out Film Guide Ninth Edition* (The Pengion Group, London, 2001) p.970

[11] Standish, I *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* p.223

[12] Sartre, J.P, Mairet, P (trans) *Existentialism and Humanism* (Methuen Publishing Ltd., Great Britain, 1974)

[13] Ibid. p.23

[14] Rayns, T *A Scene at the Sea* review in Pym, J (ed) *Time Out Film Guide Ninth Edition* p.970

[15] Udo, T *A Scene at the Sea* review in B. Jacobs (ed) *Beat Takeshi Kitano* p.26

[16] 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

[17] Most overtly, this has been discussed by Keiko I. McDonald – McDonald, K.I. *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context* (University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2006) pp.222-225

[18] Rayns, T *The Harder Way,* a short piece on *Kids Return* and an interview with Kitano in *Sight and Sound,* Vol .6 no. 6 June 1996 p.24

[19] Kerr, A *Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan* (The Penguin Group, London, 2001) p.285

[20] Ibid. p.298

[21] Standish, I *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* p.224

[22] Ibid. pp.224-230

[23] Stephens, C *Dolls Film Comment* (November-December 2004) pp.72-73

[24] Davis, B *Takeshi Kitano Senses of Cinema* online at http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/kitano.html (Accessed 12/09/08) p.4

[25] Galbraith IV, S *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune* (Faber and Faber, Inc., New York, Faber and Faber Ltd., London. 2001) p.607

[26] Richie, D *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, California, London, 1965, Third edition, 1996) p.223

[27] Davis, B *Takeshi Kitano Senses of Cinema* p.4

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Stephens, C (2004) p.72

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Wood, R *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1986) pp.50-58

[35] Goldberg, R *The Nightmare of Romantic Passion in Three Classic Japanese Horror Films* in McRoy, J (ed) *Japanese Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005) pp.29-37

[36] Ibid. p.29

[37] A number of works on Buddhism and sex make reference to these concepts of cyclical earthly existence as penitence. See Faure, B *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1998) and Stevens, J *Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and Sex* (Shambala Press, Boston, 1990)

[38] Goldberg, R *The Nightmare of Romantic Passion in Three Classic Japanese Horror Films* in McRoy, J (ed) *Japanese Horror Cinema* pp.32-34

[39] Romney, J (June 2003)

And The 'Beat' Goes On:

New directions for ('Beat') Takeshi and Kitano

BROTHER [2000], ZATOICHI [2003] & TAKESHIS' [2005]

> 'My core activity is trying to avoid being pigeon-holed
> by the public...I am Takeshi Kitano, I am Beat Takeshi,
> and you can't tell what I'm going to do next[1]'.
>
> Kitano Takeshi

> 'The special kick of Kitano's films...is the man himself.
> He's their centre of gravity, their most precious resource.
> In the distinguished history of actor-directors, he stands
> alone: not even Keaton used his own presence with such
> graceful economy[2]'.
>
> Kent Jones

This study has contended that *Hana-Bi* [1997] is the most significant of the fourteen films so far made by Kitano Takeshi. This work elevated its director to the esteemed pantheon of auteur directors, and stands as a precisely calibrated film at a point of summation, of detailed continuation *and* reconsideration, of the Kitano oeuvre up until that point. It also served as a marker of future stylistic norms and narrative/generic practice and technique. As such, 'Takeshi Kitano Volume 7' represents the end of a particular phase, an evolutionary epoch, in the development of said oeuvre, and the point after which Kitano's art changed quite dramatically. It is a watershed work: and his cinema in subsequent years has never been the same.

This development and transformation has remained almost entirely unacknowledged in critical discourse. However, the fact that he has very self-consciously aimed to re-invent himself with each successive film is among the clearest unifying threads of Kitano's post-*Hana-Bi* output (if one can talk of the commonality of a series of films residing precisely in their determined difference one from another). It is what contributes to his status as a prototypical carnivalesque filmmaker, that he has attempted to deny any normative, overtly unified system of meaning in his work: and it has variously been at the heart of his two most recent films, *Takeshis'* [2005] and *Kantoku Banzai* (*Glory to the Filmmaker*, 2007). One can thus conclude that, such is the prevalence of this aspect of his cinema that Kitano's own thoughts have become preoccupied with the subject.

As Kent Jones suggests[3], and as argued elsewhere in this study, Kitano's own performances have, since *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsukī* (*Violent Cop*, 1989), been a defining aspect of his work. This has progressed from Kitano's debut through to his increasing personalization of the Yakuza form that resulted in *Hana-Bi*. In these significant works of 1990s Japanese genre cinema, his characters' familiar wearied, emotionally empty, linguistically inarticulate, and almost entirely anomalous presence in the world, in addition to their instinctive recourse to violence, reached an apogee of inexpressive grace.

Since *Hana-Bi*, there has been a decisive shift in the method of signification, one that has entailed an attendant development of film and narrative style. Until *Hana-Bi*, Kitano's protagonists tended to exist at one remove from the milieu in which they lived, whilst in the subsequent films the world exists apart from the protagonists. This may seem to be two ways of stating the same point. But in fact what it underlines is the increasing subjectivity in terms of style and structure that is made manifest in

Kitano's work from (and including) *Hana-Bi* onward. In other words, to complement the insistence of diegetic looking and being looked at that forms such an integral part of all Kitano's films, the extra-diegetic gaze, that of the camera and of the audience, undergoes a paradigm shift with *Hana-Bi*: moving from an objective gaze (in both senses of the term: of a third-person view of the character and of the character positioned as object, receptive spectacle, of the subject's look) to a subjective elucidation. This latter mode is then characterised by narrative focalization, through a presentation of the world through the protagonist's eyes rather than an objective dramatization of his predicament: of looking with him as opposed to at him.

One can tell from this fundamentally different presentation of post-*Hana-Bi* protagonists in relation to the diegesis and to the narrative that the presence of 'Beat' Takeshi is central to establishing and reinforcing this element of his cinema. That it is by such means - by, one might say, Takeshi Kitano as signified through 'Beat' Takeshi - that the apparently radical diversity and (ostensible) alterity of recent Kitano films becomes most clearly interpretable. Kitano as actor and star, his physical visibility and the reality of his bodily presence, becomes both fore-grounded and deconstructed as representative of the new directions the films themselves embark upon. This is especially true of the three works that will occupy this chapter: *Brother* [2000], *Zatoichi* [2003] and *Takeshis'*. Kitano's performances (and by extension their contextual narratives and stylistic norms) here become divorced both from the televisual/filmic symbiosis and from the blank, reserved yakuza - the two strata of being that have defined and delineated the 'Beat' persona in the films of Kitano's in which he has appeared as an actor, as 'Beat' Takeshi. In their place is a figure that depends for its effect on channelling familiar aspects of Kitano's image as performer, but on manipulating and/or transgressing these precepts.

This is not confined to Kitano's own films. It is, for example, a central facet of Yoichi Sai's *Chi to hone* (*Blood and Bones*, 2004), which features Kitano as an abusive familial patriarch, a figure with an immense capacity for intensely personal, domestic violence for which 'Beat' Takeshi's cinematic image of (impersonal) violence in a genre context is progressively distorted. However, it is most keenly demonstrated in the films directed by Kitano. As such, these works are aptly placed to elucidate not simply the authorial presence of Kitano Takeshi but also the stardom of 'Beat' Takeshi; to trace the extent to which the by and large coherent Yakuza image is cogently developed, or otherwise.

This analysis, in seeking to bring the return full circle by reconnecting with the initial emphasis on the 'Beat' persona in Kitano's earlier work, will examine *Brother*, *Zatoichi* and *Takeshis'* in light of their presentation of 'Beat' Takeshi and the various related means by which they can be seen to represent a departure for Kitano's cinema. Familiar tropes of the 'Beat' persona, and the attendant ways in which Kitano (and others) have constructed and used it, will occupy a central focus and a point of departure in the argument. Through this route, concerns not only related to a transformation in performance, style and narrative, but also to Kitano's deepening self-identification as a Japanese artist - evinced in both *Kikujirō no natsu* (*Kikujiro*, 1999) and *Dōruzu* (*Dolls*, 2003) - will be analysed, as indeed will Kitano's ongoing dialogue with the myriad of cinematic allusions and influences that inform these works.

This emphatic diversification is ideally situated at the summit of both Kitano's oeuvre and this study, as these three films reveal much about the development of Kitano's artistry as a filmmaker. Key factors in this regard are his engagement with classical paradigms and progenitors of Japanese cinema, his appropriation of a generic

foundation (both a familiar Kitano framework, as in *Brother*'s yakuza format, and an unfamiliar, such as his foray into the *Jidai-geki* in the case of *Zatoichi*) and the carnivalesque aspects of his canon. But it also covers his approach to violence, the typical Kitano construction of character, and his clearly identifiable narrative style. All these aspects can be delineated and studied through an analysis of these three, as yet critically marginalized films, and as such can shed light on the better-known and more celebrated works that preceded them.

The concentration on the 'precious resource[4]' of Kitano's films, on 'Beat' Takeshi himself, then finds a perfect expression in Kitano's most recent work, the aptly titled *Takeshis'*. This intensely personal and interior film is another *volte face* in Kitano's career, and seeks to narrativize and interrogate notions of 'Beat' Takeshi, and what his stardom has come to signify. In so doing, it occupies a chronological and thematic place at the apex of Kitano's career (as it currently stands), and can be regarded as of a piece with *Hana-Bi* as the concluding chapter of a particular phase in his work. The analysis here will draw out these notions: it will locate *Takeshis'* within a lineage of useful Japanese and European progenitors, and argue that the meanings contained within this hermetic text carry complex ramifications for an understanding both of what has passed and what is yet to come in the ever-unpredictable cinema of Kitano Takeshi.

Going to America to Die – marking the Japanese body with violence

Hana-Bi and *Dolls* can be taken as the *locus classicus* of both a 'Kitano Takeshi' film and, more crucially for present purposes, as models of self-conscious change in Kitano's career. In the case of *Hana-Bi*, the drive towards auteur artistry within a familiar, pre-existing genre framework marked out Kitano's effort at transfiguring and

capitalising upon his previous entries in the cop/yakuza genre. *Dolls*, on the other hand, represented a move away from this format altogether, into the stylized realms of an artwork that, like Shinoda Masahiro's *Shinjū ten no amijima* (*Double Suicide*, 1969), allegorizes both cinema and theatre as its subject. It also invokes the literary project of a novelist such as Kawabata Yasunari, and his emphasis on the apprehension of the world through sensory experience and perception, through a re-conceptualization of art, tradition, nature and beauty. This style and thematic connects *Dolls* to *Hana-Bi*, and points not only to the commonality of their respective positions as films that surmise and crystallize preceding tenets of Kitano's oeuvre, but to the fact that they both consciously strive to re-define Kitano's cinema.

Brother was made immediately prior to *Dolls*, and was typically regarded as a repetition on Kitano's part of his previous yakuza films. One can certainly see how it may have been supposed to represent an attempt to capitalise on Kitano's post-*Hana-Bi* cachet by re-working the material for which he was best known into a story set in the US. However, Kitano had wanted to leave such material behind in the wake of *Hana-Bi* precisely because he was so closely associated with it. As a consequence of this desire for change, he made *Kikujiro*. For Kitano, his eighth film was a *Wizard of Oz*-inspired narrative that allowed a calculated subversion, and attendant transposition, of his familiar affect-less, inarticulate gangster persona into a diametrically opposed milieu. Following this, *Brother* similarly re-works earlier generic material, reconfiguring its familiar turf war in America plot into a inquisition on the concepts and facets most closely associated with the Yakuza film. Indeed, where *Kikujiro* relocates Kitano's yakuza protagonist generically, *Brother* dramatizes a comparable migration, in this case geographically. It is thus a film that demands to

be considered along with Kitano's other late-period transformational films, rather than a cynical exercise in capitulation and selling out.

Of course, Kitano had produced abruptly transformational films before – the *volte-face* from *San tai yon ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990) to *Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi* (*A Scene at the Sea*, 1991) is the clearest example. However, in the first phase of Kitano's filmmaking career, which culminated with *Hana-Bi*, one has the sense that, though his different films are far from disparate and discrete entities, the director is nonetheless testing and experimenting, both taking risks and playing safe - such as following *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993) with *Minnā-yatteruka* (*Getting Any?* 1994) - whilst searching for a definable voice to match the clear delineation of his style. In other words, he can appear to be a filmmaker in need of a *Langue* as the foundation for the *Parole* of his visual and narrative idiosyncrasy.

In the wake of his Golden Lion-winning Venice triumph and the immense critical acclaim it garnered, Kitano finally seemed to feel secure in his ability. He had attained a mastery of his craft, his art, and this fed the aforementioned desire to change and challenge himself, to re-define the parameters of his cinema. As the description of the contiguity of re-located yakuza protagonists in *Kikujiro* and *Brother* attests, Kitano initially looked backward in order to move forward, re-working material from earlier films in a significantly alterior context and framework. In point of fact, each film from *Hana-Bi* until *Dolls* can be understood along these lines: and whereas *Hana-Bi* can be seen as a recapitulation of *Violent Cop*, *Brother* exists in a similar, comparable relationship to *Sonatine*.

The premise of *Brother* - that of Kitano's jaded yakuza becoming involved in an indigenous turf war after leaving Tokyo for America – expands on that of *Sonatine* by focusing on the Japanese gangster abroad. In this latter film, this protagonist becomes

embroiled in violent struggles with the Hispanics and the Mafia in the concrete jungle and ethnic melting pot of urban Los Angeles. The fact that *Brother* is predicated on earlier Kitano Yakuza films can be seen most clearly in that it distils the central tenets of his involvement with the genre, whilst at the same time breaking new ground in standing at a point of summation.

The comparison between the typical characters played by Kitano and Buster Keaton has several important resonances for the films under consideration in this chapter. With regard to *Brother*, Kitano and Keaton's oft-quoted similarity masks one crucial distinction: namely, that of Keaton's physical completeness. The characteristics contained herein – the supreme control and mastery of his own body that triumphs over his emotional fragility and ultimately both overcomes and celebrates his out-of-synch-ness with the world around him – are diametrically opposed to those that typify a Kitano cop or yakuza. In this altogether bleaker arena, the body provides a temporarily stubborn bulwark, a drawn out and performative battle, against encroaching erosion and fragmentation. Kitano's face is a mask and his body a shell. Inside there is nothing, a lack: outside, there is a corporeal body that defines the protagonist's identity, his reality.

This particular aspect of the film finds its most complete realisation in *Brother*, in which Kitano takes his preoccupation with violence and with the breaking of the body into a different, symbolic register. Here, the bodies of the protagonist, Yamamoto, and several of the characters that serve with him as yakuza in a war against various ethnic gangs in America, become marked by a discourse of connotative violence that has several significant ramifications for both Kitano's use of genre and the carnivalesque, and for his engagement with notions of Japanese-ness. These elements of *Brother* echo both *Hana-Bi* and *Sonatine* in the repackaging of an ostensibly generic violent

framework, and can further be contrasted with *Dolls* in presenting a specific engagement with contemporary Japan, an engagement that entails a look backward through a lens of specific socio-cultural historicity.

A director to whom Kitano has often been compared is Jean-Pierre Melville. It is a comparison that seems predicated on the (admittedly significant) perceived philosophical minimalism and generic preferences common to both filmmakers, and which is best expressed in the performances of Kitano himself and of Alain Delon in three Melville gangster films. For the most part, the comparison is not entirely useful or illuminating: Melville's gangster films display much more of a deep-rooted affinity with the tenets of classical genre cinema (which was what Melville adored about Hollywood in the first place) than do Kitano's: one could not imagine, for instance, Melville turning the genre on its head and subverting it as Kitano does in *Sonatine*, or interiorising and fragmenting its ordered surface and inexorable drive as he does in *Hana-Bi*.

However, *Brother* bears a similarly comparable relationship to Kitano's earlier cop/yakuza films (most especially *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*) as Melville's *Le Cercle Rouge* (*The Red Circle*, 1970) does to his earlier gangster films. That is, it lays bare, with what Tony Rayns terms 'diagrammatic clarity[5]', the internal mechanisms of the director's particular use of the form. For both filmmakers in both films, their characters and seemingly prescribed narrative structures (the fateful 'red circle' – a Buddhist proverb – of Melville's title; the quasi-kamikaze military campaign in America of Kitano's yakuza) become a means of delineating their defining features and distilling in a programmatic manner the central concerns of the earlier works.

The narrative structure of *Brother* recalls *Sonatine*. It is not simply that the yakuza abroad plot resembles its progenitor. So too does its almost complete disregard for the

mechanics of a conventional thriller. Like *Sonatine*, the plot of *Brother* develops only incrementally, with increasing stretches of dead time between action being filled with the characters sitting around in either pensive, ruminative reflection, or else playing sports. Much of the violence (which will be considered subsequently), and the momentum of the plot concerning the rise of Kitano's gang, are reduced and compressed into distended montage sequences that begin and end with calculated suddenness. As such, Kitano mimics and expands upon on *Sonatine's* episodic, elliptical construction by adding further characters as the film progresses, piling up bodies (and the body count) until the focus becomes almost entirely diffused.

The result of this particular structure is both to remove any sense of a conventional, Hollywood product, and to undermine the centrality of narrative within the overall effect of the film as a whole. Thus, a film about a character removed and alienated from a strict way of living with strict rules governing behaviour finds an objective correlative in the destabilisation of an ordered narrative structure with a comparable set of rules that structure a stringently ordered product. In this way, the film can be contrasted with Jean-Luc Godard's *À Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1959) or François Truffaut's *Les quatre cent coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959). In these seminal works of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, the strictures and boundaries of society are implicitly connected with those of classical cinema, and with the codes of genre and the tenets of narrative construction and stylistic subservience thereto. This is why, for example, Godard's marked deviations from the norms of classical continuity editing are most to the fore in *Breathless* when his protagonist, Michel, is breaking the law. Similarly, the cumulative power of the final scenes of Truffaut's film is crystallized when Antoine Doinel's escape from the constricting institutional imprisonment that hitherto has characterised his life finds a perfect correlative in the unbroken travelling

shot that seems both to document and partake in the character's exalted getaway. This scene marks the final transgression of the protagonist, Doinel, and concomitantly of the filmmaker, Truffaut, who departs from the practice of continuity editing to which he had, by and large, adhered until this point.

This intrinsic stylistic norm is another means to effect the aforementioned variation on the project of *Sonatine*: namely, turning genre - both the Yakuza genre in particular and the concept of genre as a whole - in on itself. Whereas the earlier film reconceived a generic plotline as rote performance - as an expression of a wearied man almost meaninglessly playing the part of a prescribed *dramatis personae* in a fated drama of too-familiar action and incident - *Brother* presents the shadow, or ghost, of a formulaic story to ultimately different ends. The point in the latter film is to use a standard Yakuza genre narrative (again, as in *Sonatine*, a turf war) in order to offset the typical generic relationships contained within. That is, to demarcate between Yamamoto and his real brother and fellow Yakuza Ken, and the ultimately more meaningful relationship that develops with him and his non-yakuza, figurative brother Denny.

This bond transcends the genre in juxtaposition with the generic ties between the yakuza that are elsewhere variously subverted and destabilised: a point that encapsulates how *Brother* reconfigures Kitano's earlier works in order to transform the Kitano paradigm: by foregrounding and examining the codes and the behaviour of yakuza life in order to comment upon them. Like several of his recent films (particularly *Dolls*), *Brother* has been significantly misunderstood and marginalized, and the point about deconstructing the Yakuza genre has not been appreciated. This is why comments such as Tony Rayns' that the film is 'a straight-ahead action movie[6]', or Daniel Edwards' criticism that it is nothing but 'an empty paean to violence[7]', are

demonstrably misleading, if not incorrect, as is Mark Kermode's characterisation of the film as 'part blood-splattered, post-Woo Hollywood heroism, part old-school Japanese samurai asceticism[8]'. The violence is at times immensely graphic, but is not of a piece throughout the film, and should be understood as part of a strategy that encapsulates the aforementioned dual conceptualisation of *aniki*, elder brotherhood. Just as Kitano contrasts Yamamoto's figurative brotherhood with Denny with his relationship with his actual sibling, so the graphic self-mutilations that make up a central part of yakuza codes of behaviour and honour are contrasted with the excessively stylized violence elsewhere in *Brother*. When, for instance, Yamamoto and his brother's men kill the gang that control the local territory, their gunshots cause immense, highly exaggerated spasms in the bodies of these gangsters. These death throes become almost comedic in their over-determination, and thus render the violence impersonal and negligible with regard to the characters.

Similarly, much of the gang violence elsewhere in the film is treated as distinct from the main body of the film and made unavailable as glorified, stylized spectacle. Kitano in fact reduces much of it to either outlandish punishments (such as the chopsticks-in-the-face that explicitly links Yamamoto with Shirase, and which recalls *Hana-Bi*) or to near abstraction in keeping it largely off-screen, especially the two mafia massacres that first wipe out much of Yamamoto's gang and then, at the end, Yamamoto himself. The fact that Kitano increasingly treats these ostensible action set pieces as montage scenes further detaches them from the narrative. Towards the end he even piles up killings on top of killings with such rapidity that it takes time for the audience to assess what in fact has happened. Retribution is enacted by both parties in what Kitano's editing connotes as being a self-fulfilling prophecy, as begetting itself in an ever-increasing cycle of violence.

This last point, pertaining to the violence inherent in the ranks of the yakuza, underlines *Brother's* focus on ritualised and regimented codes of behaviour. As in Oshima's *Gishiki* (*The Ceremony*, 1971), these then become paradigmatic of a certain view of Japan and Japanese-ness. In *Brother*, Kitano spends what is for him an inordinate amount of time detailing the formalities of yakuza life and business, the intricacies of their ceremonial gatherings and attendant behavioural strictures. This is primarily the case in the first extended flashback detailing the reason behind Yamamoto's flight from Japan to the US. Here, as a big boss is assassinated on a night out, and as his gang disintegrates as a result, Yamamoto's yakuza brother joins a rival outfit and is ordered to kill his one-time gang sibling, the stringent hierarchy and the hermetic familial paradigm of the yakuza is revealed.

To emphasise such a thematic focus on ceremonial formality, Kitano replicates and mirrors it at a structural level, ordering *Brother's* plot in an intricate way that demarcates different sections of the narrative. There is a prologue, which lasts until Yamamoto arrives at his brother's gang's place. Then, following another medium close-up of the protagonist (one that rhymes explicitly with the first shot of the film), there is a slow fade to black. Following this, the first section detailing the rise to local prominence of Yamamoto's gang begins with a flashback to the story of his flight from Japan and ends with the gang's massacre of their Mexican rivals. Again a fade to black closes this act, and again it ends on a medium shot of Yamamoto, this time in action rather than reflection, having just dispatched the opposing gang members.

The next section then begins as a mirror of the beginning of the prologue, with Yamamoto being transported in the back of a vehicle. This time, rather than the taxi in the opening scene, he is in the back of a limousine, and instead of a hotel, he is on his way to a new headquarters in a tower block, overt markers of his rise in status and

prominence. The comparison with the prologue is cemented when the limo stops to collect a female companion, and two successive exterior shots of the car are taken from different canted camera angles that echo the shot of Yamamoto outside the airport at the very start of the film.

This second act moves away from the violence of the first and into a typically Kitano emphasis on games. A number of scenes involve such playing around: the game of basketball, in which Kato tries in vain to join the play and have someone pass the ball to him; the gambling between Yamamoto and Denny; and the *Sonatine*-like game of Frisbee on the beach. A doubling of scenes specific to this section provides a semblance of closure. Early in this act, a gang member awaits Yamamoto in his brother's place, taking him and holding him at gunpoint. Ordered to shoot by the Japanese, Denny shoots both Yamamoto and the gunman, injuring his friend (he is shot in the abdomen) but saving his life.

The situation is repeated later, when two men hold Yamamoto's woman hostage. Yamamoto attempts the same tactic, but this time to no avail, as he kills the woman along with her captors. The scene, and the act, closes on a shot of Yamamoto that explicitly builds on the previous shots to have closed *Brother's* earlier sections: it combines the pensive, melancholic reflection of the first and the action of the latter, the fact that he has just killed several people in both scenes (a successful massacre in the former and a personal, accidental shooting in the latter).

The transition into the third and final act this time does not begin with a fade-out from the final shot of the previous. Rather, there is a straight cut to the next scene, something that becomes reflective of the lack of order and demarcation that characterises the film's last act, the way in which events spiral desperately out of control. The clearest narrative signifier of this is the way in which the violence of the

first act combines with the game playing of the second in the scene in which Yamamoto and Denny attempt to exact revenge on a mafia boss by tying him up and making him choose three from five strings to pull, having been told that one is connected to a gun pointed directly at him.

The shots of Yamamoto associated with the beginnings and endings of the film's different acts accrue a particular significance from the very first in *Brother*. The opening explicitly recalls *Hana-Bi* (and *A Scene at the Sea*) in its abrupt presentation of the protagonist in almost disorienting medium-shot, with no sense of traditional decoupage or analytical editing of space. These films immediately present their protagonists as static, monolithic entities in a world in which they are and remain an anomalous presence, and against which they act in violent futility. Again, one may compare and contrast this characteristic with Buster Keaton's films. The very first short film Keaton made when he became an independent filmmaker was *The High Sign* [1920], and this film begins with as succinct an existential paradigm as any Kitano has presented. A train thunders through a static frame and suddenly deposits Keaton as if from nowhere into the space in which the action of the narrative will take place. Following this, Keaton's films tended to begin in a very stylized way, often with the protagonist simply arriving in a space or (as in *The Balloonatic* [1921]) with an action already underway, a plot in *medias res*.

Brother foregrounds a comparable presentation of Kitano. Through its narrative of geographical displacement and presentation of LA as a perpetual blank slate, a site of no indigenous culture, the film distils Kitano's previous Yakuza works, in particular their weary, alienated protagonists. The central character of the film, Yamamoto, is literally a stranger in a strange land, a man out of time (and as the film will go on to show, out of place). The abrupt establishing shot, followed as it is by the

aforementioned canted-angle long shot of Yamamoto standing motionless as the world busies itself around him (he is outside LA airport), underlines this idea. Yet it also goes beyond earlier incarnations, as there is no subsequent action or confrontation such as can be found at the beginning of both *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*. Yamamoto is simply driven to his hotel, whereupon there is the comic business of his over-tipping the porter before his search for his brother gets underway.

The sense of quotidian detail over meaningful action is further underscored in the flashback, from Yamamoto's point of view, of the taxi driver simply talking to him (with diegetic sound removed to underscore his alienation in a new country). It is a reverse of the original shot in the taxi, which held on Yamamoto as the driver talked to him. Aside from connoting the above-noted precept of alienation (which in any case is clear enough from the opening shots) this detail has the effect of delimiting any true narrative drama or meaning.

These details are coupled with the fact that Yamamoto is, in the film's first shot, attired almost exactly as the protagonist Nishi is in various, similar static shots in *Hana-Bi*: in a black suit with white shirt and dark sunglasses, staring dolefully off-screen in apparent melancholic thought. The effect of this opening is, then, to prefigure *Takeshis'* five years hence. It presents 'Beat' Takeshi as 'Beat' Takeshi, and highlights ostensible commonalities between Yamamoto and earlier Kitano protagonists and depicts him as distinct from any meaningful plot detail or action in order to inscribe his body and presence as the film's real site of drama and meaning; its real narrative.

This thematic of the body as the ultimate site of meaning also serves to reinforce the film's exploration of the Japanese entity cast adrift in a foreign land, and its ultimate passivity in the face of overwhelming, impersonal violence. This then

becomes the (to be analysed) major subtext of the film, and again the difference between Yamamoto and previous 'Beat' Takeshi cop and yakuza protagonists becomes pronounced. Where before characters such as Murakawa in *Sonatine* and Nishi in *Hana-Bi* were able to kill their antagonists before they turned their violence on themselves and committed suicide, in *Brother* the reverse holds true. Yamamoto and Denny kidnap a mafia boss in order to exact revenge for the murder of the latter's family. However, after toying with him on the beach, - playing the aforementioned game - they simply take him along with them as they flee the mafia. Ultimately, they simply let him go as they decide on their own respective fates, their own courses of action.

One could argue that Yamamoto's death at the end is as good as suicide, staying behind to face the mafia by himself knowing only too well that he will be killed by their overwhelming force. However, it is nonetheless true that the veritable hail of machine gun fire that cuts him down contrasts markedly with the typical single shots that finish off the character's forebears in *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi* (as well as *Violent Cop*, although that is not a suicide).

This then feeds into Kitano's newfound, post-*Hana-Bi* exploration of Japan and Japanese-ness. In an essay in the recent book *Theorising National Cinema*, Mika Ko details the ways in which the (carnivalesque) work of Miike Takashi, in particular his obsession with non-Japanese Asians and with characters whose bodily integrity is variously eroded and destroyed, can stand as emblematic of the contemporary national body of Japan[9]. That is, she draws an explicit correlation between the bodily decay and transgression of bodily boundaries of many characters in Miike's films, and the decay in the perceived homogeneity of the Japanese race and attendant notions of Japanese-ness.

The critic and filmmaker Tony Rayns, in an interview with Kitano for *Sight and Sound*, makes the point that there is a possible Pearl Harbor allegory at the heart of *Brother*[10]. Kitano, in apparently excited agreement, replies that the main characters in the film are all named after prominent wartime militarists (Yamamoto Isoroku, Shirase, Ishihara, Kato). Without doubt, he says, 'it's a film about going to America to die[11]'. As with all Kitano's films, then, a pervasive dichotomy lies at the heart of *Brother*. It is a presentation and exploration of the nature of those concepts associated with the yakuza (many of the incidents depicted were related to Kitano by an actual yakuza gang member) in a wholly alien country and culture.

America in this sense is not an arbitrary choice. The country has, since the Pacific War, been the Western nation most often contrasted with Japan, with the country identified as a child (with the implicit assertion that America was the parent) by Douglas MacArthur. Indeed, texts such as *Off-Center: Power and Culture Relations Between Japan and the United States* by the Japanese sociologist Miyoshi Masao[12] have gone to great lengths to explicate Japan's problematic relationship with the US. Moreover, in a national explication of the psychoanalytical precepts outlined in Kitano's other Yakuza films, Marilyn Ivy explores what she terms 'ghosts[13]': the social and cultural anxieties created by Japan's hyper-modernity. In this study, entitled *Discourses of the Vanishing*, she begins by elucidating how American constructions of Japanese-ness have fed into national assertions of self for Japan.

Brother was designed to capitalise on Kitano's international filmmaking reputation (particularly in the US, where *Hana-Bi* had become the first of Kitano's films to receive a theatrical release, with *Kikujiro* soon following suit), and specifically to break new ground both for its director and for Japanese national cinema. The film's production notes boasted proudly that *Brother* 'will challenge what has never been

attempted in the Japanese cinema industry; to fuse the Hollywood film-making method...and Kitano's film-making as an auteur[14]'. The fact that the film was completion-bonded was also 'unprecedented for a Japanese film-maker[15]'. Alongside Kitano's regular producer Mori Masayuki, *Brother* was also co-produced by Jeremy Thomas, an Englishman with a track record in working with significant directors (he has produced several of Nicolas Roeg's films) and major international co-productions. Among the most prominent of these are Oshima's *Senjō no merii kurisumasu* (*Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence,* 1982) and *Gohatto* (*Taboo,* 1999); and, perhaps most significantly, Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* [1987].

The presence of Thomas is interesting here, as *Brother* is in many ways Kitano's most Oshima-esque film. The presence of rituals, formals gatherings and ceremonies are intrinsic to a number of Oshima's works, not simply the emblematically titled *The Ceremony*. They relate to the director's conviction that such events entail a fundamental acting out of nationhood, an alterior, collective time that sees the release of feelings and emotions otherwise kept in check. Indeed, it is one of the proto-typical aspects of a specifically Japanese concept of carnival, and can be seen in numerous other major Japanese films: Kurosawa's *Ikiru* [1952], *Yume* (*Dreams,* 1990) and *Hachigatsu no rapusodī* (*Rhapsody in August,* 1991), Kobayashi Masaki's *Hara-kiri* [1964] and Itami Juzo's debut *Osōshiki* (*The Funeral,* 1983).

Kitano's East meets West narrative of *Brother* works along similar lines. The ceremonial formalities of yakuza life become connotative of existence in a strict, familial environment where subservience to the group and to one's superiors takes precedence over the individual, who is then expected to subsume himself within this larger collective. Furthermore, it is true that, as Mark Schilling notes[16], there are stereotypes and clichés of perceived traditional Japan at every turn in the film. What

Schilling does not recognise is that these characters and notions, particularly regarding the kamikaze spirit, are used very deliberately to explore a particular view and definition of commodified Japanese-ness that the characters themselves self-consciously adhere to and stand by as codes and paradigms of cultural tradition. It is precisely in this aspect of the film that the whole point of *Brother* is revealed: a narrative concerning a culture and a society (Japan as much as anywhere else) that has disintegrated to the extent that such horrific examples of violence can be validated as meaningful. Like the connotatively fractured and invaded bodies of Miike's work, the personal-as-national body that emerges from *Brother* is one of a decaying unit in which otherness (the other of Denny) can provide a small measure of respite and release, and a brief moment of connection between outsiders in a foreign land.

Subverting the Samurai: Kitano, *Zatoichi* and the *Jidai-geki*

Perhaps surprisingly for a film that would give him the biggest commercial success of his career, *Zatoichi* is a more complex work than at first may be apparent: one that breaks new ground for Kitano whilst at the same time recapitulating and extending a number of earlier thematic and stylistic tropes. It is Kitano's first film in the *Jidai-geki* (period film) genre, and typically for its director seems discordant with the film series and television serial on which it is based. Of course, this may well have attracted him to the project, as material that will allow for yet another transformation of his cinematic façade. However, he was initially indifferent, if not resistant, to the idea of involving himself with such iconic material when it was first proposed by a third party. Amongst other reasons was the fact that Kitano had parodied the character on a number of previous occasions, both on his TV shows and in the extended section of *Getting Any?* when the hapless protagonist finds work on a *Zatoichi* picture. It was

only when he was guaranteed complete freedom to make the film that Kitano was persuaded to go ahead with *Zatoichi*: adding to which was the fact that he recognised the commercial potential of the project and foresaw it as a makeweight against the more personal and esoteric works that he had in mind for the future, such as *Takeshis'* and its follow-up *Kantoku Banzai* (*Glory to the Filmmaker*, 2007).

The fact that this, Kitano's eleventh film, was (and remains) his only *Jidai-geki* is proof enough that it marks a point of divergence in the director's oeuvre. But there are other prominent signifiers of alterity with regard to the Kitano canon. The blonde rinse hairstyle (which Kitano felt he had to introduce to the Japanese public in advance of the film so that they could acclimatise) was a startling new variation on 'Beat' Takeshi. Indeed, as will subsequently be elucidated, the hair colour is perhaps the most obvious visual sign that the character of Zatoichi is different to the ones that Kitano has typically essayed, one that alludes to earlier filmic manifestations of 'Beat' Takeshi in order to shift the parameters of exactly what this persona signifies. Kitano himself explained away the hair oddity as an indexing of what he saw as the Zatoichi's Eurasian roots. Tellingly, in his conception, the protagonist is the child of Japanese and Dutch parentage from Nagasaki at the southern tip of Japan - the only place in the country where foreigners, principally merchants from Holland, were allowed to remain when the newly-unified Japan (under the rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate) closed its doors to the outside world at the start of the seventeenth century.

Another, quite radical and related divergence within the context of Kitano's cinema is the narrative structure and storytelling style of *Zatoichi*. In contradistinction to the minimalism of *Brother* (and indeed to the majority Kitano's films), in which plot as structural principle is either de-centred or progressively stripped away, there is,

in *Zatoichi*, a preponderance of narrative and a wealth of detailed characters with their own personal histories, stories and agendas. This is laid out in diagrammatic fashion at the start of the film when, presented alongside the introduction of Zatoichi as he dispatches several samurai intent on killing him and makes his way into town, there is an extended introduction to the other major characters, via flashbacks, as their paths cross on a busy road.

It is a conscious over-determination of plot information and retardation: a morass of (ostensibly) clumsy and overly insistent exposition which could certainly appear to be dramatically awkward, uncertain storytelling on Kitano's part, especially as it is without precedent in his oeuvre. However, it is actually as resonant with regard to the presentation of the protagonist as the earlier narratives of *Sonatine*, *Hana-Bi* or *Brother*, and establishes a narrative structure that will privilege crosscutting and a juxtaposition of opposites to an extraordinary degree. In this sense, the immediate narrational omniscience that is so new to Kitano's cinema in *Zatoichi*, with regard to revealing character and story details through flashbacks, is designed to be contrasted with the opening scene and credits sequence of Zatoichi's journey to the village where the action of the film will take place. Yet again, the very first image of the film abruptly presents 'Beat' Takeshi as Zatoichi - as if from nowhere and entirely without preparation or dramatic build, simply being in the diegetic world; and yet again it is a static shot of the motionless protagonist, as he sits beside a road, though here the fact that he is depicted in long shot testifies to a possible de-stabilising of his narrative centrality, if not agency. It suggests that his story and his consciousness will not (cannot) anchor this film, in the same way that the opening medium close-up of Nishi in *Hana-Bi* establishes precisely the opposite.

What follows this calm stasis is, in the best tradition of Kurosawa, a sudden burst of frenetic action as Zatoichi kills or otherwise maims his opponents. He then makes his way to the village in an important scene of heightened spectacle: a scene that shows a colourful peasant procession and depicts several farmers enthusiastically tilling the ground, the swishing and striking of their tools making up a musical rhythm in apparent accompaniment of Zatoichi's journey. The scene also makes a number of cinematic references and allusions. There is Sergio Leone (the musical rhythm built from an accretion of diegetic sounds echoes the credits sequence of *Once Upon A Time in the West* [1969]), and, in the first of several acts of homage, Kurosawa himself (the merry farmers singing and working in *Shichinin no samurai/Seven Samurai* [1954]).

This scene is significant because Kitano immediately underlines Zatoichi in relation to physical perfection and bodily integrity. This is a crucial point in presenting a new 'Beat' Takeshi accrued from remnants of earlier performances and characters. Where the bodies of protagonists such as *Violent Cop*'s Azuma and *Hana-Bi*'s Nishi were merely empty shells, armour, with nothing beneath the surface, Zatoichi has a body replete with supreme skill, imperviousness to pain and actual injury. This, coupled with the spectacle that accompanies his journey, serves to mark out his character as one indelibly connected to action and exterior prowess, to physical completeness and strength. However, Kitano does not present these qualities as unambiguous attributes of a heroic figure, or even of the film's clear protagonist; in a manner that reflects the dichotomy between body and spirit in his earlier work, he contrasts Zatoichi's outward superiority and physicality with an interior lack, a psychological blank space. He has no history or story, no interior life. He is, as the opening shot connotes, simply present in the world: constructed, like the movement

and rhythm that characterises the processional, celebratory (carnivalesque) peasants, as pure spectacle, and defined only by his action within and outward movement through it. This recalls earlier Kitano works such as *Hana-Bi*, in which much of the violence that occurs is marginal (if not irrelevant) to the narrative, and is thus separated from the exigencies of the plot and delineated as spectacle for (inter and extra-diegetic) consumption.

The presentation of the titular character as perfect spectacle is, contrastively, why the compressed character histories of the road-flashback sequence are so crucial. It details their subjectivity, their lives and personal identities in opposition to and distinct from Zatoichi. Thus, rather than being overly-determined or clumsily expositional, these opening details are precisely calibrated in order to be juxtaposed with the aforementioned opening scene that introduces Zatoichi. The other main characters of the film are presented in this compressed sequence: the two sibling geishas who seek revenge for their family, and the ronin who will become Zatoichi's antagonist and mirror image.

This sequence contrasts with the opening, the characters with Zatoichi, in a number of ways. It is set on a busy road with many other people going about their business and lives, as opposed to the empty expanse of land and deserted milieu in which Zatoichi was shown; the scene (without the flashbacks) takes place as an extended crane shot that sweeps into the diegetic space and slowly picks out the characters from the group, as opposed to the abrupt and static presentation of the titular character. More significantly, there is also an emphasis on interiority, on the emotions, stories and histories of the characters. It will transpire that they all act from empathetic personal motives. The brother and sister geisha desire revenge for their murdered family; whilst the ronin, Zatoichi's most marked foe, is acting in the

interests of an ailing wife, and becomes a bodyguard to the chief antagonist solely for employment, for money to help her. The fact that this interiority is demonstrated in terms of action – the flashbacks detail the ronin and the geishas killing others – only underlines the dialectic between them and Zatoichi: the dramatic, necessary and personal import of their action and violence as against the more spectacular but less meaningful swordplay in which he engages.

This opening, then, establishes what will become the principle intrinsic norm of the narrative structure of *Zatoichi*, and the chief means by which the film's generic material is reconfigured as a Kitano Takeshi film: the separation of the ostensible protagonist from the characters around him, and the fact that they operate figuratively on different planes (something central both to Kitano's Yakuza and youth films). It is underlined at various points in the narrative by inter-cutting their respective exploits, such as Zatoichi's gambling juxtaposed with an attempt at revenge by the two geisha siblings (a powerful and emotive story arc contrasted with a simple pastime).

There is also a scene in which Zatoichi and his accrued family unit (the aunt, nephew and two geishas) are sheltering from a rainstorm. In this scene there is a further instance of the flashback/interiority device that was introduced in the opening scene. The geishas once again recall the wrong that has been done to them and the ways in which this can be avenged, which is then contrasted sharply with Zatoichi, who simply imagines a fight in the rain that is entirely un-contextualised and narratively superfluous. Once again, this is a presentation of pure spectacle, of exterior movement and performative action and violence that remains distinct from the heart of the drama within the film. It is set beside and against the interiority of the supporting characters, their personal feelings and problems of choice and, most significantly, constraint.

Both the geishas and the ronin are, like Zatoichi, specifically Japanese archetypes. However, in addition to having their actions and identities refined by the specificities of their particular stories (and they are linked through the motif of revenge), they are further delimited by their contrastive situations. The ronin has the requisite skills, but has to contend with an ailing wife who desires that he should not have to work as a bodyguard and practice those skills. In contrast, the geishas have no such constraint on their use of violence, but they lack the refined and perfected action needed for them to see through their mission. This further distinguishes both parties from the blind swordsman: who, in contradistinction, has complete freedom of action, but who lacks any attendant interiority that might legitimate it and colour the character over and above his purely functional nature, his existence as mere *dramatis personae*.

This separation of action and violence from the dramatic, emotional heart of the film recalls, in particular, *Hana-Bi*. But it may also here be taken as a commentary on and subversion of the genre, indeed the very concept of genre: of a familiar framework that offers predictable pleasures. In this case those pleasures are the expectations of a narrative quota of violence and action, of swordfights and (for those acquainted with Japanese *Jidai-geki chanbara* cinema) exaggerated bloodletting[i]. In Kitano's conception, such necessities are abstracted from the narrative and become mere examples of spectacle to be consumed.

The ultimate crystallization of this dichotomy comes at the very end of the film, when its polarities are reversed. Here, there is an even more marked separation, a fracturing, of narrative and spectacle. Zatoichi's seeking out and slaying of the clan members who have terrorized the village is juxtaposed with the festival celebrations

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[i] As was previously alluded to, it has been suggested to me (by the Japanese filmmaker and critic Fujiwara Toshi) that Kitano really only undertook *Zatoichi* as a commercial offering to procure the necessary leverage to make his subsequent, more esoteric films. However, as the above analysis demonstrates, Kitano has by no means made a slavishly generic Samurai or *Zatoichi* film

of the villagers (itself another debt to *Seven Samurai*) who have been freed from oppression and tyranny. This idiosyncratic dénouement makes manifest Zatoichi's most prominent and meaningful narrative action and agency (his cleaning up the town by ridding it of its corrupt officials), but Kitano de-centres its importance by presenting it almost rudimentarily as simple plot delineation and exegesis alongside the grand flamboyance of the carnivalesque, celebratory spectacle occurring in the village.

This particular conceit - of the protagonist faced with an ostensible mirror-image opponent who is himself removed from the real villainy behind his opposition to the central character - strongly recalls *Violent Cop*: as does the characterization of said opponent[ii]. Although Tadanobu Asano in this role is a more sympathetic presence than is Hakuryu in Kitano's debut, and indeed the character himself (in the tradition of the Katsu Shintaro *Zatoichi* films and television series) is an empathetic, even tragic, figure, nonetheless the two antagonists are comparable for the ways in which their respective characterizations clash with those of the protagonists and ostensible hero figures.

There is another prominent structural comparison to be made in the film: between Zatoichi and the young brother and sister acting as geisha in order to avenge their family. Their particular situation mirrors the titular characters in that each of them has a facade, a performative identity, which conceals their true character. Indeed, this is also a characteristic of the real villain: the boss of the Kuchinawa gang who have been ruling and terrorising the village. Kitano highlights this likeness in two identical shots in which first Zatoichi, then the siblings, leave the house and walk towards the static

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[ii] With this in mind it is interesting to note that *Zatoichi* was the first Kitano film since *Violent Cop* in which the idea for the project and the original scenario did not originate with Kitano. These are the two outstanding examples in his oeuvre of presenting central characters who exist entirely at a remove from the world and the people around them, and are also at heart Kitano's most fundamentally, straightforwardly generic narratives

camera until they completely fill the screen, appearing to walk directly through the frame.

These diegetic contrasts return one to the comparison between *Zatoichi* and *Violent Cop*. It is a useful juxtaposition, as the latter began Kitano's long and complex association with violent characters and subject matter, and it is chiefly by this route that the otherness of Kitano Takeshi in *Zatoichi* becomes inscribed within the text. Most overtly, the majority of the action set pieces in the film involve stylised *chanbara* swordplay and blatantly artificial computer effects used to generate the copious spurts of blood once venerated by Kurosawa at moments of climactic dramatic impact (as in *Sanjuro* [1962] and *Ran* [1985]). Here Kitano not only undermines his own past predilection for sudden, naturalistic and affect-less violence, he also begins to subvert the genre in which he is working.

In the original film, *Zatōichi Monogatari* (*The Tale of Zatoichi*, 1962), directed by Misumi Kenji, the ostensible antagonist (the character played in Kitano's film by Asano Tadanobu) is a virtuous and skilled swordsman on a par with the titular hero. Indeed, they become close friends over the course of the film and only fight because he has of necessity entered into the employ of the real villain. Thus, again in an echo of Kurosawa films like *Seven Samurai*, as well as *Ninkyō eiga* Yakuza works, swordsmanship becomes an exterior manifestation of traditional virtue and spiritual strength, with the antagonist constructed as a worthy opponent of comparable skill and moral fibre as contrasted with the venal officials. Concomitantly, the use of a pistol is the recourse only of the antagonist(s), and is redolent of their lack of the values and character found in the protagonist and his mirror image.

In his *Zatoichi*, Kitano's almost comically exaggerated and digitally assisted bloodletting is associated exclusively with the blind swordsman himself. As such, it

serves to further render him a remote figure, someone who operates at a remove from the other characters in the diegesis. It also positions him not only as spectacle, but also as an overtly artificial entity, as a character who is determined entirely by his role within the plot.

A canonical genre

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in notable, commercially and critically successful productions that may once again be attributable (at least in part) to a comparable cultural determinant. The most visible examples of recent *Jidai-geki* samurai films have been retro-nostalgic fare, and have been no less popular for being so. In recent years, two variously classical films by two famous filmmakers who, from their respective generations, have been most closely associated with the genre, have contributed to this generic reappearance: *Ame agaru* (*After the Rain*, 2000), directed from a Kurosawa Akira script by Koizumi Takashi (in the stately late-Kurosawa style); and *Fukurō no shiro* (*Owls' Castle*, 1999) by New Wave director Shinoda Masahiro.

The major contributor to this strain of samurai drama has been veteran director Yamada Yoji (the one-time director-in-residence of the *Tora-san* series). Along with *After the Rain*, his melancholy trilogy comprising *Tasogare Seibei* (*The Twilight Samurai*, 2002), *Kakushi ken oni no tsume* (*The Hidden Blade*, 2004]) and *Bushi no ichibun* (*Love and Honour*, 2006) fits neatly into one category of the four that David Desser sees as accounting for all post-war samurai film production: 'the nostalgic samurai drama[17]'.

What distinguishes this group (which Desser sees as embodied by Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* and the oeuvre of Inagaki Hiroshi) is an emphasis on the melancholy

tone of the particularly Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, or the sweet bitterness of transience and the mortality of life. Such stories echo Sam Peckinpah's westerns in detailing the anomalous samurai as a dying breed, an antiquated character in peacetime, Tokugawa-era Japan. As their titles suggest, this is precisely the animating precept of Yamada's films, as it is with Takita Yojiro's similarly themed *Mibu gishi den* (*When the Last Sword is Drawn*, 2003), a film that beat *Zatoichi* to best film and best actor for Nakai Kiichi at the 2003 Japanese film awards. The characters in all these films are tragic, poverty-stricken figures living meagre existences, usually supporting a family. They are forced into acts of violent confrontation, often against their will, and these demands of *giri* (which *The Hidden Blade* doubly emphasises with a love affair across strict hierarchical boundaries) then result in resignation to, and stoicism in, suffering and an attendant discovery of respite in their families and relationships.

All the above films achieved a notable level of commercial and critical success, both in Japan and the West. However, the true strength of the recent re-emergence of the *Jidai-geki* samurai genre is made most markedly clear in the number of subversive works by notable filmmakers. In addition to directors such as Kitamura Ryuhei and Nakano Hiroyuki who have built their careers around re-inventing the samurai genre, there are those filmmakers who, like Kitano, have no history in, nor whose particular inclinations would seem especially compatible with, this generic form.

Directors such as Oshima Nagisa, Miike Takashi, Hayashi Kaizo, Kore'eda Hirokazu and Ishii Sogo have all turned their hand to the *Jidai-geki* samurai genre within the last decade, and have typically energised and re-codified the dramatic impetus that animates Yamada's work. Kitano himself has been involved as an actor in both Oshima's and Miike's recent *jidai-geki*: *Gohatto* (*Taboo*, 1999) and *Izo* [2004]

respectively, and has cited Oshima's lack of expertise in action choreography as one reason for his own decision to turn to the genre with *Zatoichi*. *Gohatto* was Oshima's first feature (not including two documentaries he made for British television) since *Max Mon Amour* [1986]. It explores homosexual tension and jealousy within the hermetic ranks of the elite Shinsengumi - the army (also featured in *When the Last Sword is Drawn*) that was charged with quelling insurrectionary uprisings at the end of the Tokugawa era [1603-1868]. Typically for this director, transgressive erotic obsession - which signified a retreat from Japan's militaristic society in *Ai no corrida* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1975) and a Buñuel-esque mocking of bourgeois mores in *Max Mon Amour* - here undercuts regimented formality. Its story presents samurai both young and old whose stringently codified lives and physical prowess cannot bear the strain of human emotion, lust and desire.

Ishii Sogo was a sometime singer and rock guitarist who in the 1980s became a cult figure for his perceived position as Japan's pre-eminent punk and counter-cultural filmmaker. He marked his first foray into samurai action territory with the epically mounted *Gojō Reisenki* (*Gojoe*, 2000), a costly box-office disaster that brought about the end of Sento Takenori's Suncent Cinema works. Like his more recent *Electric Dragon 80000 V* [2001], *Gojoe* depicts the escalating clash between two opposing warriors, this time within the context of a reworking of one of the great myths of feudal Japan: the war between the Heike and Genji clans in the twelfth century. Where Oshima subverts generic formula by delving behind an ordered façade to uncover the tangled, messy human emotions that fester beneath and threaten to overturn the codes of Shinsengumi life, Ishii looks without rather than within. This he achieves by invoking all manner of demons, myths, gods and divine activity. *Gojoe* begins and ends in space, with a story of twin comets. It further features a solar

eclipse, and ultimately even presents cosmic intervention in the final duel between the warrior monk Benkei and the deposed Genji prince Yoshitsune, when lightning flashes begin to rain down and burn both the characters and the titular bridge on which they are fighting.

Broadly, then, one can detect two distinct arenas of production in contemporary samurai films: nostalgic, wistful drama and variously anarchic, subversive and stylized variations. As Kitano's fortuitous involvement with both the Yakuza genre and the *Seishun eiga* amply demonstrates, he has remained very much abreast of generic trends in Japanese cinema. His *Zatoichi* is comparable to Kore'eda's recent *jidai-geki*, *Hana yori mo naho* (*Hana: The Tale of a Reluctant Samurai*, 2006) in conflating both the above generic forms. They both present stock characters and situations, but contrast them with broad comedy that undermines their traditional melancholy and solemnity.

Both directors enact this contrastive tone with recourse to a character that performs on the periphery of the small and self-contained locale that remains the central setting of the narrative (the village *in Zatoichi*, a shanty dwelling *a la* Kurosawa's *Dodesukaden* [1970] in *Hana*). Both are child-like and simple. Kore'eda depicts a man obsessed with collecting excrement in order to sell, whilst Kitano, in a thematically representative character, sporadically shows a young man who constantly dresses in samurai armour and charges around the village yelling, someone playing at being a samurai (in fact the fairy-tale character Momotaro), presenting a façade to the world in order that he may become what he performs. This finds a correlative in the bumbling character of Shinkichi, who spends almost the entirety of the narrative performing, aping the external trappings and characteristics of others in an effort to transform himself into them. He tries closing his eyes to mimic Zatoichi and attempt

to access his heightened senses to use for gambling. He also applies make-up to look beautiful like the *onnagata* geisha. It is a performance of self, a succession of facades that disguise a lack of a real identity, which reflects and recalls Zatoichi, and the fact that he can be seen to conceal any true selfhood behind his spectacular skill.

This typical Kitano comedy is not the only means of overt subversion in *Zatoichi*. In a typically multivalent stroke, Kitano displaces his most visible generic features, indeed what can be regarded as the central tenets of the genre, exclusively onto his ostensible mirror image of the ronin. The *giri/ninjō* conflict is exclusively the domain of this antagonist, whose similarity to the titular hero (so marked in the original Katsu film) Kitano removes in its entirety. There is also a pointed intersection of these two dominant precepts of the samurai code. Asano's ronin struggles in vain to reconcile his personal feelings, in this case his need to care for an ailing wife, with the duty that arises from his being employed as a bodyguard by the ruling gang (his vendetta with Kitano's blind swordsman). The inexorable double bind that truly elevates this character to the pantheon of the tragic arises from the fact that it is the personal inclination of his love for his wife that necessitates his taking the job as the bodyguard, and thus the duties that keep him from her during her illness.

Ultimately, as if to crystallize the fact that in another narrative the character of the ronin would, unambiguously, be the hero, the introduction and the initial characteristics of this character coincide with other prominent Japanese film protagonists. Initially, he resembles Mifune's Kuwabatake Sanjuro in *Yōjinbō*. He quickly becomes a bodyguard, a *yojimbo*, to the corrupt villain, much as his forebear in Kurosawa's film does: and the fact that he arrives as an outsider in town and demonstrates his skills as a swordsman in an audition also explicitly echoes *Yojimbo*. Latterly, however, the character recalls no one so much as Nishi from Kitano's own

Hana-Bi. He toils to care for a seriously ill wife whilst juggling his professional responsibilities and the spectre of a past tragedy (here the ill treatment of a forceful instructor). These echoes are further testament to the gulf between Zatoichi and his ostensible antagonist, and proof that the real heart and emotion of the film lies elsewhere than in the titular swordsman.

Both Kitano and Kore'eda also employ the bodily aspects associated with carnival in order to subvert their generic form. In *Hana*, there is an emphasis on faeces that the peasants are collecting to sell to landowners as fertilizer. For Kitano in *Zatoichi*, the idea of gender confusion fulfils the category of the unstable body-as-process within carnival's preoccupation with grotesque realism. The question of gender and the grotesque body has frequently been explored. As Barbara Creed notes, the notion of fluid gender positions and subjectivity is born from that aspect of the carnivalesque that stresses instability and a lack of bodily completeness and integrity rather than order and clear definition: 'The grotesque body lacks boundaries; it is not "completed," "calm," or "stable[18]"'.

The young man disguised as a geisha in Kitano's film - who like the protagonist of *Yukinojō henge* (*An Actor's Revenge*, 1963) stays in disguise throughout - remains, as it were, in character. He keeps up his performance and never lets his mask slip. In contrast with the empty rigidity of Zatoichi, his character ultimately figures in a celebration of performance, of becoming other than oneself and embracing the bodily mobility associated with carnival in a prevalent vision of positive identity politics. It is the ultimate subversion of the samurai in a generic form in which such parody has been relatively little seen in Japanese cinema. It also leads directly into Kitano's next film, in which a performative self becomes central to a narrative concerned in its entirety with acting and becoming.

Kitano's *Eleven and a half*: *Takeshis'*

Kitano Takeshi's twelfth film, *Takeshis'* has even now after three years yet to gain significant distribution (theatrical or otherwise) in the West. Following its 'surprise' unveiling (to less than unanimous acclaim) at the 2005 Venice Film Festival, it opened in Japan in November of the same year. In the wake of the popular success of Kitano's previous film *Zatoichi*, both audiences and critics, perhaps predictably, received *Takeshis'* rather coolly. It performed modestly in Japan (it debuted at No. 5 in the box-office chart), but singularly failed to repeat the significant commercial triumph of its progenitor. Reviews from both East and West were also generally negative, with several echoing *The Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman's charge that the film is 'oppressively solipsistic...a structuralist editing exercise...to no particular end[19]'.

Takeshis' concerns a famous actor called Takeshi 'Beat' Kitano who, whilst preparing to film in a television studio, comes across an auditioning actor who is his exact double and who also shares his name (he is known as Mr. Kitano). The resulting narrative contrasts these two figures, juxtaposing not so much their actual lives as the perceptions and fantasies that infest both parties regarding the life of his respective *doppelgänger*, especially the latter's desire to become his double. The film takes its structural cues from this subjectivity, and becomes consumed by parallels, not simply of characters but salient plot details and visual motifs. It is also full of allusions to, or, more properly, subversions of, Kitano's earlier work. These encompass not simply his Yakuza films, though of these there are a multitude – ranging from Kitano's ultimate incarnation as an unstoppable killing machine at the end, to a play on *Sonatine* when 'Beat' Takeshi is seen filming a stereotypically Kitano Okinawa-set Yakuza melodrama – but also to other recent successes. *Zatoichi* is referenced in appearances

both by the young actor who played the *onnagata* geisha in flashbacks in Kitano's *jidai-geki* and also by The Stripes. Similarly, a prominent role for Kishimoto Kayoko (who played the wives of Kitano's protagonists in *Hana-Bi* and *Kikujiro*) as a perpetually nagging harridan who keeps appearing and making life difficult for Kitano, could well be taken as a swipe not simply at those films, but as a crystallization of the general role of women vis-à-vis the men in Kitano's cinema in general.

Takeshis' continues and foregrounds one particular subtextual project of the majority of Kitano's recent (post-*Hana-Bi*) films: namely, the cinematic overturning of the violent Yakuza genre material that made and secured his filmmaking reputation. It has been noted how Kitano's work from *Hana-Bi* onward has variously worked towards an often radical reconsideration of what 'a Kitano Takeshi film' means. *Hana-Bi*, *Kikujiro* and *Brother* all drew on established, familiar tropes of both 'Beat' and Kitano to ultimately subversive ends, whilst *Dolls* and *Zatoichi* transposed Kitano's exterior, generic universe into entirely new cinematic forms and contexts. *Takeshis'*, by contrast, represents a culmination of this thread of Kitano's career by internalising this transformational aesthetic of the recent films and narrativizing 'Beat' Takeshi himself as the site of dramatic conflict.

In this way, *Takeshis'* takes up a similar structural position with regard to the second (post-*Hana-Bi*) phase of Kitano's career as *Hana-Bi* itself did for the first. That is, it stands as the film that occupies the apex, the point of summation, of a particular line of development over the course of several works. In the case of *Hana-Bi* this progress was clearly towards Kitano Takeshi the auteur and genre innovator. *Takeshis'*, in contradistinction, stands at the head of a (related) strand of Kitano's cinema that engages both with the presence of 'Beat' Takeshi before the camera as a

signifying paradigm of textual alterity and differentiation, and also with the cinema as autobiography and confessional. Indeed, one way of reading the title of the film in Japanese (in which Takeshis' is pronounced *TA-KE-SHI-SU*) is 'Takeshi dies', a clear indication of the extent to which its writer/director views the film as watershed in his oeuvre: as a work that lays to rest a major feature of his cinema (the violent model that reached its apogee with *Hana-Bi* and which Kitano has been consciously attempting to distance himself from with each successive film since his seventh in 1997).

There are several marked progenitors to *Takeshis'*, and a good way of understanding Kitano's aims and achievements with this film is to juxtapose it with a number of high-profile forebears. The most obvious point of comparison is, as the above title suggests, Federico Fellini's *Otto e Mezzo* (*Eight and a Half*, 1963). Although in Kitano's film the central figure is 'Beat' Takeshi the actor and personality, rather than the filmmaker (Fellini's alter ego Guido Anselmi) who remains the focus of *Eight and a Half*, there are nonetheless fruitful comparisons to be drawn between the two works. In particular there is a common presentation of fevered dreams and fantasies, and a comparable emphasis on the multitude of ways in which an artist can be co-opted, how success can lead to frustration rather than to failure. This is achieved less by an exploration of the power structures that facilitate the work of art and which can control its development (the subject of several Godard films in the 1980s), but by examining outside pressures and perceptions of what that artwork means once it is completed and, it is implicitly argued, becomes distinct from its creator.

Both *Eight and a Half* and *Takeshis'* contain passages in which the protagonist is assailed with interpretations of his work and even requests to put various people in his

films. Kitano's film even contains an echo of the famous and celebrated opening scene of *Eight and a Half* - a nightmare in which Guido is trapped in his car during a traffic jam in a tunnel, and, like an animal at the zoo, is stared at by the occupants of the different vehicles in the vicinity. The corresponding scene in Takeshis' follows on from an early exchange in which 'Beat' Takeshi's chauffeur chastises a taxi driver for his laziness, and has 'Beat' fantastically re-imagined as a taxi driver himself (the precise, inverted image of being driven around in a limo). What follows is a surreal scene at night in which Takeshi's cab becomes increasingly full of strange characters (who variously appear throughout the narrative), whilst he ultimately has to navigate a road littered with corpses in what is easy to conceive of as a reference to the bodies that have littered the path of Kitano's career and which he must now traverse to successfully leave that Kitano behind. He is, in other words, as trapped by his situation and his work as is the artistically impoverished director conjured in his own image by Fellini.

These respective scenes also both end in exactly the same way: with a prolonged fall. After flying away from the cluttered tunnel, Guido finds himself as a kite floating above a beach before finally plummeting down to earth in the seconds before waking. Kitano's fall occurs after he has navigated the road full of bodies. From driving at night he suddenly finds his cab falling, descending into nothingness, an abyss, immediately before Mr. Kitano ('Beat' Takeshi's lowly double) wakes from his dream. This is signalled by a dissolve from the void into which the cab has fallen to a miniature figurine of 'Beat' Takeshi in the famous 'Comaneci' pose from a stand-up comedy routine. It is a telling juxtaposition, serving as it does as an apt signifier of the commodification of Kitano and his art visualised as the figurative bottom of the pit, the hell, into which he has just descended.

Taking the analogy with *Eight and a Half* further, it may be tempting to speculate about a possible correlation between the respective situations of Fellini after *La Dolce Vita* [1961] and Kitano after *Zatoichi*. That is, two artists who have just had the biggest international hit of their careers and have then turned to their own lives and careers for subject matter, crystallizing in the cinema their subsequent uncertainty as to how best to proceed from the authorial point zero of their previous works. In actuality, the deliberately schizophrenic nature of Kitano's oeuvre should at least qualify such an interpretation: as, perhaps, should the fact that the project dates back more than ten years. However, at that time Kitano was not involved as an actor or as a narrative subject. Originally entitled *Fractal*, the film was to have been made in the wake of *Sonatine*, and according to Kitano had a Chinese-box narrative structure in which 'an ordinary guy...enters into an imaginary world in which he enters another imaginary world...(and) it interweaves his real-time actions with these imaginary worlds, multi-layered like a *Baumkuchen* cake[20]'.

Kitano goes on to note that his decision to cast himself in the film and, further, to examine his own (or perceptions of his own) celebrity status assuaged the doubts of his producers and financiers, which had prevailed in 1994 when the project was shelved[21]. Unlike Fellini, it is certain that Kitano's decision to make *Takeshis'* in the wake of *Zatoichi* did not result from artistic frustration or a creative block. Rather, it is tempting to read the obtuse interiority and fragmented surface of the latter as necessitated by and conceived in response to the open accessibility and (comparatively) stable generic identity of the former.

As previously outlined, one could situate *Takeshis'* at the summit in what may be termed Kitano's anti-auteur cinema: that is, his carnivalesque cinema of renewal designed to frustrate critical attempts at authorial canonization (as opposed to *Hana-*

Bi, which represented the self-conscious apogee of Kitano's aspirations of cinematic authorship, his auteur cinema). At this juncture another comparison can be productively outlined. With regard to transforming himself as an artist and subverting previous norms of his career, the trajectory of Kitano's oeuvre in the last decade echoes that of Orson Welles. Welles' own career, leading up to his film essay *F for Fake* [1972], has led critic Jonathan Rosenbaum to describe him as 'rejecting any obvious ways of commodifying his status as an auteur[22]'. One may use precisely the same phrase in classifying Kitano's recent work, culminating in *Takeshis'*: an attempt to undermine, if not reject outright, the critical canonization of both his body of films in general and several aspects therein (i.e. violence) in particular.

The oppressive commodification of Japan, its culture and tradition, as a saleable and consumable entity has been at the thematic heart of several of Kitano's films. Chief among these are *Hana-Bi* and *Dōruzu* (*Dolls*, 2003), in which 'Japan' is felt as a veneer, an empire of signs, of signifiers with no meaningful signified beneath them, that offset the character's attempts to define themselves and in both films to repair a fractured (broken) relationship. In *Takeshis'* this exclusion is internalized and brought to bear on Kitano himself, who has long been neglected by audiences and certain critics in his own country. It is a discourse of marginalization that is realized in a narrative that centres on 'Beat' Takeshi's loss of his specificity as a popular figure and star, his lack of continued originality as the face of a series of films that have negated his artistic personality and promulgated a brand.

This is then where the comparison with Welles comes into play. *F for Fake* is about the art forger Elmyr De Hory, Howard Hughes hoaxer Clifford Irving and Welles' own charlatanism as a filmmaker, a professed magician. It contains a specific interrogation of art, art experts, originality and authorship (at precisely the time when

his authorship of *Citizen Kane* [1941] had been expressly questioned by Pauline Kael). For instance, the director derides the status of art as a marketplace commodity, an entity given value by bearing the approved stamp of its artist creator and thus a seal of originality and commercial value. This is contrasted with the cathedral at Chartres, which for Welles belongs to a better age, expressly because of its time-less anonymity emanating from a pre-industrial, pre-lapsarian world.

In *Takeshis'*, one finds something similar. The individual originality of Kitano Takeshi and the prevalence of what has been his long-standing double in 'Beat' Takeshi is taken up by the narrative and explicitly problematized. Indeed, this is the clearest way of reading the film's visual and structural obsession with *doppelgängers*, even down to the 'Beat' Takeshi doll that is given to Mr. Kitano: as the nightmare of an artist whose commodification and, in this regard, canonization has led to different versions and constructions of himself taking root. It is the problem of an artist who has become enslaved by the perceptions of others, and who has to contend with an attendant slippage into a 'reality' where said creations not only take on their own lives but also attempt to become him and ultimately react against him. Mr. Kitano is a struggling actor, but after procuring some guns for a role he increasingly usurps 'Beat' Takeshi's persona and filmic existence as a violent gangster. Finally, he is involved in a parody of climactic violence - an exaggerated gunfight against dozens of different adversaries; all of which is set in the paradigmatic Kitano locale of the beach, and takes place in the moments before he attempts to kill 'Beat' Takeshi by stabbing him in the television studio.

The important point here is that it is the exterior trappings, the accoutrements, of 'Beat' Takeshi on film that define Mr. Kitano's rise to becoming his double. He is characterised exclusively by the guns he takes into his possession; then by his actions

with those guns, such as robbing a bank (as in *Hana-Bi*), and retreating to the beach (in an echo of *Sonatine*). Finally, his transformation is crystallized when his body becomes as 'Beat' Takeshi's: that is, when he engages in a prolonged and stylized shootout whilst at the beach, and despite facing a multitude of opponents amid a veritable hail of bullets, he emerges unscathed, taking on the bodily impenetrability of the typical Kitano yakuza protagonist. The fact that Mr. Kitano is distinguished from 'Beat' Takeshi only by virtue of a blonde rinse hairstyle (the one familiar from *Zatoichi*) perfectly encapsulates the fact that external factors alone that have made up 'Beat' Takeshi on film, from *Violent Cop* onwards. *Takeshis'* is about elucidating the hollowness and artificiality of this construct as a means to override the perceptions and preconceptions inherent in discourse on Kitano's work.

It should be apparent at this juncture that the concept of the double is central to *Takeshis'*. It is a common literary and cinematic conceit: and as Kitano's film amply attests has tended to carry marked philosophical undertones pertaining to selfhood and subjectivity. The idea of the *doppelgänger*, in fact the very coining of the name within the world of the novel, has been traced back to the 1796 novel *Siebenkas*, by Jean Paul. As Andrew J. Webber's book *The Doppelganger: Double Visions in German Literature* notes, the concept proved common from Romantic-period German art onward[23]. It has also proved a common device in Russian literature, particularly in works by Dostoevsky (*The Double*) and Vladimir Nabokov (*Despair*). These authors conceive of desperate, delusional protagonists (and at the centre of tales told by distinctly unreliable third and first person narrators, respectively) who conjure up their doubles from the recesses of their own mental states.

More recent novels, such as José Saramago's *The Double*, have explicitly taken up the challenge of the philosophical inquiry prevalent in *doppelgänger* fiction. In

contradistinction to the clouded interior worlds and fantastical imaginings made manifest in Dostoevsky and especially in Nabokov, Saramago's lucid, objective prose presents his protagonist and actor *doppelgänger* as scientific fact and as an explicit challenge to selfhood and identity. It is this mode that has carried over most overtly into the many cinematic explorations of the concept of the double. Films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's adaptation of Nabokov's *Despair* [1977], Bernardo Bertolucci's *Partner* [1968], Krzysztof Kieslowski's *La Double Vie de Veronique* (*The Double Life of Veronique*, 1991), Steven Soderbergh's *Schizopolis* [1996], David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* [1988] and the Polish Brothers' *Twin Falls Idaho* [1999] have all variously examined personal and political malaise through the figure of the double. Kieslowski's twin Polish and French Veroniques are representative of a discourse on fate and destiny. Otherwise, particularly in Bertolucci and Cronenberg, the doubles (imagined in the former, flesh and blood in the latter) signify a split psyche made manifest. Each character's *doppelgänger* undertakes what the protagonist himself cannot, and is thus constructed as a manifestation, an external projection of interior doubt and ennui.

One may also point to a series of Japanese progenitors for Kitano's film. Kurosawa's *Kagemusha*, Tsukamoto Shinya's *Gemini* [1999] and Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Dopperugangā* (*Doppelganger*, 2003[iii]) all feature characters that literally double the protagonist, although they have not quite the same intellectual and philosophical rigour as their counterparts in the West (indeed Tsukamoto's and Kurosawa Kiyoshi's film are in many ways light, playful genre fare). However, if one extends the parameters here to include the figurative and thematic concept of the *doppelgänger*, then many more films emerge that effectively establish a national

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[iii] Interestingly, Kurosawa Kiyoshi's film was marketed with the tagline: 'What if your worst nightmare…turned out to be you?' A line that could serve Kitano's film just as well

context for *Takeshis'*. Of particular note here are a number of other Kurosawa Akira films (a director, it should be remembered, who admired Russian literature, and Dostoevsky in particular, above any other national canon). In addition to *Kagemusha*, films such as his first, *Sanshiro Sugata* [1943], *Nora inu* (*Stray Dog*, 1949), and *Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low*, 1963) provide the protagonist with an antagonist who mirrors him in almost every aspect of his character.

The presence of the double in *Takeshis'* would seem to owe more to Dostoevsky and Nabokov than any other progenitor. Indeed, the protagonist of *The Double*, Mr Golyadkin, finds that his *doppelgänger* rises in social acceptance, prestige and popularity as his own declines: that, in other words, he takes the place of the protagonist; rather like the accession of Mr. Kitano in *Takeshis'* and his incremental usurping of 'Beat' Takeshi that both prefigures and is born from the latter's own uncertainties and career dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, from the very beginning of *Takeshis'*, Kitano opens this conceit out and presents a multitude of doubles and echoes of the 'Beat' character and persona that reverberate around and haunt the dream world of the film. The opening scene features 'Beat' Takeshi as a World War II soldier seemingly failing in an attempt to play dead before an American GI. It is a short scene that is returned to at the end of the film, and which (as so many scenes and actions do during the course of *Takeshis'*) finds its significant double in the scene in which 'Beat' Takeshi lies down to have his yakuza tattoo applied before a shoot in the TV studio. In a further echo, designed to provide a sense of closure to the film, both occurrences of this wartime scene are followed by a presentation of the violent *dénouement* of a fictional (and parodic) 'Beat' Takeshi Yakuza film entitled *Hell Heat*.

This is a significant, representative moment of the film, and is of paramount importance in introducing the narrative. It has been demonstrated the extent to which Kitano lays connotative stress on the often abrupt, deceptively simple, quotidian beginnings of his narratives. It is as if a world entered in *medias res* provides both a structural referent and an objective correlative of a protagonist forever out of step and out of kilter with his environment, and for whom the challenges that reside in the minutiae of his existence figure as strongly as the action that propels the plot. This is fore-grounded most comprehensively in *Brother*, but in *Takeshis'* it assumes a somewhat interior dynamic. Here, the milieu that alienates the protagonist (i.e.: 'Beat' Takeshi) is his own fame, his own story: something that can then be regarded as the central idea underpinning the overlapping dream and fantasy structure of the film. That is, as a means of subverting or taking figurative flight from a bodily reality. One may relate this to the Casio Abe-led discourse, outlined in the chapter on Kitano's carnivalesque, pertaining to 'Beat' Takeshi on film and television.

'Beat' Takeshi as a soldier, then, immediately presents Kitano not simply in a different context, but one with a particular meaning with regard to this filmmaker and actor. For a director known primarily for his depictions of graphic violence, and an actor whose bodily reality has been built around its relationship to, and its propensity for, violent action and death, this brief opening scene reconfigures the linkage in the context of an altogether different conception of violence: one that relates to the impersonal tidal wave of death as opposed to Kitano's own stylized, increasingly Jacobean excesses.

At the risk of contravening Kitano's own wishes as to the preferred treatment of his film by audiences, the fact that this scene depicts Kitano at the mercy of an American (Western) soldier can further be read as a comment on Kitano Takeshi. It

can be understood as an attack on the filmmaker at the mercy of international critical discourse and Western commodification of what is perceived to be the defining aspects of his cinema. Here, in a scene of dominance and implied violence, is laid out the transference of critical over-valuation of violent material in Kitano's work to the violence visited on Kitano Takeshi the filmmaker by this discourse: connoting the harm done to his work by critical fetishization of this one aspect of his cinema.

However, this does not exhaust the interest and connotative potentiality of this opening scene. Unlike a number of subsequent moments, wherein 'Beat' Takeshi's work in television and on film is overtly presented as such, there is an implicit film-within-a-film status to this cryptic opening. One may instinctively presume this to be a dream, as its graphic patterning repeats the shot of 'Beat' Takeshi on the tattooist's table (laid flat looking up at someone standing over him). However, it could be 'Beat' Takeshi playing a soldier for a film role. If one remembers that Kitano's first serious role, that of Sgt Hara in Oshima Nagisa's *Senjō no merī kurisumasu* (*Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, 1982) was in a war film, and that this dramatic performance drew instinctive laughs from many in Japan, then this bracketing scene becomes especially meaningful. It becomes reflective of misconceptions of Kitano and of 'Beat' Takeshi, of believing him and his work to be other than he and it is.

If this moment is ambiguous, the aforementioned shots of 'Beat' Takeshi having his yakuza tattoo applied are clear in their signification. They rhyme with Mr. Kitano attacking and stabbing him in what is certainly a dream initiated early in the film. In other words, the violent attack segues into 'Beat' Takeshi being made up (constructed, created) as the genre figure that he is popularly or primarily known as and that has been taken as the central, paradigmatic character within his work, the stabbing involved in the assault being mirrored in the prick of the needle as the tattoo is

applied. With this, Kitano juxtaposes actual and figurative violence in order to crystallize the harm inherent not in the characterisation itself, but in what it has come to represent in his career. It is redolent of the violence meted out to Kitano by commentators who can't see past violence as a defining feature of his work.

In this regard the work of Michel Foucault, who has become an influential theorist of the body, can once again be usefully employed. Foucault has argued that the human body can be regarded as a surface or space for writing, a canvas on which messages are produced and communicated. He describes the body as a site on which social systems of regulation and control, and all resistance to and subversion of such impositions, can be marked out and openly displayed[24]. In *Takeshis'*, 'Beat' Takeshi becomes just such a vessel, a conduit. The yakuza tattoo literally inscribes and codifies his body just as the perceptions and views of critics and commentators have figuratively performed the same act of violence against his work, his textual body. From what is, in actuality, a nexus of imagined completion and bodily wholeness (the sign of belonging to a strictly ordered fraternity of brotherhood) is gradually revealed, for 'Beat' Takeshi, as a stain on his sense of self, an exterior mark of interior decay.

Perhaps, in the last instance, the key to *Takeshis'* can be found in a Japanese rather than a European or American progenitor. Early in the film, during a scene in which 'Beat' Takeshi arrives at the television studio, there is a brief cameo by one Akihiro Miwa: a famous transvestite singer and performer. Playing himself (in drag), he berates 'Beat' Takeshi, who retaliates by calling Miwa a freak. It is a short and ostensibly insignificant moment in the film, but in fact assumes a marked importance if one considers Miwa as an objective correlative to Kitano himself. Both are performers with dual identities, artistic split personalities - in Miwa's case his camp female alter ego and public persona and the actor Maruyama Akihiro – and both are

more famous for the explicitly performative side to their art and persona, the mask that constitutes the public face.

However, in contradistinction to Kitano, Miwa's identity offers a measure of stability – a public face (emphasised in the fact that it is Miwa that is seen leaving the studio rather than Maruyama: i.e. he is still in character) and a private person that never comes under the spotlight. This then becomes the mirror image for Kitano as the film progresses, an ordered double self in whom two facets of one performer and personality are kept discreet and distinct. In opposition, 'Beat' Takeshi experiences a nightmare in which his multifarious faces converge and bleed into his existence.

Related to the above is the question of transformation in *Takeshis'*. The film that cemented Miwa's nationwide fame in Japan was *Kurotokage* (*Black Lizard*, 1968), based on a story by Edogawa Rampo. In this pop culture detective pastiche, directed by Fukasaku Kinji in the years before he revolutionized the Yakuza genre, Miwa plays the head of a group of criminals involved in kidnapping and extortion. In an early scene in which she talks with the film's ostensible protagonist, Japan's number one private detective Kogoro Akechi, the question of how to determine the true character of a criminal is posed.

Akechi posits the case of three women. Each, he notes, receives a bouquet of roses. The first, upon holding them close to her in order to smell the flowers, sees a caterpillar crawling along one of the petals and, hysterical, hurls the bouquet into the fireplace. She is not the criminal type. The second woman is presented with the same situation, but instead of screaming and throwing the whole bouquet, she calmly removes the insect and throws only that into the fire, before savouring the scent of the flowers. Again, this does not indicate a criminal mindset. Finally, Akechi says, woman number three will neither destroy the flowers nor remove the caterpillar;

instead, she will find the man who gave her the bouquet in the first place and simply kill him. This is the character of someone who is 'capable of rebelling against accepted morality': someone who society will label a criminal but who, in actual fact, is the most tenderhearted of all three. In response to this, Miwa notes that she has never met such a detective: 'one who has such a deep and romantic attachment to crime'.

One finds this hypothesis taken up in *Takeshis'* in the repeated motif of a caterpillar appearing in a bunch of flowers that have been given to 'Beat' Takeshi. None of the three hypothetical scenarios outlined by Akechi in *Black Lizard* actually occurs. But the presence of this incident can be taken as further reinforcing the discourse in *Takeshis'* of an over-determined attachment to and over-association with crime on the part of Kitano. The caterpillar in this case becomes a mark of transformation, of one creature becoming another. It underlines both the duality inherent in the art of Kitano that is the subject of the film: and, further, a transformation on the part of Kitano the filmmaker – a director in the process of changing from one state of being to something else.

This death and rebirth positions *Takeshis'* as, ultimately, among the clearest examples of carnival in Kitano's oeuvre, and highlights the essentially different bodily presence of 'Beat' Takeshi within *Takeshis'*. For this reason, one can take the film as the definitive end to a particular phase of Takeshi Kitano and 'Beat' Takeshi. That is, its discourse on the body of 'Beat' Takeshi as a figurative entity, a signifier without a fixed signified, reconfigures earlier conceptions and constructions of this subject by centring them on 'Beat' Takeshi as 'Beat' Takeshi.

Takeshis', then, represents a departure for Kitano into the realms of the subjective, the fantastical and dream-like. This directorial alterity runs contrapuntally alongside a

different conception of performance and bodily spectacle, one that diverges markedly from *Brother* and *Zatoichi*. Unlike those films, *Takeshis'* is not characterised by a presentation of exceptionality: of 'Beat' Takeshi as an alien in America in the former and as a blonde and supreme swordsman in the latter. Here, the protagonists are explicitly, narratively, construed as anomalous entities in the same way as they are positioned as such on an extra-diegetic level (i.e. within Kitano's oeuvre). *Takeshis'*, by contrast offers a diametrically opposed example. It is a portrait whereby the exceptional figuration of 'Beat' Takeshi is denied by the presence of the double: where everything that makes up 'Beat' Takeshi is copied and thus usurped. In so doing, the hollowness of the former is exposed, the fact that it is composed entirely of physical features with no essence, nothing tangible, under the skin.

That Mr. Kitano, the double, initially sports the *Zatoichi* blonde rinse reinforces this notion. It is not merely a device to tell the two Kitanos apart (they are rarely onscreen together at once: only twice, and then briefly at the beginning and end of the narrative). Rather, it is testament to the extent to which a façade, exterior paradigms, have constituted 'Beat' Takeshi on film. The psychoanalytical precepts of the Yakuza films, the fact that the frustration of the Oedipal complex inherent in his gangster/cop guise has negated the formation of the unconscious, relates to this fundamental shallowness. As does the Nō mask-like 'Beat' Takeshi visage, relating as it does to that theatrical form's repertoire of types, a series of *dramatis personae* characterised by a rigidly stratified set of features in which a particular role is fulfilled. In other words, in which psychology is largely eschewed in favour of prescribed action and agency, of surface detail and delineation. If even a devoted fan cannot tell the difference between the two 'Beats', as the girl who continually waits outside the

workplace of 'Beat' Takeshi and later the home of Mr Kitano to offer gifts and thanks cannot, then what, really is there to differentiate and tell them apart?

It is in this notion, even more than the overt parodies of Kitano's work, that the real project and aim of *Takeshis'* is made manifest. Mr Kitano exposes 'Beat' Takeshi, and is thus as much a projection of perceptions of Kitano by those who have concentrated on the violence in his films as it is by Kitano himself. He becomes 'Beat' through the excessive violence he engages in after procuring a gun, ultimately turning that violence on his famous double (i.e. himself). This is a sly and subtle exposition and subversion on Kitano's part of what is expected from his work, the violence and suicide that has become, or is perceived to have become, central to the (thematic and narrative) effect of his most celebrated and well-known Yakuza and Cop films. Mr. Kitano thus becomes an embodiment of exterior perceptions of 'Beat' Takeshi, with his final recourse to excessive violence and suicide. This is further reinforced by the poor home life he is shown living in the early stages of the film (something that has become a part of Kitano's biographical legend to the Japanese public). Thus, Mr. Kitano's trajectory is, in effect, that of Kitano himself, his journey from Kitano Takeshi into 'Beat' Takeshi.

This focus on surfaces, on figurative uniforms as well as on overt echoes and doublings, returns this analysis to the spectre of *Hana-Bi*. It has been contended here that *Takeshis'* occupies a similar place in the Kitano canon to 'Takeshi Kitano Vol. 7', and in another pointed echo of that film, it has not only brought to a close a phase of Kitano's career, but has instigated yet another. If *Hana-Bi* marks the point of transition between the life and death trilogy and the art and autobiography 'Japanese' tripartite, *Takeshis'* similarly stands at the apex of a series of reconfigurations of 'Beat' Takeshi. At the same time, it initiates what is now, with Kitano's most recent

film, *Achilles to kame* (*Achilles and the Tortoise*, 2008) a trilogy concerning himself and the specificity of his art and celebrity persona. In looking both forwards and backwards, it represents a significant point of crossover, of moving from one series of films to another whilst anchoring the particular concerns of its progenitors and successors. That it remains largely unseen in Europe and the US is regrettable for what has become one of Kitano's most important films.

Notes

[1] Kitano, T *You can't tell what I'm going to do next* An interview in the Guardian Newspaper in the UK Thursday, May 29th, 2003 online at
http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,966251,00.html (Accessed 12/09/08)

[2] Jones, K *First Look: Takeshi Kitano's 'Brother'* *Film Comment*, vol.36 no.5 (Sept/Oct 2000) pp14-15

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Rayns, T *Brother* review in Pym, J (ed) *Time Out Film Guide Ninth Edition* (The Penguin Group, London, 2001) p.145

[6] Ibid.

[7] Edwards, D *The Willing Embrace of Destruction: Takeshi Kitano's Brother Senses of Cinema*, online at http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/brother.html (Accessed 09/07/07) p.2

[8] Kermode, M *Brother* review in *Sight and Sound* vol. 11 no. 4 (April 2001) p.41

[9] Ko, M *The Break-up of the National Body: Cosmetic Multiculturalism and the Films of Miike Takashi* in Vitali, V & P. Willemen (eds) *Theorising National Cinema* (British Film Institute, London, 2006) pp.129-137

[10] Kitano, T Interviewed by Tony Rayns *To die in America Sight and Sound* vol. 11 no. 4 (April 2001) pp.26-27

[11] Ibid. p.27

[12] Miyoshi, M *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991)

[13] Ivy, M *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995) pp.141-191

[14] Quoted in Kermode, M (April 2001) p.41

[15] Ibid.

[16] Schilling, M *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California, 2003) p.170

[17] Ibid. pp.147-150

[18] Creed, B *Horror and the Carnivalesque* in Devereaux, L & R. Hillman (eds) *Fields of Vision* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1995) p.136

[19] Hoberman, J *The Lusty Men*: a report from the Toronto Film Festival in *The Village Voice* (Tuesday, September 13th 2005) - Online at http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-09-13/film/the-lusty-men/ (Accessed 28/04/07) Hoberman further characterises *Takeshis'* as painfully self-conscious and indulgent and compares it with Jerry Lewis' *The Nutty Professor* [1963]

[20] Kitano in conversation with Tony Rayns in *Beat meets Mr Kitano Sight & Sound*, vol. 15 no. 11 (November 2005) p.9

[21] Ibid.

[22] Rosenbaum, J *Orson Welles's Purloined Letter: F for Fake* p. 7 This essay accompanies the Criterion DVD release of *F for Fake*, which appeared in 2005

[23] Webber, A.J. *The Doppelganger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996)

[24] Foucault, M, Sheridan, A (trans) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (Penguin Books Ltd., United Kingdom, 1991) First published in 1975 as *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* by Editions Gallimard

Conclusion

'A Film is a Toy Box'

Kitano Takeshi: Studies in (Japanese) Authorship. Or, Personal Filmmaking in an Impersonal Industry

> **'Cinema is something very personal. When I make a film, I make it first and foremost for myself. It's like a wonderful toy box that I play with[1]'.**
>
> Kitano Takeshi

In the 19 years that Kitano Takeshi has now been active as a filmmaker, the Japanese film industry has, like Japan itself, undergone a number of profound changes, and has arguably experienced its most turbulent and transformational decades. When Kitano's directorial career began in the late 1980s, Japanese cinema had entered its most impoverished state. The major studios had either gone bankrupt or had abandoned production in favour of distribution; comparatively few Japanese films of note were domestically successful, and classic films by Ozu, Mizoguchi, et al, had ceased to be shown, whilst almost no new works were being exported to Europe or the US. As a consequence, major directors such as Kurosawa Akira, Oshima Nagisa, Fukasaku Kinji, Ichikawa Kon and Shindo Kaneto had been either working on international co-productions (*Kagemusha* [1980], *Ran* [1985], *Max Mon Amour* [1987]) that were almost monolithically anomalous within their national industry, or they had become mere filmmakers for hire. Shindo was working as a screenwriter on commercial

products, and Ichikawa even worked as assistant director on the popular animal film *Koneko monogatari* (*Milo and Otis/The Adventures of Chatran*, 1987[i]).

The early 1990s marked a period of national solidification, and concomitantly the gradual re-emergence and accession to global visibility of Japanese cinema through a number of successful films and filmmakers. Throughout this decade, independent cinema and the so-called New New Wave (which was shaped in large part by Kitano) blossomed amid a resurgence of specifically Japanese genre material, in particular the Yakuza form and its attendant violent content. By this time, although the surviving major studios (Shochiku, Toho, Toei) had largely forsaken film production, an increasingly symbiotic relationship between their commercial concerns and the independent sector two began to emerge. Along with the parallel return of genre material and new approaches to style and narrative, this development owes a significant debt to the example and the influence of Kitano.

In recent years, Kitano's oeuvre has also been central to the renewed (though still precarious) stability and international prosperity of the cinema in Japan. Since 1997, when *Hana-Bi* [1997] won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, many Japanese directors and producers have consciously sought foreign distribution and success. Models for this manner of filmmaking in Japan can be found in the 'golden age' of the country's cinema in the 1950s (which reflects the fact that there has often been a divergence of views on the great Japanese filmmakers between Japan and the West[ii]) and this is perfectly encapsulated today in the case of Kitano. He is known and celebrated in his own country as an irreverent television host and comedian, a

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[i] In actual fact, this was not as overtly a detrimental career step as may be supposed. The genre of the animal film, a very sentimental form, attained immense popularity in Japan in the latter half of the 1980s, and was exploited by desperate studios.

[ii] Most obvious in this regard is Mizoguchi Kenji, who, in the 1950s, following Kurosawa's historic win at the Venice Film Festival for *Rashōmon*, reportedly took with him to the same festival a Buddhist shrine before which he prayed for comparable success with *Ugetsu monogatari* [1953].

lowbrow pop culture icon; whilst he is revered in the West as a serious filmmaker and artist.

Diversity and difference - a presentation and performance of different faces for a multitudinous variety of audiences - has always been an integral part of the totality of Kitano's output. He has, particularly since his international reputation was sealed with *Hana-Bi*, sought to constantly change, challenge and re-define his filmmaking, and in so doing has reconstituted the parameters of what is understood (or thought to be understood) as a Kitano Takeshi film almost with each successive entry in his canon. Indeed, so esoteric have his recent films been seen to be that they still await theatrical distribution in a number of countries (England and the US included).

It is thus only possible, as this study has attempted to demonstrate, to approach Kitano the director through a myriad of differing, often competing and oppositional discourses. In addition to transgressing the worlds of television and the cinema, he conflates East and West in his style and approach to filmmaking; he typifies and defines a number of contemporary trends yet invokes several key director from previous generations of Japanese filmmaking; he has worked (by and large) within the bounds of genre cinema, yet personifies an approach that owes more to European art cinema luminaries in controlling every aspect of his work as a grand creator: originating stories and screenplays, directing, often starring, producing through his company, Office Kitano, and editing.

Given this all-encompassing artistic creativity and control - and taking into consideration his uniquely independent position, the fact that he is able to (and does) pay scant regard to commercial imperatives, to audience tastes or current trends - Kitano presents a veritable case study in contemporary authorship. Indeed, this is doubly so if one remembers that he works within one of the most formulaic film

industries of any major country: an industry within which he has moved between states of relative concordance (in that he began the 1990s by defining a number of generic paradigms that would prove to be intrinsic cinematic norms) and, latterly, anomaly.

Kitano emerged as a filmmaker at a time when auteurism was beginning to be tentatively resuscitated, and offered a model of authorial canonization that is less common today, and certainly almost unique in contemporary Japanese cinema. This 'authorship as personality paradigm[2]', when placed side by side with the specificity of Kitano's Japanese-ness as a director and his accession to the Kurosawa-like ranks of representing Japanese filmmaking in and for the West, is a useful tool for further study. In particular, it is aptly situated to interrogate the extent to which the study of authorship on film can elucidate the artistic and/or industrial example of Japanese cinema today (as opposed to its previous golden eras, particularly the 1950s after Kurosawa and *Rashōmon* had opened up the West for Japan).

With regard to a reinvigorated interest in Japanese cinema outside Japan, Kitano has proved an important, even prophetic figure. Since the turn of the millennium, a number of anointed Japanese auteur directors (perceived as such in the West, especially in the US and France) from various generations have been canonized internationally. They have received wide exposure and recognition in Europe and America, and have opened the way for a re-discovery and re-popularisation of Japan's cinema in a preponderance of critical discourse. Kitano, although still without any depth of commentary commensurate to his position within (or indeed without) the Japanese film industry, has done as much as any contemporary director to facilitate this development.

Kitano Takeshi: Defining Japanese Cinema and Authorship

> 'Today...auteurism is surely dead, but so are the debates
> over the death of the author...writing about individual
> careers is necessary to any proper sociology of culture.
> such writing helps us to understand the complicated,
> dynamic relation between institutions and artists[3]'.
>
> James Naremore

If the 1990s was, as Nakata Hideo has claimed[4], a decade during which Japanese filmmaking began again - in which independent production and an influx of new talent rejuvenated a stagnant mainstream industry - then few directors can claim as important a role in this period of transformation as Kitano. He has been at the forefront of several generic, thematic, stylistic and industrial trends that have defined or re-defined Japanese cinema over the past decade. As his Wellesian statement on his approach to filmmaking attests, one of the key aspects of Kitano's films, from the very beginning of his career, has been an immensely personal cultivation of the directorial craft.

Filmmaking was an obvious route by which Kitano could subvert his already firmly established televisual persona of 'Beat' Takeshi within Japan, and thereby craft for himself a viable and independent artistic personality. In so doing, he established a dichotomy (*Beat Takeshi vs Takeshi Kitano*, as the title of Abe Casio's book highlights) that has structured his whole career in cinema, at least to the extent that it has shaped and guided perceptions of his work. Indeed, as Abe's book attests[5], it is this schizophrenia that has fed into much of the discourse on Kitano to date; and which has also found expression within Kitano's own brand of filmmaking in recent years.

Although Abe's critique of Kitano is problematic, it does usefully underline what have become canonical approaches to the director. It can certainly help in attempting to understand the development of Kitano's career, especially with regard to his most recent films (which are, ironically enough, absent from Abe's text, which was last updated in the wake of *Dōruzu/Dolls* [2003]). His turning the spotlight on himself and his own singular situation is yet more evidence of the spirit of carnival that has always animated Kitano's work, from the forceful undermining of television's 'Beat' Takeshi in *Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki* (*Violent Cop*, 1989) onwards.

It is this desire to subvert and to challenge that has seen his oeuvre develop in a markedly idiosyncratic way. Beholden to no one, he has sought to overturn the circumscribed perceptions and constructions of himself and his work that have accrued around his career. Thus, as his work as a director has progressed, so has an almost overwhelming need to second-guess his audience and break from the constraints of, first, the national context of his comedic 'Beat' Takeshi persona, and increasingly his international canonization as a maker of violent Yakuza films.

Concomitantly, this tendency has fed into the difficulty and hesitancy with which the Japanese have approached Kitano as a filmmaker. A constant feature of Kitano's career (particularly since *Hana-Bi*, when discourse on his work began to proliferate, both in Japan and in the West) has been the director's self-conscious presentation and/or subversion of different sides of his artistic personality for various markets, especially for international art house consumption. Consequently, one can regard his oeuvre as an ongoing attempt to manipulate, employ or otherwise (re)-negotiate the various constructions of Kitano and 'Beat' Takeshi, and both to explore and re-define his status as an international Japanese filmmaker and auteur figure.

Kitano is, of course, afforded this luxury of self-reinvention, this freedom from commercial imperatives, largely due to his status as an independent director and an independently wealthy icon of Japanese popular culture. However, the fact that this restless, subversive impetus has rendered Kitano's cinematic art a distinct second in popularity to his television shows in Japan (the obverse image of his fame abroad) remains one of the givens of critical discourse on his work[iii].

In a national film industry as rigidly genre-based and formulaic as that of Japan, Kitano's abiding conceptualization of cinema as a means of personal, artistic expression within a generic framework has served to re-introduce once salient genre norms (such as the Yakuza film) back into Japanese cinema. Just as importantly, it has also facilitated, and to an extent popularised, the use of genre as a point of departure, as a structural and narrative framework, that can then contain the stylistic and/or thematic signature of an artist, an auteur. This, in turn, has influenced the young directors associated with the New New Wave. Filmmakers such as Aoyama Shinji, Sabu, Yaguchi Shinobu and Ishii Katsuhito would all go on to define themselves through their idiosyncratic, offbeat additions to violent Yakuza cinema: and all have received widespread screenings and serious critical attention in the West.

This tension between genre filmmaking and the arena of artistic self-expression continues to characterise Kitano's body of work. From the inception of cinematic authorship with the French '*politique des auteurs*' and its canonization of directors such as Howard Hawks and Nicholas Ray, the emergence of a recognisable artistic vision within the impersonality and commercial imperatives of the industrial system, has been seen as the *locus classicus* of Hollywood authorship. However, much of the

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[iii] It was suggested to me recently by the Japanese critic and filmmaker Fujiwara Toshi that, in private, Kitano's lack of popular acceptance as a director in Japan might well be a source of regret for him. This could then go some way to explaining the particularities of his film *Glory to the Filmmaker*, and its more accessible (to a Japanese audience at least) re-packaging of the concerns of *Takeshis'*.

richness of Kitano's work (that is to say, his suitability for contemporary auteur studies), resides in its resistance to easy definition or categorisation. It has been the primary task of this study, not to simply analyse a body of work along authorial lines, but to uncover and elucidate the ways in which Kitano's oeuvre can throw light onto the analysis of contemporary authorship studies. Kitano's body of work highlights succinctly and directly the differing constructions of 'the auteur' that have appeared as the theory has had, out of necessity, to adapt itself to the challenges posed by successive theoretical negations of its almost inviolate hegemony within film studies.

These discourses have had significant ramifications for the development of contemporary Japanese cinema, and more significantly for perceptions of filmmaking in Japan. Principally, in an echo of the first golden age of the 1950s and the preponderance of exotic *Jidai-geki* that were distributed abroad at that time, Kitano and Tsukamoto's successes fed into a similar situation whereby violent or otherwise extreme Japanese films began to predominate, to circulate in the West at festivals such as Rotterdam (where Miike Takeshi was later discovered).

This has harmed Kitano quite markedly. It is precisely because he so overtly began to deny a number of the precepts of his own authorship at the point when they were crystallized, and move away from these tenets of perceived Japanese-ness, that reactions to him have remained somewhat faddish. Indeed, his recently esoteric personal films have all but removed him from the critical radar, to the extent that his appearance in competition at the 2008 Venice film festival, where a decade earlier his rise was cemented when *Hana-Bi* won the top prize, went unremarked on in a number of reports. In particular, British magazines like *Sight & Sound* and *Time out* ran detailed programme reports and reviews and made no reference at all to the new Kitano film (*Achilles to kame/Achilles and the Tortoise* [2008]).

Thus, while Kitano certainly is an auteur director, with immediately recognisable thematic concerns and stylistic motifs, he is at the same time a case study in modern authorship. More than this, he is also a test case for Western authorial canonization of Japanese directors, and the extent to which this has occurred too schematically against the backdrop of perceptions of national cinema. At this juncture, it is worth concentrating on the former, on Kitano's authorial signatures, as a means of elucidating the complexity of his thematic concerns and visual style and refuting the over-simplified and misleading way that such signatures have been read, especially in the West.

Among Kitano's most overt auteur markers is a particularly distinctive method of presenting violence and manipulating genre in delineating character. From *Violent Cop* onwards, he has conceived of and examined violent action in a generic setting as a default means of expression for characters for whom human contact and compassion have been irrevocably corrupted by the capitalist, materialistic society in which they live.

This is why violence in Kitano's work is almost always ultimately directed at the protagonist himself. This aspect in particular alludes to what is important and meaningful in Kitano's treatment of this subject. He himself has said that seismic social events (such as a war or other such atrocity) have influenced filmmakers, but that within the smaller field of inter-personal relationships there can be no such incitement to narrative. This can be seen as the reason why society is a distant entity in Kitano's films. It is because he always tends to scale his narrative focus down to the personal, to material he knows at first hand, and to try and find comparably large obstacles (illness, handicaps, deficiencies of character) to harmonious relationships. Almost all his films are built around two central characters who reflect and refract

each other, and in this is contained the locus of Kitano's work, the special quality of detailing personal lives within heavily ritualised genre settings that frequently work to oppress and imprison them.

It is this last point that sees a tension between, and a fracturing of, the generic and those elements that deviate from genre. Kitano, early in his career, worked within two of the most prevalent generic modes at that time in Japanese cinema (the Yakuza film and the Youth film), but frequently reconfigured the boundaries and archetypes of genre in very specific ways. In the Cop and Yakuza films, genre is often configured as a performance, a rote working through of actions that remain distinct from other aspects of the lives of the protagonists. Given the pared down existential nature of a majority of Kitano's works, the fact that they begin in *medias res* with characters who occupy an eternal, infernal present (usually, even when a past event hovers over the film, as in *Hana-Bi*, it is not presented in flashback as would be the norm in a majority of commercial cinemas), this use of genre is significant. It connotes the ways in which identity is a surface construct for many Kitano protagonists; something that falls in line with generic precepts but which ultimately clashes with their lives and feelings.

The prevalence of violence in Kitano's work has become both over-determined and under-developed in critical discourse. This is especially so given that his conceptualization of the subject has undergone changes in presentation and emphasis over the course of almost all his films (as befits an auteur in the Peter Wollen mode of cine-structuralism[6]). It is also a curious oversight given Kitano's influence in this regard, the way directors such as Aoyama Shinji, Ishii Katsuhito, Sabu and Shimizu Hiroshi. However, with the exception of Aoyama, none have examined or presented violence in as meaningful a way. Ultimately, one can say that the primary difference

between his Kitano and the majority of New New Wave directors that have followed in his wake (especially Ishii Katsuhito) is the difference between innovation and imitation. This being the case, it is precisely Kitano's thematic interest in and exploration of violence (as opposed to Ishii's simple narratives featuring acts of violent behaviour and conflict), which distinguishes his work. It is the effects of violence: not simply the physical, though this figures in Kitano's central thematic preoccupations, but psychological and even social that defines Kitano's cinema and his characters.

Kitano's characters frequently express and define themselves exclusively within the insular milieu in and through which they take temporary flight. As in Antonioni, especially the wordless final minutes of *L'Eclisse* (*The Eclipse*, 1963) in which the protagonists disappear from the film as shots of city life predominate, the 'real world' remains distinct from Kitano protagonists. The very end of *Sonatine* functions in this way, when empty shots of the landscape once populated by Murakawa's gang close the narrative after the final credits. One can further point to scenes such as the infamous chase in *Violent Cop*, in which the protagonists' private struggles burst out into the outside world in a chase that covers much of downtown Tokyo.

Kitano's body of work comprises a series of variations on this central theme: on fractured characters on the margins of society who, ultimately, can only react in kind against the (literal and figurative) violence meted out to them. They grope towards existential self-definition in lieu of any viable physical or emotional means of constructing or expressing self, the barrier between them and the world around them encapsulated in their frequent difficulty with language. This latter point further constructs and positions them as paradigmatic Lacanian subjects, stunted in their

development through the mirror phase and oedipal conflict (something further witnessed in the lack of sexuality and desire on the part of many Kitano characters).

As in the work of several other prominent contemporary Japanese filmmakers (Tsukamoto Shinya and Miike Takashi foremost among them), identity and selfhood in Kitano begin and end with the corporeal boundaries of the human body. The bodies of Kitano's protagonists are frequently broken or otherwise transgressed, and this experience of violence feeds into a tension between the movement (however confused) towards the self as subject and an awareness of being as object. Ultimately, the body, usually the body of 'Beat' Takeshi, becomes the site for this irresolvable conflict, and it thus can only find meaning in the act of destruction and the vicissitudes of violent behaviour. Kitano's characters achieve this through embracing violence as a default means of physical expression, conceiving of their ultimate and inevitable death as a way of retrospectively legitimating life.

What, ultimately, one finds in the thematic core of Kitano's work, and which is the more remarkable for its organic expression within the defined parameters of Japanese genre filmmaking, is consistency with paradigmatic European art cinema. The notion of communication breakdown, of the essential alienation, anguish and loneliness associated with modern existence, is one typically credited to such directors as Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson and Michelangelo Antonioni in the first flowering of art cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a heritage that continues today in the work of such austere filmmakers as Michael Haneke, Las Von Trier, Theo Angelopoulos, Béla Tarr, Gaspar Noé and Bruno Dumont, and one to which Kitano belongs as much as a Hollywood-centred authorship of expression-through-genre (which defines many of the other pre-eminent figures of new Japanese authorship, such as Miike Takashi and, especially, Kurosawa Kiyoshi). Indeed, like the troubled, confused and inarticulate

protagonists that blindly and stubbornly move through and act within the godless worlds of, say, Dumont's work, Kitano's yakuza and cops never think, never grow or learn. They enter their film's diegesis as completed beings, and thereafter simply act; or, more often, react.

Kitano's stylistic norms have evolved into a supremely succinct means of expression for these themes, and are similarly marked and apparent from very early in his career. As in the cases of Arthur Penn in Hollywood, Eric Rohmer in Europe, and Kurosawa in Japan, Kitano's first film, *Violent Cop*, presents a remarkably coherent exposition of the themes and the style that would develop in subsequent films. Kitano has doubtless achieved this through his own multi-faceted involvement both in front of and behind the camera, and through a close collaboration with a number of key crewmembers who continue to form what may be termed 'the Kitano Company'. The predilection for a presentational visual vocabulary of frontal, tableau compositions, stylized *mise-en-scène*, and elliptical editing and narrative construction has been refined and manipulated over the course of virtually all his films. Initially, this style seemed largely organic. It was a (more or less) natural response on the part of Kitano the filmmaker to directing and presenting 'Beat' Takeshi as a cinematic figure, to depicting him (as in *Violent Cop*) in ways that undermined his televisual specificity. Most overtly, this took the form of depicting him as a physical entity defined by his capacity for absorbing and dispensing violence but lacking any concomitant interiority, any viable emotional life or identity.

As his career has progressed, though, this feature has accrued a double significance. It has become a comedic technique, usually depicting the aftermath of an action or an accident, but also relates to a thematic of time, of its inevitable, ineluctable passing, the transience of the world. In *Hana-Bi* and *Dolls*, in particular,

static, almost still-life shots punctuate the end of scenes; for example the shot of the remains of a snack eaten in the previous scene by the protagonist Nishi and his wife in *Hana-Bi*, a shot that closes this scene and leads into the next. Although too much has been made of this aesthetic by a number of Western critics, this style and attendant thematic does relate to such notable progenitors as Ozu Yasujiro and Naruse Mikio. The fact that *Hana-Bi* works to an extent within the generic parameters of the *Gendai-geki*, contemporary life home-drama underlines this notion. Indeed, these shots function almost in the same way as Ozu's famed pillow shots, giving breathing room to the narrative and characters and facilitating a contemplative distance on the part of the audience.

Perhaps more importantly, this style is a perfect correlative (as in *Brother* [2000], a film that in some ways recalls pre-*Hana-Bi* Kitano) for a series of dislocated protagonists who remain out-of-step with the world around them. In this sense, a fragmented visual and narrative modality has a quasi-subjective significance in connoting distanciation and alienation, attendant upon which is a marked theatricality of style and presentation that depicts a number of Kitano protagonists as performers on a figurative stage. The presentation of very generic plot lines and situations reinforces this precept: the sense being of weary, emotionally stunted men simply going through the motions of their lives and professions by rote: actors who have rehearsed their lines so long that their meaning has been lost.

The prominence and distinctiveness of these stylistic features belies the attempts (or, more properly, the lack thereof) by commentators to analyse their precise nature and function effectively. The overtly presentational aspect of Kitano's cinema is, in fact, anything but anomalous within the context of Japanese filmmaking. From its inception Japan's cinema was predicated on the theatre – on static, proscenium shots

and the ever-presence of the *Benshi* narrator who would mediate between the film and the audience. One can see this not only in the number of films adapted from the theatrical repertoire, but in the work of directors such as Ichikawa Kon, Kinoshita Keisuke, Shinoda Masahiro and Kurosawa Akira, who even more than Kitano have made expressionistic use of the specifics of the Nō or the Kabuki stage in their style and *mise-en-scène*.

Kitano's use of what Noel Burch (quoting Jindrich Honzl) terms 'the theatrical sign[7]' is less overt and demonstrative than these significant progenitors. Indeed, his presentational theatricality is frequently naturalistic with regard to *mise-en-scène* (*Dolls* is a significant exception). However, theatrical signifiers abound: from the bridge as *hanamichi* walkway separating life and stage in *Violent Cop*, to the beach as Nō stage in *A Scene at the Sea* and the florid Bunraku stylization and puppetry that infuses every aspect of *Dolls*.

This visualization of aspects of the classical Japanese stage is, in fact, secondary to Kitano's thematic treatment of this subject, which is far less common in Japanese cinema. The aforementioned concept of performance, of characters as actors, is one facet of this precept. Just as prevalent is the correlative of the above: the question of spectatorship. This applies to the extra-diegetic audience of the film. It is fore-grounded in the aforementioned way in which several Kitano works stress the facilitation of a contemplative distance that necessitates the audience remaining to a certain degree detached from the film in order to consider its narrative and characters, rather than simply becoming immersed its story. It is also implicit in Kitano's oblique manner of editing that construction and artifice become apparent, that the audience must work to make sense of events and, more often, of spatio-temporal relations and contiguity.

The precept of the spectatorial applies even more directly to Kitano's narratives and to his characters. All Kitano's films are intricately bound up in structures of looking and being looked at, which relate both to psychoanalytical and existential imperatives of identity and selfhood. The notion of 'to be is to be perceived[8]' is crucial to a number of Kitano's binary protagonists, their identity predicated on being seen (or not) by others. This is especially true of *Kizzu ritān* (*Kids Return*, 1996) and *Kikujiro*, whose characters have close friends and family that cannot see then, cannot return their look, either literally (*Kikujiro*) or figuratively (Shinji in *Kids Return*).

Conversely, the Mulvian[9] associations of control with the bearer of the (male) gaze are often subverted to detail the lack of true subjectivity on the part of a number of Kitano's blank, weary, emotionally numb cops and criminals. It is here that genre and existence fracture and fragment, with the characters tired of their generic lives but lacking any viable alternative and so often finding themselves in limbo between the two.

This is then where the beach and the sea front enter into Kitano's work. This has become such a recurrent Kitano location, appearing in all but one of his films (*Kids Return*), that a 2000 documentary on him was entitled *Scenes by the Sea*. Opinions differ as to what the sea represents for Kitano, with the director himself offering more than one explanation for its significance[10]. It is, in fact, a complex motif, one whose specificity changes from film to film, but one commonality is that it is frequently associated with play, with an alterior time for the characters away from the toil elsewhere in their lives. In Aaron Gerow's terminology, the beach is a 'liminal space[11]' of play.

Authorship studies have thus evolved far beyond the simple elucidation of textual connections within an oeuvre that is represented in its early manifestations. For this

reason it can be argued that the critical notion of cinematic authorship is one of the most prevalent and significant concepts to have emerged in film studies in the last 50 years. Although it remains a theoretical framework and methodology defined as much by refutations of its compatibility and use value for the study of what in filmmaking is a communal art form, as by those critics and theorists who have persevered in applying its fundamental principles to the serious analysis of directors worldwide, as a concept it has rolled with successive punches. It has withstood and, what is more, absorbed the challenges to its legitimacy heralded by extra-cinematic philosophical and semiotic practices that have found expression within the study of film, and has assimilated these within its ongoing, ever-increasing and developing project.

In the mid-1990s, as Kitano was becoming a major international figure in filmmaking, *auteurism* was once again on the critical agenda, with a number of books and articles re-assessing its validity and importance. Because of the number of functions Kitano fulfils, and more importantly the attendant signature that has thus developed, it is important to note that a confluence of authorship with a multitude of theoretical and conceptual (even philosophical) frameworks is necessary to understand his work. This is also why a Hollywood-based approach to Kitano, as a Hawksian or even a Fordian figure revealing his artistic preoccupations through work in regulated genre cinema, does not tell the whole story. If one were to adhere to the narrow view of *auteurism* as originally entailed in Truffaut's *A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema*[12] and subsequent auteur studies in France, or in Andrew Sarris' initial transatlantic translation[13], then Kitano is not a suitable subject. From this perspective, a director such as Miike Takeshi would be a better candidate for a study of authorship in Japanese filmmaking. He has made a career as a prolific studio director who is routinely appointed to projects after-the-fact (rather than instigating

the script of the narrative himself) and yet he continues to personalise his works through recurring themes and motifs.

Since his second film *San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu* (*Boiling Point*, 1990), Kitano has been the originating, creative impetus for his work. With only the partial exceptions of *Dolls* (if one counts the inspiration and presentation of Chikamatsu's *The Courier from Hell*) and *Zatoichi*, which was suggested as a project for him although he had complete freedom in writing the screenplay, he has not adapted or worked from pre-existing sources. This, coupled with the extent of his input into his work (writing, directing, editing, often starring), produces a rather more grand conception of the author, which relates more to a European art cinematic conceptualisation of the artist as creator than to a Hollywood studio employee shaping impersonal material to his own style and particular worldview.

However, it is unavoidable that notions of genre and star studies impact as greatly upon his work as much as cinematic authorship, and herein resides one of the features of his work that qualifies Kitano as a case study in the concept of *auteurism* rather than an auteur analysis. The key criticism against authorship, even as post-structuralism had made it clear that a cross-fertilization of theories was needed to fully understand or even approach cinematic signification, was the lack of ideology and of the subject positioning constructed within and by the filmic text. Kitano is, as this study has attempted to demonstrate, an ideal subject for such an approach to film studies, because of the multitude of industrial, textual and theoretical positions and approaches that find a point of organic confluence in the cinematic body (in both senses: the physical body of 'Beat' Takeshi and body of work of Kitano Takeshi) that is Kitano.

'Glory to (Kitano) the Filmmaker'

As Japanese cinema has developed and transformed during Kitano's filmmaking career, so Kitano himself has developed and transformed, albeit through an increasing antagonism towards his national cinema. As the 1990s gave way to the new millennium, and Japanese cinema settled into a phase of (largely) stable prosperity; as, in the words of Darrell William Davis, there was a 'cause for (cautious) optimism[14]', Kitano's position within Japanese cinema gradually transformed. He moved from the initial stage(s) of his career, in which he worked in line with, indeed often led, the conventions of his country's cinema, to a later stage in which he has appeared to outgrow this once beneficial symbiosis, casting it off like a used skin that no longer fits. Kitano's last five films (*Zatoichi* is a partial exception[iv]) have seemed anomalous and monolithic entities-unto-themselves, in which Kitano has strove ever more (self)-consciously to successively re-brand and re-package himself and his work. There are few filmmakers of his stature today whose work appears so audience-proof, which challenges viewers to keep up or drop out, to join the authorial dots or dismiss their significance altogether: in effect, to accept the works as they are or forget them.

Glory to the Filmmaker, Kitano's thirteenth film, continues and refines this pattern. It is a work in two halves. The first is a comedic examination of Kitano Takeshi the filmmaker attempting to expand his repertoire and make a number of different films, from which brief scenes are presented at various stages of completion. These include an Ozu-esque *Shomin-geki*, a clearly autobiographical drama about a young boy with an abusive father, a J-horror shocker complete with faux outtakes, a commercial sell-out of a martial arts cash-in on *Zatoichi* with intrinsic plot-holes

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[iv] I again refer to Fujiwara Toshi, who told me it was his belief that Kitano's only reason for making *Zatoichi* was to enable him to make *Takeshis'*.

revealed, and an apocalyptic science-fiction film about an asteroid on a collision course with Earth.

Following such self-referentiality, the second half of *Glory to the Filmmaker* ostensibly opens out and expands upon this last, apocalyptic narrative strand. It is adapted into a story concerning the slapstick misadventures of two women (the elder played by Kitano regular Kishimoto Kayako) whose faces appear on the asteroid that will destroy the earth. They spend their time trying to evade paying in restaurants and to engineer road accidents in which they can claim money from the drivers. Following this, as a voice-over relates that the film needs men, these characters' actions are interspersed with the story of an ineffectual company president, his son, and his bodyguard (played by 'Beat' Takeshi). The crux of the 'plot' details a union between the youngest girl and Kitano's character, which culminates in a trip to, and ultimately a frantic escape from, a remote mountain dwelling with Kitano chasing after them.

Thus, as befits a film that begins and ends with a CAT scan in progress on Kitano in a hospital, this is a determinedly inward looking x-ray of a picture by its director, one in which the problem of the artist's creative impasse becomes central (Fellini's *Otto e mezzo/Eight and a Half* [1963] is again a significant point of reference). The fact that it is only a 'Beat' Takeshi doll undergoing a scan at the beginning of the film (as the doctor bluntly states: 'tell *him* to come himself next time') is only the start of an increasingly complex, self-excoriating joke: one which multiplies exponentially when the film's aforementioned latter half settles into a slapstick journey narrative. Here, 'Beat' Takeshi (who is repeatedly shown carrying the aforementioned doll in the film's first half) is frequently replaced in its latter section by his life-size facsimile, which can be seen being operated by workers during various fight scenes.

One can immediately see, then, that the problems of *Takeshis'*, of doubling, canonization and commodification, are as much a part of *Glory to the Filmmaker*: that the latter film follows directly from the former, indeed becomes its explicit companion piece, in continuing what Kitano has termed his 'auto-destruct' cinema[15]. However, *Glory to the Filmmaker* film reverses the focus of its progenitor. If *Takeshis'* explored the weight of perceptions imposed from without by commentators on the Kitano canon, its successor reverses this theme. It is concerned with the concomitant ways in which Kitano himself returns inexorably to these perceptions and precepts, can but submit to them. Several of the ultimately abortive film projects depicted in the first half of the narrative remain so because Kitano cannot help but have recourse to yakuza characters and violent material; whilst the same problem observed from the opposite end of the spectrum affects the others, such as the home drama and love story projects. That is, they are palatably un-commercial for a modern-day audience.

Another comparison with *Takeshis'* also immediately suggests itself. Where the former details the exigencies of Kitano's fame and persona before the camera, *Glory to the Filmmaker*, as the title suggests, is concerned as much with his position and status behind it. It is an explication of the problems entailed by the specificity of his status as a director whose films typically have to content with and negotiate a number of audiences and perceptions: a director who has become, in a sense, as schizophrenic, as doubled, as his pro-filmic alter-ego.

As such, it ideally situated at the head of Kitano's oeuvre as it currently stands, discoursing as it does on authorship and the nature of canonization. Jean Renoir once famously noted that many directors essentially spend their careers making one film, the same work, again and again[16]. In the case of Kitano, this conception has become

thoroughly constricting, a weight on his shoulders rather than a badge of artistry (as early, romantic conceptions of the film auteur would have posited it). He is, ultimately, depicted once again like Fellini's Guido in *Eight and a Half*, as an artist not in thrall to commercial imperatives or studio dictates, but only to himself.

Having already expounded *Glory to the Filmmaker's* cinematic kinship with *Takeshis'*, something pertinent to its first half, a further comparison should be made at this juncture, one that can help elucidate both the film itself and the reactions to it. It is a juxtaposition that is pertinent to the latter half of the film, its slapstick road narrative, and which closely mirrors *Glory to the Filmmaker's* particular style and tone: *Minnā-yatteruka* (*Getting Any?* 1994). This is, in fact, a multifarious point of contrast. In addition to bringing the present study full circle - with 'Beat' Takeshi the performer made manifest as figurative filmmaker in both works – it also highlights the extent to which Kitano remains the target of the film. He has said that *Getting Any?* was intended to satirize and subvert himself[17], and *Glory to the Filmmaker* similarly opens up a space in which the Kitano Takeshi of violent Yakuza films is undermined and ridiculed in no uncertain terms. For instance, in the first of a number of echoes of *Takeshis'* littered through the narrative, the first example of a Kitano film seen within the diegesis of *Glory to the Filmmaker* is a parody on the order of the earlier film's *Hell Heat*.

The aforementioned aspect of carnivalesque self-abasement that is intrinsic to *Getting Any?* is also present in a fundamentally more complex conception in *Glory to the Filmmaker*. It is complicated primarily by the fact that one is never entirely certain quite what feature of Kitano is being targeted. An early festival review described it as, possibly, either a director liberated from constraints making the film he has always desired, or a cinematic suicide bid[18] (Kitano dies where previously it was Takeshi

dies). This commentary also decried the film's unsuccessful latter half, as did a review in Variety[19], which referred to *Glory to the Filmmaker* as 'Takeshi Kitano's latest auto-reflexive wallow[20]'.

These notices are emblematic of the frustrated confusion attendant upon both this film and its predecessor. Such ambiguity is, though, a hallmark of Kitano's work, especially as it has developed since *Hana-Bi* (*Dolls* is a case in point, although that film drew criticism for the opposite reason: for its prescriptive, limiting sentimentality). Such is also the case with *Glory to the Filmmaker*. To return to the question of the film's comedic target, one may ask whether it is, for instance, an attack upon the Japanese audience who have remained largely apathetic to Kitano Takeshi the filmmaker and preferred his televisual spectacle and irreverence? Or is it, conversely, an affront to a Eurocentric mindset, a critical establishment who have constructed their own Kitano and in so doing have similarly missed the point? Is it simply a provocation to take him seriously as an artist *at all*, or a rebuke for ever having done so in the first place?

The latter seems the most likely deduction. The film's extreme irreverence (which seemed to put off more viewers than it engaged at its packed premiere at the London Film Festival in 2007) challenges its audience to analyse its constituent parts and myriad references. One final coup by Kitano, however, throws any such confident conclusion into some doubt. The actual title of *Glory to the Filmmaker* is never shown at the beginning of the film. It begins to appear in text, but is abruptly halted, interrupted, and never completed. Until, that is, at the very end of the narrative Here, as the *dénouement* is unfolding (at which time audiences may well have forgotten that this is supposed to be a disaster film about an asteroid collision and the end of the world), Kitano presents an almost perfect non-sequitur of a *deus-ex-machina* ending.

As the female protagonists are fleeing from 'Beat' Takeshi, the world is indeed destroyed by an asteroid collision. From amongst the devastation of this strike rises the title *Glory to the Filmmaker*, which can be taken as an explicit avowal of Kitano's omnipotence as a director and storyteller, the fact that on film he can and will do anything.

Following this, though, there is one further scene that complicates the above. As Kitano himself sits in the patient's chair for his scan, his doctor tells him that there is nothing in his head and that his brain is broken. Thus a statement of power and control is immediately contrasted with one of powerlessness before an interrogation, a study and analysis. This explicit bracketing is, in effect, another reprise of *Takeshis'*, of the framing scenes of that film in which 'Beat' Takeshi as a soldier lay prostrate before an American in the rubble of war torn Japan. Both sets of openings and closings present a helpless Kitano, and (even more so in *Glory to the Filmmaker* given the director is the subject and is literally being examined) can be taken as a commentary on critical canonization and its discourse of limitation and restriction.

In this regard, *Glory to the Filmmaker* follows on not only from *Takeshis'*, but also from a short film Kitano made in the interim between the two works: a three-minute film about cinema-going made as part of a 2007 Cannes 60th Anniversary film entitled *Chacun son Cinéma* (*To Each His Own Cinema*). 25 filmmakers from around the world were invited to contribute to this omnibus with a three minute, personal reflection on the same subject. Kitano's effort, called *One Fine Day*, concerns a man paying a visit to a remote rural cinema, a run-down, single screen theatre anomalously located in the middle of an otherwise barren mountainous field (he receives a farmer's concession for his ticket). He is there to see Kitano's *Kizzu ritān* (*Kids Return*, 1996). However, the film constantly keeps breaking down in the antiquated projector, and the

projectionist, played by 'Beat' Takeshi, seems distinctly unsure of his job, with the film ultimately burning on screen.

This short work contrasts with *Takeshis'* and its successor in *Glory to the Filmmaker* in being a wry and self-deprecating look at Kitano and his authorial status, in particular what Kitano himself desires with regard to his oeuvre. The fact that 'Beat' Takeshi is the projectionist can be taken as a comedic reference to the number of roles that Kitano typically fulfils in his filmmaking, a sly allusion to the romantic, grand-creator face of his authorial specificity. The fact also that *Kids Return* is the film being screened (in a remote location for only a single spectator) is perhaps connotative of its status as the film of his that Kitano would now wish to associate himself with, over and above a *Sonatine* or *Hana-Bi*.

Thus, like *Takeshis'* and *Glory to the Filmmaker*, there are two diegetic levels within *One Fine Day*: the world of the narrative, and the film within the film. However, they operate on a different plane of authorial self-reflexivity. *Kids Return* is one of Kitano's few works in which he does not feature as an actor, in which 'Beat' Takeshi is absent. As such, the combination of an ineffectual and comedic 'Beat' in the film's diegesis proper, and Kitano Takeshi (visible only as filmmaker and authorial presence) in the inter-diegetic film, alludes to a distinct separation of the two entities that characterise the cinema Kitano brand.

It has been noted that un-Japanese sentiments may be detected in *Takeshis'* and *Glory to the Filmmaker*; at the very least the pre-supposition of a working familiarity with Kitano's oeuvre that is a pre-requisite for fully understanding these films would seem to speak more to an international audience, one for whom authorial canonization of Kitano has been so pronounced (to the extent of over-simplification). So, can one re-formulate the questions already posed? Is Kitano deconstructing himself for

consumption by a national or international audience? He has said with regard to *Takeshis'* that he is now ashamed of the violent films that made his name[21], and *Glory to the Filmmaker* continues its progenitor's subversion of those films (in much the same way: opening with a parody of a Kitano Yakuza film). In this case, do his most recent works intend to re-educate foreign audiences on the new Kitano? Or did Kitano wish to undermine the films that have been successful abroad with a view to ingratiating himself into acceptance in Japan as a filmmaker?

Neither seems entirely adequate, and perhaps the question is too broad, and the films too amorphous (some would argue evasive), to really uncover any overarching intent. In the last instance, this is why Kitano presents such a complex and vital case study in contemporary authorship. The fact that he continues to second guess audiences and critics, refusing to adhere in any overt way to the precepts defined as specifically his (even though certain interviews, such as the one for the French *Cinéastes de notre temps* series, make it clear that he is more than aware of his own authorial stamp), means care must be taken to legitimate his auteur status. Each film must be carefully tested against others in Kitano's oeuvre for the way in which, in line with cine-structuralism, his antinomies have developed and undergone changes of emphasis over time. This care has, until recently, been lacking in European and US discourse on his work, but the situation is beginning to change, albeit at a time when Kitano's standing and visibility have fallen on the back of the lack of distribution afforded his work since *Zatoichi*.

Whether or not Kitano deliberately intended either or both of his most recent films to play specifically to Japanese or Western audiences, the works themselves remain the locus of their own art. They are not shaped or defined by their influences, and in belonging to a well-established genre of European and US filmmaking, constitute a

departure for Japanese cinema and a further internationalization of the Kitano brand. Concomitantly, they also encapsulate how Kitano has fallen out of synch with Japanese cinema, and has become something of a cinematic island-unto-himself. This both enriches and problematizes an authorial response to his work, but nonetheless makes such a study all the more necessary, especially as Japanese cinema (as Wally Hammond noted recently in *Time Out*[22]) has at this moment followed Kitano in again declining in visibility at the international box office.

At the time of writing, he has a new film appearing at the Venice Film Festival, a comedy entitled *Akiresu to kame* (*Achilles and the Tortoise*, 2008) about a painter and his inability to prosper due to a lack of originality on his part. It completes what is now a trilogy of films concerned with Kitano and the amorphous, multi-form nature of his art and persona, but early word on the film has fallen in line with the reactions to both *Takeshis'* and *Glory to the Filmmaker* and criticised it for its hermetic self-absorption. Having built a career, certainly a reputation, on a particular category of genre films (films that were themselves designed in part to repudiate the specificity of Kitano's televisual celebrity), the current lack of visibility of Kitano is not surprising. But he is a filmmaker that thrives on constantly challenging and redefining himself. He has already sacrificed his reputation in Japan at the altar of never playing it safe and repeating himself. Now his international standing, which has always clashed with said Japanese indifference, is beginning to follow suit.

Perhaps the fact that Kitano's work has suffered from being too narrowly and rigidly perceived in the West has contributed to this state of affairs. Precepts of violence and tenderness, of Zen spirituality, have been taken to be at the core of Kitano's work in the cinema, and deviations from this have not been considered in detail commensurate to their specific artistic *raison d'etre*. However, as noted, the

recent publication of a thorough and detailed book-length study by Aaron Gerow has

gone some way to redressing the balance. It indicates, ironically (as his critical

currency has fallen in recent years), that the idiosyncratic challenge offered by this

most singular filmmaker, in all his manifestations and multifarious constituent parts,

may finally be beginning to be accepted in the depth it deserves. The fact that Kitano

himself has begun to contribute to discourses on Kitano in his last three films

(*Takeshis'*, *Glory to the Filmmaker* and *Achilles and the Tortoise*) would seem to

suggest that the time has never been better or circumstances more conducive to

undertaking this project and meeting the challenge that Kitano has set.

Notes

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[1] Kitano, T interviewed in *Moviemaker's Master Class: Private: Lessons from the World's Foremost Director's* (Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 2003) p.169

[2] Staiger, J *Authorship Approaches* in Gerstner, D.A. & J. Staiger (eds) *Authorship and Film* (Routledge, New York and London, 2003) pp.27-57

[3] Naremore, J *Authorship and the Cultural Politics of Film Criticism Film Quarterly* vol. 44, no. 1 (Fall 1990) pp.20-21

[4] Nakata, H Foreword to Mes, T & J. Sharp *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, CA, 2005) p.9

[5] Casio, A O. Gardner, W & T. Hori (trans) *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* (Kaya Press, United States of America, 2004) - Originally published by Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., Japan, 1994

[6] Wollen, P *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, *'The Auteur Theory'* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1972) p.104

[7] Burch, N *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979) p.336

[8] This is a philosophical contention forwarded in the 18th century by the Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley, and is quoted in relation to Beckett in Worton, M *Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text* in Pilling, J (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994) p.72

[9] 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

[10] See the Takeshi Kitano Masterclass, an interview filmed in France before a live audience in 2004 for Kitano's own views on this topic

[11] Gerow, A *A Scene at the Threshold: Liminality in the Films of Kitano Takeshi Asian Cinema*, vol. 10 no. 2, (Spring/Summer 1999) pp.107-115

[12] Truffaut, F *A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema*, published in 1954, reprinted in Nichols, B (ed) *Movies and Methods* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1985) pp.224-237

[13] Sarris, A *The American Cinema* published in 1963, reprinted as *Towards a Theory of Film History* in Nichols, B (ed) *Movies and Methods* pp.238-251

[14] Davis, D.W. Japan: *Cause for (Cautious) Optimism* in Ciecko, A.T. (ed) *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (Berg, Oxford, New York, 2006) pp.193-206

[15] Kitano, T quoted in Hammond, W *Lost in Translation* – a feature published on the *Time Out* Website – http://www.timeout.com/film/features/show-feature/3444/lost-in-translation.html (Accessed 12/09/08) - about a recent slump in new Japanese films and a corrective season at BAFTA

[16] Renoir, J quoted in Stoddart, H *Auteurism and Film Authorship Theory* in Hollows, J & M. Jancovich (eds) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1995) p.46

[17] Taken from an interview with Kitano on the *Artsmagic* DVD release of *Getting Any?*

[18] Jenkins, D *The LFF Blog: Day Two* (2007) online at http://www.timeout.com/film/features/show-feature/3684/the-lff-blog-day-two.html (Accessed 12/09/08) In this brief review, the author celebrates the first half of *Glory to the Filmmaker*, but decries the second, finding it a barrage of 'half-fleshed-out skits'

[19] Scheib, R *Glory to the Filmmaker! Variety* Online at http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117934556.html (Accessed 17/05/07)

[20] Ibid.

[21] Kitano, T talking to Tony Rayns in *Beat meets Mr Kitano Sight & Sound*, vol. 15 no. 11 (November 2005) p.9

[22] Hammond, W *Lost in Translation Time Out* London Online at http://www.timeout.com/film/features/show-feature/3444/lost-in-translation.html (Accessed 12/09/08)

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Filmography

Sono otoko, kyōbō ni tsuki (*Violent Cop*, 1989)
Director: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Okuyama Kazuyoshi, Nabeshima Hisao, Yoshida Takeo, Ichiyama Shozo
Screenplay: Nozawa Hisashi
Cinematographer: Sasakibara Yasushi
Editor: Kamiya Nobutake
Music: Kume Daisaku
Production designer: Mochizuki Masateru
Production Company: Shochiku Fuji
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Dt. Azuma), Hakuryu (Kiyohiro), Kawakami Maiko (Akari), San Shiro (Yoshinari), Kishibe Ittoku (Nito), Hiraizumi Sei (Iwaki), Ashiwara Makoto (Kikuchi)

San tai yon, ekkusu...jūgatsu (*Boiling Point*, 1990)
Director, Screenplay: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Okuyama Kazuyoshi, Nabeshima Hisao, Yoshida Takeo, Mori Masayuki
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Taniguchi Toshio
Production Designer: Sasaki Osamu
Production Company: Bandai, Shochiku Fuji
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Uehara), Ono Masahiko (Masaki), Ishida Yuriko (Sayaka), Iguchi Takahito (Iguchi), Iizuka Minoru/Dankan (Kazuo), Tokashiki Katsuo (Tamaki)

Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi (*A Scene at the Sea*, 1991)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Kitano Takeshi, Tachi Yukio, Yoshida Takeo, Mori Masayuki
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Sasaki Osamu
Production Company: Office Kitano, Tōtsū
Cast: Maki Kurodo (Shigeru), Oshima Hiroko (Takako), Kawahara Sabu (Tamukai), Fujiwara Toshizo (Nakajima), Terajima Susumu (Pick-up Truck Driver)

Sonachine (*Sonatine*, 1993)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Okuyama Kazuyoshi, Nabeshima Hisao, Yoshida Takeo, Mori Masayuki
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Sasaki Osamu
Production Company: Bandai Visual, Sochiku Daiichi kogyo

Cast: Beat Takeshi (Murakawa), Terajima Susumu (Ken), Katsumura Masanobu (Ryoji), Kokumai Aya (Miyuki), Osugi Ren (Katagiri), Zushi Tonbo (Kitajima), Yajima Ken'ichi (Takahashi)

Minnā-yatteruka! (*Getting Any?* 1994)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Nabeshima Hisao, Yoshida Takeo, Tsuge Yasushi
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinori
Music: Koike Hidehiko
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Bandai Visual, Office Kitano
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Mad Scientist), Dankan (Asao), Terajima Susumu (Yakuza), Osugi Ren (Hitman), Guadalcanal Taka (Pilot), Yuki Tetsuya (Yakuza Boss)

Kizzu ritān (*Kids Return*, 1996)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo, Tsuge Yasushi
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinari
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Bandai Visual, Office Kitano
Cast: Kaneko Ken (Masaru), Ando Masanobu (Shinji), Ishibashi Ryo (Yakuza Boss), Yamaya Hatsuo (Boxing Gym Manager), Terajima Susumu (Yakuza), Kashiwaya Michisuke (Hiroshi), Daike Yuko (Sachiko), Moro Morooka (Hayashi)

Hana-Bi (*Fireworks*, 1997)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo, Tsuge Yasushi
Cinematographer: Yamamoto HideoEditor: Ota Yoshinari
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Bandai Visual, Office Kitano, TV Tokyo, Tokyo FM
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Det. Nishi), Osugi Ren (Det. Horibe), Kishimoto Kayako (Nishi's wife), Terajima Susumu (Nakamura), Hakuryu (Tojo), Watanabe Tetsu (Junk Yard Owner), Ashikawa Makoto (Tanaka), Daike Yuko (Tanaka's wife)

Kikujirō no natsu (*Kikujiro*, 1999)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinari
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Tokyo FM, Nippon Herald

Cast: Beat Takeshi (Kikujiro), Sekiguchi Yusuke (Masao), Yoshiyuki Kazuko (Masao's Grandmother), Great Gidayu (Fat Biker), Ide Rakkyo (Bald Biker), Daike Yuko (Masao's mother), Fumie Hosokawa (Girl on date)

Brother [2000]
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Jeremy Thomas
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinori
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Recorded Picture Company
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Yamamoto/Aniki), Omar Epps (Denny), Claude Maki (Ken), Kato Masaya (Shirase), Terajima Susumu (Kato), Osugi Ren (Harada), Ishibashi Ryo (Ishihara)

Dōruzu (*Dolls*, 2002)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinori
Music: Hisaishi Joe
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Tokyo FM, TV Tokyo
Cast: Kanno Miho (Sawako), Nishijima Hidetoshi (Matsumoto), Mihashi Tatsuya (Hiro the Yakuza Boss), Fukada Kyoko (Haruna), Matsubara Chieko (Ryoko), Kishimoto Kayako (Haruna's aunt), Osugi Ren (Haruna's Manager),

Zatoichi [2003]
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Saito Chieko, Saito Tsunehisa
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinori
Music: Suzuki Keiichi
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Tokyo FM, TV Asahi, Dentsu, Saito Entertainment
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Zatoichi), Asano Tadanobu (Hattori), Ogusu Michiyo (Oume), Natsukawa Yui (Hattori's wife), Guadalcanal Taka (Shinkichi), Daike Yuko (Okinu), Tachibana Daigoro (Osei), Kishibe Ittoku (Ginzo)

Takeshis' [2005]
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinori

Music: Nagi
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Tokyo FM, Dentsu, TV Asahi
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Beat Takeshi/Mr. Kitano), Kishimoto Kayako (Audition judge), Susumu Terajima (Beat Takeshi's colleague/Mr. Kitano's neighbour), Kyono Kotomi (Beat Takeshi's girlfriend/Mr. Kitano's neighbour), Osugi Ren (Beat Takeshi's Manager/Taxi driver), Miwa Akihiro (Herself)

Kantoku Banzai! (*Glory to the Filmmaker*, 2007)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Editor: Ota Yoshinori
Music: Ikebe Shinichiro
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Tokyo FM, Dentsu, TV Asahi
Cast: Beat Takeshi (

Akiresu to kame (*Achilles and the Tortoise*, 2008)
Director, Screenplay, Editor: Kitano Takeshi
Producer: Mori Masayuki, Yoshida Takeo
Cinematographer: Yanagijima Katsumi
Music: Kajiuri Yuki
Production Designer: Isoda Norihiro
Production Company: Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Tokyo FM, TV Asahi, Tokyo Theatres Company, WoWow
Cast: Beat Takeshi (Kuramochi Machisu as an adult), Yoshioka Reiko (Kuramochi Machisu as a boy), Yanaga Yurei (Kuramochi Machisu as an adolescent), Higuchi Kanako (Sachiko), Nakao Akira (Kuramochi Risuke), Omori Nao (Picture Dealer), Osugi Ren (Kuramochi Tomisuke), Susumu Terajima (Yakuza Pimp),