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Kitano Takeshi (excerpt)

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KITANO TAKESHI

Aaron Gerow

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To Seiko and Ian

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A note on Japanese names: this book follows Japanese custom by placing the family name first, except in cases of Japanese who have been mostly active abroad. It also uses modified Hepburn romanisation. Thus it is Hisaishi Jō, not Joe Hisaishi.

INTRODUCING TWO TAKESHIS

The title of the film *Takeshis*' (2005) emphasises plurality first of all. It initially refers to the two characters from the movie named Takeshi: the successful film and television star Beat Takeshi and a down-and-out actor named Kitano Takeshi. An encounter between these largely identical men generates a dreamlike and increasingly absurd narrative as the latter, chancing upon some yakuza guns, becomes more and more like the action star until he eventually tries to murder, Beat Takeshi. This becomes ironic not only because this Kitano proves to be just the product of the star's fanciful if disturbed reverie, but because *Takeshis*' is directed by a real individual named Kitano Takeshi, who also stars in the film under the moniker Beat Takeshi, which he has used as a stage name since starting the comedy duo the Two Beats in the 1970s, eventually becoming one of the most famous Japanese television personalities. The doubling in front of the camera is doubled by another behind it. The film's title screen



'Beat Takeshi' in *Takeshis*'



'Kitano Takeshi' in *Takeshis*

emphasises this mirroring by first showing the reflection of the title in blue before revealing what is reflected, the word "Takeshis" in red.

The fact that the reflection comes before what it reflects and takes on a different colour, underlines that this is not merely a duality of the real and its mirror image. What seems to be a distinct half of a pair can itself involve multiple identities. For instance, the action star Kitano the actor emulates – the one with blond hair and dark sunglasses – is not the same Beat Takeshi as the dark-haired individual in the TV studio. Multiplicities proliferate as most of the actors play three or four different roles in the movie. The posters of the film summarise rather than explicate this plurality. There are not one, but two official posters: one featuring a large close-up of the Beat Takeshi character with the title in blue, the other the Kitano character with *Takeshis* in red. Interestingly each face is composed of hundreds of smaller images, the grand majority of which are of Takeshi, but not necessarily from the film (some are from earlier works such as *Hana-Bi* [1998] and *Zatoichi* [2003]), and there is at least one photograph of each of the other characters in the movie. Visually, the posters underline not only Takeshi's two identities, but also how each of these identities is an amalgam of many Takeshis and the people that surround them.

Representing multiple 'Takeshis' is not unique to *Takeshis*. From his first directorial effort, *Violent Cop* (1989), Takeshi has credited 'Kitano Takeshi' with direction and 'Beat Takeshi' with acting. Given how many films concluded with the death of the character played by Beat Takeshi, Abe Kashō, in his book from 1994, *Kitano Takeshi vs Beat Takeshi*,¹ focuses on the films up until *Sonatine* (1993) as a battle between the televisual Beat Takeshi and the cinematic Kitano, where the latter is attempting to break down the body of the former. More recently, Daisuke Miyao has pictured the two as embodying 'the gap between cinephilia and telephilia', a means by which 'Kitano problematizes the inevitable coexistence between TV and cinema in Japan'. Miyao argues that 'the telephilic media conditions in recent Japan' may have in effect absorbed the cinematic Kitano Takeshi as just another TV personality.²

These shifts and divisions may not be so simple. Takeshi has used his real name, 'Kitano Takeshi', from before he began directing, as character names in comedy skits in the groundbreaking show *We're the Clown Tribe* (*Oretachi hyōkinzoku*) or when publishing books. He in fact made a strategy of offering different versions of himself as one means of negotiating the televisual world. Just as he would later talk of television as 'insurance' allowing him to do very different work in cinema, he spoke of his popular programmes as 'insurance' permitting him to do more daring television comedy elsewhere.³ The divisions in his identity have thus never been easily reducible to the television/cinema split.

This is also not the division between the real person, Kitano Takeshi, and the fictional 'Beat Takeshi'. Takeshi has often spoken of these two characters as dolls (*ningyō*) that he, a third, presumably 'true' identity, manipulates.

I'm having fun with Beat Takeshi and Kitano Takeshi. If I'm asked who I am, I can only answer, 'I'm the man who plays Beat Takeshi and Kitano Takeshi.' Every once in a while, I call out to myself, 'You must be tired', and ask, 'So what should we do Take-chan?' It's a classic case of a split personality.⁴

He says he swings back and forth between these characters like a pendulum, a metaphor he also uses to describe his cinematic shifts from the romantic

(*A Scene at the Sea* [1991]) to the violent (*Sonatine*) to the comic (*Getting Any?* [1995]). Such statements indicate that, at least in Takeshi's mind, his different personalities remain separate, strategic positions for managing the Japanese entertainment world. His producer and the president of his entertainment company, Office Kitano, Mori Masayuki emphasises how central this is to their business strategy, where they make a point of not selling Kitano's films on Beat Takeshi's popular television programmes.

If you casually place something of quality in a mass-produced consumer product, the customer is not going to go to it since they know better. Our experience up until now is that people will not consider it worth going to a movie sold only as a film made by Beat Takeshi. That is why we want to create absolutely no confusion on this point. We don't want the film director Kitano Takeshi and the TV talent Beat Takeshi treated within the same frame.⁵

Perhaps the specifics of this policy have changed now, but the general marketing plan has not, especially as Kitano has become a global phenomenon. Takeshi first became known abroad as Kitano Takeshi, with 'Beat Takeshi' operating largely as a footnote explaining what Kitano does in another space. 'Beat Takeshi' was encompassed within 'Kitano Takeshi', such that the personalities were often melded into a single name, '"Beat" Takeshi Kitano'⁶ (a phenomenon unheard of in Japan). That has tended to downplay Beat Takeshi's status as 'a mass-produced consumer product', rendering it merely an extension of the auteur Kitano Takeshi. With Office Kitano now producing the works of other directors, including Jia Zhangke's *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004), Mori 'wants to create the image that Office Kitano's K logo stands for high-quality works with an auteurist stance' on an international scale.⁷ The names Beat Takeshi and Kitano Takeshi, earning different emphasis at home and abroad, are kept separate partially because of product differentiation.

How does one approach a star director who bears different names in different media, producing various meanings in various locations? Kitano's case poses interesting questions first for the study of stardom. *Takeshis* is partially Kitano's reflection on being a star. Although 'Beat Takeshi' and

'Kitano Takeshi' are physically identical, the former has fame and women while the other does not. 'Beat Takeshi' behaves like the new elite, but the ease with which 'Kitano' is mistaken for the star (by the fan, by the chauffeur, etc.) only reminds us that stars differ little from ordinary people. In fact, what raises 'Kitano's' status is the pure accident of acquiring a gun, a fact that seems to endorse the notion that stardom is 'attributed', not 'achieved' or 'ascribed'.⁸ The constructed nature of stardom is evident from the fact that the elements that compose 'Beat Takeshi's' screen persona, such as the blond hair, are identified as imitable.

Takeshis, if not Takeshi's own star status, acknowledges the polysemous and often contradictory nature of star identity. Many have theorised modern stardom as being a product of bourgeois society. Richard Dyer writes that 'one of the types that stars embody is the type of the "individual" itself; they embody that particular conception of what it is to be human that characterises our culture'.⁹ Such ideological functions overlap with economic ones as a unique and consistent individual identity is also important for selling stars. But just as the economic sphere has shifted from fixed capital towards flexible accumulation in the postmodern world, so stars have increasingly become flexible entities, being either subject to a variety of readings by different consumers, or themselves increasingly embodying the disjointed and often schizophrenic flow of images.¹⁰ Takeshi presents an interesting case of a star who not only represents, but apparently is conscious of these shifts, foregrounding his own polysemy through multiple identities, ones that also exceed national boundaries. He thus encourages the knowing, perhaps even ironic form of star appreciation that Joshua Gamson discusses.¹¹ But just as we can ask if fans vicariously and self-consciously consume the relations between Takeshi's various personae, if not also his self-critical attitude towards celebrity culture, we can ask whether Takeshi's foregrounding of the apparatus actually reintroduces the star as the figure rising above the postmodern flow, someone who can both play with and criticise it.

Takeshi's star persona has often been sold as a 'genius' (*tensai*) who stands above the crowd of '*tarento*' (talents) in the Japanese entertainment industry. Abroad, this has translated into the image of a Renaissance man who not only

acts and directs, but writes novels, poetry and political criticism. In Japan this image is subject to self-parody as some of his sillier shows, such as *The Genius Takeshi's Enlivening TV* (*Tensai Takeshi no genki ga deru terebi*), sport 'genius' in the title. Seemingly his genius lay not merely in his intelligence, but in his ability to simultaneously be a clown and a genius. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto has analysed Japan's unique *tarento* system, in which the display of known personalities playing 'themselves' in variety and quiz shows has become central to nightly programming. *Tarento*, to Yoshimoto, are the currency of contemporary Japanese television, where wealth is measured not in terms of real talent, but in exposure and exchanges with the audience.¹² As often the master of ceremonies of these shows, Takeshi appears both as a *tarento* and as someone who manages this currency.¹³

The posters for *Takeshis* embody this. Although composed of multiple photos, they are not a true image mosaic like Chuck Close's self-portraits, where the individual images are arranged and manipulated according to their relative hue and tone so that, viewed from a distance, they meld into a larger image. The posters are just large images of Beat Takeshi or Kitano Takeshi imposed over the multiple smaller photographs. The plurality here is less an inherent multiplicity behind a larger fiction ('fiction' because it is the product of perception only), one available to those who look closely, than a duality offering Takeshi as both a single, overarching identity and an accumulation of distinct instantiations. We can say it is this duality, one which allows Takeshi to both 'have his cake and eat it too' – to be both a *tarento* and someone who transcends it, a polysemous intertextual entity and a singular artistic genius, a Japanese *tarento* and an international star – that distinguishes his star image.

This also relates to his image as a film auteur. Since this book concentrates on his directorial career and not on his activities in other media, it is his image as an auteur that is the foremost concern. The two – being a star and being an auteur – are related because Takeshi, along with Clint Eastwood, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and a few others, is one of the few stars to concurrently succeed as a director. His star image was used to sell at least his first film, *Violent Cop*, and the tension between his star and auteur images has fuelled his subsequent film career. He often spoke of

the frustration he felt when Japanese audiences, expecting the comedian Beat Takeshi, laughed at his first major film role, the brutal Sergeant Hara in Ōshima Nagisa's *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence* (*Senjō no meri kurisumasu*, 1983).¹⁴ His cinematic work is partially aimed at combating the star image obstructing his film identity; his directorial work, whether or not actively opposing the televisuality of that image, aspires to multiply the possibilities of his identities. Yet it was inevitable that he would have to coordinate the two: although the blond hair he sported in *Zatoichi* was one of the ways he rewrote this established character, he actually dyed his hair months beforehand so that Japanese audiences could get used to it on TV and not laugh when they saw him in the film. When Kitano's work travels abroad, this coordination is more difficult and more flexible (since he is less burdened with an extra-cinematic star image). He has both taken advantage of and fallen victim to these transnational differences.

Creating a distinct image as a director was one of the aims of his cinema, and that was further augmented by the control he seemed to have over the production process. The structure of Japanese film production has often been director-centred, even during the studio era. Kitano, too, quickly created a 'Kitano-gumi' (Kitano crew) composed of regulars like the actors Ōsugi Ren, Watanabe Tetsu, Kishimoto Kayoko and Terajima Susumu. An unusual production schedule designed to fit Takeshi's TV obligations and the lack of complete scripts encouraged improvisational creation on the set and made production dependent upon the director's decisions. Even though Kitano is well known for rarely giving his actors specific instructions, this is less to encourage their expressive talents, than to have them not act, and thus better fit his overall scheme. Often credited not only for directing and acting, but also for screenplay and editing, Kitano appears to have undeniable personal artistic control over his films. This apparently confirms the impression, in the words of Tony Rayns, of

the singularity of the position Kitano has carved for himself as a director. No film-maker currently active . . . gives less thought to the impact of individual films on his or her career. Kitano has no impulse to build on past successes, or to go any significant distance towards meeting audience expectations.¹⁵

It is common in studies of film directors to announce the caveats to the auteur theory. Surely one must not fall into the illusion that Kitano's films are 'clearly recognizable as the work of one man'.¹⁶ We cannot ignore the significant contributions of artists such as cinematographer Yanagijima Katsumi,¹⁷ lighting designer Takaya Hitoshi, set designer Isoda Norihiro, composer Hisaishi Jō or even script supervisor Nakata Hideko, who maintained order as Kitano changed the script from day to day. Yamamoto Yōji's designs for *Dolls* (2002), for example, were so bold that Kitano ended up changing his plans for the film. Arguably the most significant presence in Kitano's work is his producer Mori Masayuki, who has been with him on every single film, on the set and in the editing room, making decisions on what project to film and when. He, for instance, came up with the title for *Hana-Bi*. Such varied contributions are hard to account for, which is why it sometimes makes more sense, à la auteur-structuralism, to consider the auteur's name as designating less a single creator than the sum total of forces that shape, unify and sometimes disrupt the texts. Some of these forces include the social and industrial conditions of production and the processes of reception. Kitano's films appeared at a time of readjustment in the Japanese film industry, after the end of the studio era and on the cusp of a wave of independent productions increasingly aimed at foreign festivals and markets. Japan was also suffering from the bursting of the economic bubble of the 1980s, a rethinking of postwar culture, and the rise of nationalism, just as it pursued reforms to make it more globally competitive. On an international level, Kitano's films were important texts in reappraising the relation of genre and art cinema in what could be termed a post-classical age of cinema, trends that were not unrelated to changes in how Japan was consumed abroad.

Within all this, fans played an important role in supporting Kitano's work and shaping it. This is not only because Kitano, contrary to Rayns's appraisal, admits to decisions made to satisfy his audience, but also because the expectations spectators brought to his films constantly interacted with them. The example of fans laughing at *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence* reveals Kitano's awareness of the power of reception to manipulate a film's significance. What is intriguing from the standpoint of auteurism is the strategy

Kitano took against this. Instead of attempting to satisfy the demands of his consumer base, he fought against them and the persona Beat Takeshi itself. This helped create a subversive or an auteur, who ignores commercial considerations to undermine convention. But this was a peculiar image for an auteur: as film audiences would get used to a 'Kitano Takeshi' who was not Beat Takeshi, he would then, for instance, undermine that label with a film the posters said was 'directed by Beat Takeshi' (*Getting Any?*). Throughout his film career, Kitano has shifted, sometimes radically, between different film styles and narratives.

One of the hallmarks of the auteur theory, if not the spark for its inception, was the perception that works by the same director shared certain traits. They were so consistent it was said that all the movies of an auteur constituted a larger single work. What is interesting about Kitano is that while there are those who insist this is true of him – that despite the apparent changes, there remains an unmistakable 'Kitano' quality to all his work¹⁸ – many have declared that if there is anything unchanging about Kitano, it is that he is always changing. To Horike Yoshitsugu,

The moment one utters a word to describe him, he is no longer in the place that word describes. That is, there is no place where he exists himself as Kitano Takeshi; he rather seeks his identity in always becoming something other.¹⁹

This is a different conception of the auteur from that focusing on the single, expressive subject creating a consistent textuality. Post-structuralism declared the 'death of the author' because it identified operations of language and textuality that deferred or deconstructed such unities, as well as argued for the liberating effects of freeing the polyphony of language from a restrictive solitary source. In that vein, one can point to the contradictions and fissures of Kitano Takeshi's works as proof that they exceed and undermine the enunciation of a single genius director. But to do that with the aim of disproving the existence of 'Kitano, the auteur' is to miss the point: just as Takeshi acknowledges the polysemy of his star identities, Kitano consciously performs the contradictions of any authorial identity ascribed to

him by continually becoming different auteurs, evading attempts to define him. This could be the postmodern authorship analogous to his schizophrenic manipulations of star identity.

This may not be Kitano's final, self-conscious deconstruction of authorship. We should remember that one of the impetuses for his performance of change was precisely to avoid mistaken readings. It was in some ways a realist stance, trying to prevent audience impressions from overwhelming his real message. But combating audience expectations can also become a strategy to oppose spectator power. Pulling the rug out from under the viewer gives the author an advantage in the struggle over meaning. Again, as with his star identity, the knowing subversion of authorial identity can allow for the auteur to re-emerge through the back door, where now the flaunting of change and cynical resistance to expectations are taken as emblematic of a more authentic auteur. As such, the continuous Kitano and the discontinuous Kitano may in fact be two sides of the same auteurist coin. It is thus important to examine Kitano's work not only for the signs of these consistencies or diffusions, but also for marks of a strategy to manage and manipulate authorial identity in a postmodern age after the death of the author.

As star or auteur, Takeshi ultimately emerges as a juggler managing multiple identities and meanings, all the while performing a tap dance around the borders of genres and categories that may work to define him and his cinema. In this acrobatic act, Takeshi usually swings between two poles. Just as Jean-François Buiré has identified the contrapuntal as a central figure in Kitano's film-making 'fugue',²⁰ so we can see him playing two sides of a pair against each other, starting with 'Beat Takeshi' and 'Kitano Takeshi', but continuing with comedy and violence, life and death, convention and subversion, seeing and being seen, words and silence, motion and stillness, masculine and feminine, visibility and invisibility. The figure of the pair can be traced to the *manzai* vaudeville comedy that initially brought him fame, one usually performed, as Takeshi did with his partner Beat Kiyoshi, in a two-person team. It multiplies throughout his work, however, as we see pairs of characters in every film, from Azuma and Kiyohiro in *Violent Cop* to Shigeru and Takako in *A Scene at the Sea*, from Shinji and Masaru in *Kids Return* (1996) to Nishi and Horibe in *Hana-Bi*, from Yamamoto and Denny

in *Brother* (2001) to Beat Takeshi and Kitano Takeshi in *Takeshis*'. One of the issues I will pursue in this book is how Kitano portrays these dualities, asking particularly whether he proliferates their contradictions or instead finds frames that, while distinguishing the pairs, ultimately renders them part of a greater unity.

Given the deft dance we see in Kitano's oeuvre, one could argue, as Nakano Midori has, that 'theorising Takeshi' (*Takeshi-ron*) is impossible.²¹ This argument is a central plank in a critical platform that has supported Kitano's cinema, but it also is a 'Takeshi-ron'. We must consider the foundations for such an assertion and what kinds of analyses it enables and disables. I think it is incumbent upon us to swing between such assertions and their critique, while also seeking a frame – albeit not always the one Kitano might offer – that offers us a different perspective on this process, one connecting it to larger problems in Japanese and global culture.

The methodology and structure of this study will therefore borrow a page from Kitano's book and utilise the figure of the pair, while also considering frames for reappraising it. I will refrain from predetermining the 'Kitano as consistent' versus 'Kitano as ever changing' debate by dividing the book into two main sections: one devoted to summarising accounts of the stylistic and thematic consistencies in his work, relating and sometimes problematising them through historical and biographical context, and another that analyses each film from *Violent Cop* to *Zatoichi* for its uniqueness – as well as for the problems it poses to the vision of the ever-changing auteur. Book-ending these dual sections will be an introduction (this chapter) and a conclusion that use his twelfth film, *Takeshis*, as a frame to provide perspective on this particularly self-conscious film-maker, but without solving all the contradictions and inconsistencies this inherently divided account will provide. I hope the reader can frame them as representing the contradictions and inconsistencies of Kitano's cinema itself.

This task will not be easy, as I myself will have to juggle multiple Takeshis, offering his different identities and my own analysis of them, but taking care not to force a single opinion on a figure whose definition paradoxically includes resistance to definition. With Takeshi problematising efforts to name him, the very issue of what terms to use becomes difficult.

In this introduction and elsewhere, I allot different names to different figures, particularly using 'Beat Takeshi' for the star persona, 'Kitano Takeshi' for the director, and 'Takeshi' for what is often an amorphous, and not necessarily real 'other' entity perhaps above, perhaps between, but always somehow around the other two. These are only provisional terms, so I enjoin my readers to try juggling them themselves.

Another problem will be my own position *vis-à-vis* Takeshi. Although I have no personal connection to him, I lived in Japan through many of the years of his directorial career, and participated in the debates about his work and his contemporaries, writing criticism and analytical articles in English and Japanese. Although it is important to frame Takeshi in a global perspective, juggling his domestic and international activities, my natural bias is towards the debates in Japan that are most familiar to me. Since those are also the issues unfamiliar to most readers of this book, my emphasis will be on explicating this neglected pole – the discourses and conditions in Japan that attempted to define and make possible his film-making and its reception – so as to get a fuller picture of Takeshi's position between the local and the global. This bears a critical aspect because it involves introducing domestic criticism of his work that is largely unknown abroad, and which may alter his international image. Negotiating these different views, Kitano's voice and the voices of others, will be an important aspect of this work. Emerging in a 'World Directors' series, and limited by length, this book will also concentrate on Kitano the director, covering other aspects of Takeshi mainly as they are pertinent to the film-maker.

An obstacle faced when writing about Takeshi is the mythology that surrounds his personae. Some of what is said about him is simply untrue, but nonetheless takes on a life of its own, especially as fans latch on to certain narratives that support their vision of him. For example, even up until *Zatoichi*, commercially his most successful film, it was common to say that Kitano's movies were not successful at home. That is false. Takeshi is sometimes to blame for these myths, as he has admitted to lying to interviewers on more than one occasion,²² but the endurance of such myths says more about those believing them than about their accuracy. I will take a critical stance towards Takeshi's various images, one that may overturn fan illu-

sions. But I do not think this is necessarily alien to this project, since he often acknowledges the made-up nature of his tales even as he utters them. Again, we must weave our way between the myths, understanding how they operate and why, and the factual truths, analysing the game that Takeshi himself plays between these two realms.

That does not mean this book will offer a cold debunking of the Takeshi myth. It is important to stake out a mobile position between hagiography (which is what many of the books written on Kitano have been) and polemical criticism, one that appreciates his artistry, that of his films and his image production, and critically examines its historicity and ideology. This book is not concerned with evaluative appraisals. Given Takeshi's own dual status as intellectual and buffoon, the language of this book stands between scholarly analysis and popular criticism (with reduced theoretical jargon, but also unfortunately without much Takeshi-like humour). Against a director who is still swinging his pendulum, what I offer is a critical approximation of that motion, with thoughts on its conditions and future direction. Where it goes from now is up to Takeshi and, I believe, all who view this unique cinematic performer.

Hana-Bi

Kids Return had foregrounded the issues of repetition and change in Kitano's career, especially the question of what kind of return the director had made after his accident. *Hana-Bi* (released as *Fireworks* in some countries) would repeat the problem of return, as Kitano's own narrative of discovering life after the accident would be doubled by aspects of the film's story, in which doubled characters came to the fore to explore different outcomes of Kitano's return. What would be added to the equation was a new frame: triumph abroad and the prospect of a foreign audience. Kitano had enjoyed some success in Europe, especially in the United Kingdom with some of his first films, and at Cannes with *Kids Return* in 1996, which earned critical acclaim but no awards. *Hana-Bi* grabbed the Golden Lion for best film at the Venice Film Festival, repeating the accomplishment of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* in 1951 and Inagaki Hiroshi's *The Rickshaw Man* (*Muhōmatsu no isshō*) in 1958. The feat helped secure foreign distribution contracts as *Hana-Bi* became Kitano's first work to open in the United States. Even in Japan, the victory at Venice helped *Hana-Bi* become a small box-office success.

The question was whether this new international frame altered Kitano's work. To many commentators, *Hana-Bi* was a compilation (*shūtaisei*) of the best elements of his earlier films. The situation of a detective (Nishi, played by Beat Takeshi) caring for a sick family member while battling a cruel yakuza killer performed by Hakuryū was shared with *Violent Cop*; the loving couple who remain mostly silent (Nishi and his wife) was found in *A Scene at the Sea*; and two men following different fates shown through parallel montage (Nishi and his partner Horibe) was developed in *Kids Return*. Kitano himself spoke of initially intending *Hana-Bi* as an 'upgraded' version of *Sonatine*,¹ and as being 'composed of the best things I picked up' from previous films.² Shinozaki Makoto tried to clarify Kitano's comment by arguing he did not mean 'reproducing con-

densed versions' or 'simply refining' what had been done before. Kitano, he stressed, is the 'greatest critic of [his] own films', 'constantly rejecting [his] previous film while making the next one'.³ *Hana-Bi*, he argued, was fundamentally different in its use of depth, colour, landscapes and *mise en scène*. Abe Kashō agreed, declaring that the use of the term 'compilation' in appraisals of *Hana-bi* was 'crude' (*sozatsu*). Abe offered a list of *Hana-Bi*'s cinematic techniques that were relatively new to Kitano's oeuvre, including flashbacks, dissolves and camera movements that establish the location of scenes.⁴

The duality of authorial continuity/discontinuity found its analogue in *Hana-Bi* in two characters who, as some said, 'appear to be cinematic self-portraits of the director at different moments in his life'.⁵ Horibe is a police detective paralysed in a shooting incident who loses the will to live until he takes up painting; his former partner Nishi, who feels responsible for the shooting because he left the scene to visit his hospitalised wife, commits a bank robbery to help Horibe and the widow of Tanaka, a detective killed in a subway shooting by the same criminal who shot Horibe. With the remaining money, he goes on a last trip with his own terminally ill spouse, chased by the yakuza and his former police colleagues. We must consider how the film shapes these two avatars of Takeshi, as well as how the foreign shapes this split. As noted by Shinozaki Makoto, Darrell Davis and myself on separate occasions,⁶ *Hana-Bi* features more symbols of the nation, such as Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms, than any of his previous work. Even as it propelled Kitano to global fame, we shall see that *Hana-Bi* was deeply entwined in discourses about frames, borders and the nation, exploring different Takeshis in order to enshrine the newly international 'Takeshi Kitano' as a 'Japanese' film director.

Hana-Bi was possibly an even more autobiographical work than *Kids Return* because it bore the traces of Takeshi's 1994 motorbike accident. Confined to the hospital for several months, he began painting like Horibe does in the film. The works that Takeshi produced found their way into the movie, becoming one of two visual traces of the accident on celluloid, the other being Beat Takeshi's scarred and partially paralysed face. Especially since Kitano frequently spoke of the film as curiously arising from the



The transcendental POV?

paintings he had done (most were completed before the film was fully conceived, including even the crucial 'suicide' canvas), it was as if these painted scars of the accident shaped this more colourful work.

Horibe was often interpreted as a representation of Takeshi after the crash, someone who had actually confronted death and decided to accept life, discovering colours in the process. Horibe thus illustrated '[i]n Takeshi's worldview' the conclusion that 'there is only one path to redemption – to face impending loss with a welcoming and tractable outlook',⁷ a lesson lost on Nishi, who 'has adopted such an inflexible and uncompromised attitude toward the world that it will . . . sooner or later destroy him'.⁸ Although Horibe does not figure in the film as a master painter, one of the roles of this artist was to narrate. Given Kitano's statements about the paintings shaping the story, their creator in the diegesis, Horibe, comes to function as a surrogate narrator. Indeed, some of his later paintings, especially the one of suicide, appear to foreshadow, if not prompt Nishi's fateful story.⁹ Nishi, in contrast, represents Kitano before the accident. Like Murakawa and Uehara before, this violent character was an excessive element in a world that could no longer allow him to live; unable to fully master it, he set out on a road towards death. Nishi in this sense is more

narrated than narrating, a character doomed to erasure as the ultimate narrator, Kitano himself, changed his outlook on life.

Kitano's own statements, however, complicate this simple division. While he acknowledged elements of himself in Horibe and Nishi,¹⁰ he challenged the view that valorised Horibe's choice of life over Nishi's selection of death.

[T]o me, by dying, Nishi and his wife take a step forward to the next life, while Horibe, by not killing himself, will not be able to live a fruitful life. By choosing to live he chooses to die slowly, a slow suicide.¹¹

Hana-Bi's difference lay less in its view of life than in its approach to death.

I feel that the meaning of death in *Hana-Bi* is different from that in *Sonatine* and *Boiling Point*. In the latter two films, there's a sense the characters try to solve problems through death – death is a way to escape those issues. In this film, the hero does not escape into death, but actively approaches death on his own.¹²

This asserts that Nishi is not a character entirely subject to fate. Narratively, the relationship between Nishi and Horibe is one of reversal. If Nishi is initially the silent man with a broken family, he regains speech and familial bonds as the voluble Horibe loses his family and, for all intents and purposes, verbal language. The contrast is most apparent in the latter part of *Hana-Bi*, as Kitano uses parallel montage to connect the two men. Both pursue painting – Nishi painting the car – but in terms of plot order Nishi begins before Horibe does. His 'artwork' is both more proactive and practical. He is less a narrator foreshadowing events than a director, preparing his own script, props and costume, and ultimately appearing in front of the camera (the surveillance setup at the bank). Compared to his relative inactivity in the first half, Nishi in the second functions as the central protagonist, pushing other characters towards action and orchestrating events, from the bank robbery to the trip, that fundamentally shape the narrative.

Against this, Horibe seems a more reactive, if not repetitive character. He is the first one to mention painting, but just to immediately dismiss it. He can only act on his desires when prompted by outside forces. His paint-

ings operate similarly. While the flower-shop scene offers a conventionally romantic narrative of the artist inspired by nature, it is interesting that some of the paintings Horibe envisions, such as the lion with a sunflower head, are actually shown two scenes earlier when Horibe is moving along the road, frustrated after his initial attempts at drawing. Such inserts accord with the non-linear narrative that dominates the first half of the film, but they call into question the status of the paintings. Although they are psychologised in the flower shop, that is less the case on their first appearance. Given their spatio-temporal ambiguity, the inserts cannot be rearranged into a proper temporal order like most of the inserts in the first half can (of the subway shooting, etc.). Their presence is obtrusive, asserting their existence before Horibe 'imagines' them. This partially undermines the narrative of romantic artistic inspiration. In terms of plot order, Horibe only repeats what the audience has already seen. This impression is only reinforced by the existence throughout the diegesis of Kitano's paintings, starting with the first hospital scene. Usually singled out by camera movements or lighting, they are also obtrusive inserts without clear narrative motivation, yet their similarity to Horibe's work reduces his creations to repetitions, now of Kitano's *mise en scène*.

Abe Kazushige argues that Nishi escapes the repetition entrapping Murakawa in *Sonatine* and achieves a perspective, represented by the extreme high-angle shot of his partners getting shot in the subway, like the angels in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987). He thus argues that Nishi is the angel who, starting with the first drawing in *Kids Return*, increasingly becomes a motif in Kitano's work. In *Hana-Bi*, paintings of angels have an almost transcendent status, appearing both non-diegetically, under the credits, and diegetically, in the landing of the hospital staircase. To Abe, Nishi is outside the circularity of life that shapes much of Kitano's work and which, while not represented like in *Boiling Point*, is nonetheless present in *Hana-Bi* in the figure of the girl running around on the beach at the end. Nishi exists outside this circle, using his proximity to death to transcend such repetitions.¹³

It is true that Nishi resists repetition within the story, even warning the punk who reappears by the lake never to show his face again. Nishi does

experience recurrent memories of the traumatic shooting (Tanaka's wounding is presented three times in the film), but one could say that Nishi's assumption of responsibility for failing to prevent the incident (and to stop Horibe's shooting), and his decision to act as guardian angel for Tanaka's wife and Horibe, stops these recollections. Nishi, however, is not completely immune from repetition, and thus is never fully transcendent. If his recurrent memories disappear in the film's second half, it is in part because these repetitions have been replaced by another: that of mimesis in the bank robbery. Nishi replicates a police car and then does a performance for the junkman that repeats his own earlier view of a patrol car from the junkyard. The old hand-cranked siren emphasises that this is mimesis and not identity, the irony of course being that since Nishi is no longer on the force, he has to mimic being what he once was. But it still replicates the transcendental viewpoint of the shooting through the similarly detached surveillance camera. What has changed is that Nishi is now within the frame.

This framing of Nishi is crucial to the film. As with previous works, pairs and the number two figure prominently in *Hana-Bi*, whose title itself is split into two. Nishi is paired with Horibe, his wife and even with Tōjō (the yakuza enforcer) through a cut from him gunning down the debtor to Nishi testing his gun. The loan shark Okada's punks come in pairs, as do the carpark attendants. But the number three also reigns over *Hana-Bi*, often working as a framing device. Certain locations appear three times, such as the entrance to Nishi's apartment or Okada's office, and trios are conspicuous throughout, particularly in the form of the family. Through Horibe's family, his paintings, the group seen on the beach, or even the wooden dolls at the inn, all families are composed of two parents and one child. This structure functions in part to underline the missing third term in Nishi's family – the deceased daughter – an absence that is reiterated twice through abandoned child objects at the entrance to the apartment building. One could say that Nishi is caught between the numbers two and three, haunted by a third member when he is in a pair, and opposed by two others when he is in a group of three. When Nishi is in a three shot, he is often framed by the others. Nishi's is frequently a framed existence, and this is evident from the

start, when we see a dissolve from the word 'Die!' framed by the parking lot lines, to Nishi's car driving between the lines on the road. His destiny and his framing are tied. When Nishi becomes more and more the subject of Horibe's paintings, even if post facto, his fate is sealed.

Nishi, however, resists or by chance avoids such framing. Although he is captured within the borders of the security camera at the bank, he either has problems with cameras or successfully eludes them after that. He drops his lens cap at the temple and his attempt to do a timed shot with his wife fails. Then he refuses to take a picture at the inn with his wife, who is posed, significantly in front of one of Kitano's large framed paintings. His effort to escape the frame ultimately succeeds through that crane and pan left at the beach at the end that removes Nishi and his wife from the screen, after which they remove themselves from the world of the living.

What Nishi cannot escape, even there, is the frame of the nation. As with *Sonatine*, *Hana-Bi* reiterates Japan as a space one cannot escape from, framed as it is by the sea and the lines of the beach. Unlike *Sonatine*, however, this work more clearly aligns itself with the nation. As Shinozaki Makoto initially pointed out, this is the first of Kitano's films to feature common symbols of Japan such as Mount Fuji, cherry blossoms and old temples.¹⁴ *Hana-Bi* did receive criticism that such symbols served to tailor the film for foreign festivals.¹⁵ Its citation of the nation is more complex, however, since there are moments of national ambivalence in the film. Symbols of tradition like the temple are treated irreverently and the most classical element of the story, Nishi and his wife's journey before death (*michiyuki*), is rendered in a non-classical fashion. The *michiyuki*, which is also used in *Dolls*, is a central narrative device in several famous kabuki and *bunraku* plays, especially *shinjūmono* (double suicide plays) where the couple's journey to commit suicide functions as an opportunity to reiterate the couple's passion, now freed from social ties but inexorably directed towards death. Although Nishi's efforts to escape society resemble the principles of the *michiyuki*, the resulting humour and lack of sexual passion greatly deviates from tradition. In fact, Kitano has offered comments expressing a desire to 'get rid of the typical Asian traits, cultures, and aesthetics in our films'.¹⁶

Yet his discourse on the film, especially in Japanese, has been more nationalistic, far more than with his previous works. The official pamphlet for the film has him stating, 'I am a Japanese so I'm trying to achieve a Japanese style'. This involved a critique of what the pamphlet called an 'audience indulging in a "peaceful routine"' in postwar Japan. To Kitano,

In the postwar, Japanese have for a long time only thought of living in ease and pleasure. But if human beings have the right to be happy, they also have the liberty to be unhappy. Given that, I think you can establish a film style based on a way of living directed towards death.¹⁷

Nishi came to represent an older Japanese 'spirit' that was lost on postwar Japanese, one that he at times likened to 'Bushido, the ancient samurai philosophy'.¹⁸ To Kitano,

Many present-day Japanese will very possibly see Nishi's behaviour as overly romantic or sentimental, or at least rather out of date. But the way he discharges what he understands to be his responsibilities conforms with an ideal which has existed in Japanese society at least since the Edo period [1600-1867].¹⁹

That, in his mind, made Nishi 'a man out of synch with the era'²⁰ like the out-of-season firefly in the snow outside the inn. That the film is sympathetic to Nishi's philosophy is indicated by the pursuing detective's expression of admiration and frustration at the end: 'I could never live like that.' Nishi is a superman in an age become dully average.

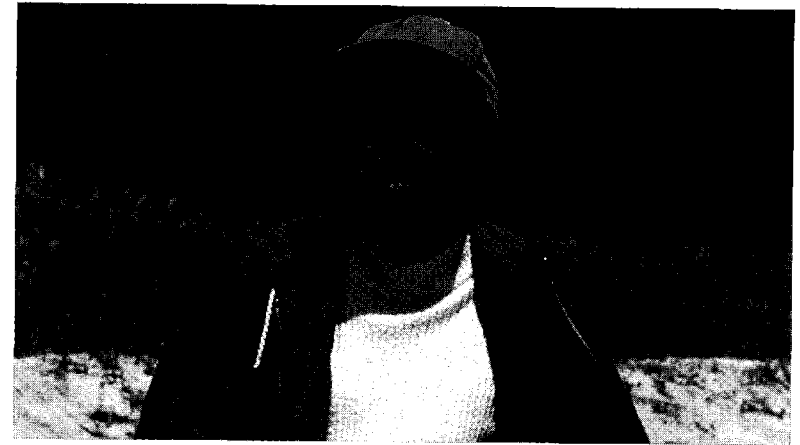
This lament for a lost Japaneseness was not solely directed towards a domestic audience. A glance at viewer comments on the Internet Movie Database shows how many foreign viewers interpreted the film through national characteristics, citing 'mono no aware' (a Japanese aesthetic expressing the inherent pathos of life), the 'Oriental mind', or 'Japanese aesthetics' as keys to grasping the film. Again in the pamphlet, Kitano said that 'The issue this time is whether this style, this Japanese sense of feeling, will be acceptable in Europe and America.' He particularly expressed con-

cern over whether the 'spirit' Nishi embodies, especially in his march towards death, would offend foreigners.

When forced under oppressive conditions, it could be like the spirit of kamikaze pilots. . . . When it is not forced, but is done on an individual basis, I think it's romanticism worth admiration. But romanticism for the nation is bad. That's why I call it poison. If that image overlaps with the image Europeans have of Japanese soldiers during World War II, I fear they could never approve of this film. But if it was a movie where one could feel the romanticism in the problem of that husband and wife on the individual level . . . I felt they could understand it. It's good they didn't make that connection.²¹

This quotation raises two important issues. The first is one of spectatorship. Although Kitano was known for declaring his lack of concern for the audience, his discussions here reveal a greater attention to moulding the film with spectator understanding in mind. He made conscious efforts, both in the film's narrative and in its relation to national themes, not to alienate his viewers. Certainly *Hana-Bi* was Kitano's first film to employ a non-linear narrative structure, one that leaves some scenes, such as Nishi's initial encounter with the carpark attendants, temporally ambiguous. Suzuki Hitoshi may not be out of bounds in saying the film places the past 'adjacent' to the present, but it is excessive to say it then renders time 'null'.²² *Hana-Bi* is understandable within the structural bounds of art cinema. Its narrative puzzle is not difficult to reassemble, easier perhaps than the brainteaser *Nishi* and his wife fumble with, because past and present are clearly demarcated. Most of the flashbacks are psychologically motivated and even if Nishi's memories of Tanaka's shooting are initially only brief, they are presented in progressively longer versions that culminate in a full account. Kitano's reiteration of certain shots provides the viewer with landmarks that guide the reconstruction of the narrative path. The non-linear presentation of the story largely ceases by the middle of the film, after which a more conventional parallel editing structure takes precedence.

The other issue is again one of framing. Kitano's statements reveal his awareness that *Hana-Bi* was broaching issues of nationality that were, if not



The framing smile

out of date, possibly offensive to some. His own declarations, as well as structures in the film, describe devices that frame and thus alleviate the problematic nature of these issues. One device is individuation, rendering qualities which Kitano himself attaches to the nation – at least in the past – now matters of individual choice and character. Another is death. The director had this to say about the function of death in this film, if not Japanese society in general.

There is no doubt that evil is evil in the eyes of the law, but we forgive evil if it is accompanied with a resolution to commit suicide (*jiketsu*²³). However, there was a current of such romanticism in the past, when many Japanese soldiers died in the name of the emperor. There is something very dangerous about the beautification of such a death. Yet nothing is solved by declaring that the way lots of people died is stupid or absurd. Such romanticism flows in the blood of every Japanese, and we must face it.²⁴

Kitano retains a critical stance against the mass and especially coercive nature of Japan's construction of suicide, but he nonetheless argues for a Japanese relation to the practice that serves as a form of moral frame: those who are willing to die for what they do are excused for their actions. While

there is room for debate on how critical Kitano is towards this racial tradition, it is clear that in *Hana-Bi* Nishi enjoys a moral reprieve for his crimes, the greatest of which are the bank robbery and, we presume, the murder of his wife. It is not only his willingness to die, but also his deep sense of responsibility and care for others that help us excuse him. It is this national romanticism, in effect, that provides the frame that pardons Nishi.

What shapes Nishi's relation to the nation is the additional frame of gender. In one sense, *Hana-Bi* is a film about emasculation. At the start, Nishi has been rendered speechless and largely inactive by the ailing female body (his dead daughter and sick wife). Horibe is also indirectly affected by this body (Nishi's need to care for his wife leads to Horibe's wounding), and he recovers only to then be more blatantly emasculated by his wife, who leaves him. To Abe Kashō, *Hana-Bi* is overlain with cases of paralysis and physical weakness, from Horibe's legs to Nishi's (Takeshi's) face,²⁵ but the narrative at least offers Nishi moments in which to perform masculinity by taking responsibility for the problems caused by his paralysis, and ultimately directing his own death. The role of his wife in this 're-masculinisation' is complex, however. Some observers did criticise Kitano for offering a female character who is not only weak and silent, but who also says nothing when her unemployed husband suddenly comes into cash, beats up men in front of her and leads her to her death.²⁶ Kitano, however, spoke of this as a means of adjusting the relationship between Nishi and his wife.

There is a sense that the wife in *Hana-Bi* knows everything and is letting me do this. It's like I'm playing around in the palm of her hand. Given that, there's a sense of the immensity of women – it's not an equal relationship at all. Cinematically, the man is worried about his wife and takes her on a final trip, trying really hard to do this and that, but the impression is that the wife knows it all and is just letting him do it.²⁷

This provides an interpretation of the final scene.

Perhaps the wife has seen through everything, and there's the sense that she's being kind to him and knowingly following along. In terms of the male–female

relationship, she is maternal, knowing everything and giving him a kind 'Thank you.' A naughty boy has acted recklessly: 'He has done those kind of things while saying it was for me. But I must finally tell him thank you.' It's like they're husband and wife but also something different.²⁸

Such statements need not be considered definitive of the film's gender relations. It would be hard to argue, for instance, that the wife has greater power than Nishi. She does not know about all of her husband's financial dealings and is rendered humourously incompetent, if not childish at moments such as when she falls into the snow.²⁹ Although framing Nishi, rendering his excesses excusable, she herself is framed (as she is by the painting at the inn).

Yet it is precisely because of her cute, somewhat infantile quality that she can function as a frame for Nishi's actions and the film's narrative. Consider, for instance, the scene where Nishi breaks the young girl's kite. Narratively, the girl allows Nishi and his wife to vicariously enjoy a 'daughter' before their deaths.³⁰ What Nishi does to this 'daughter' is rip her kite. In another context, this would be a callous act. Kitano has spoken about how perspective can make a tragedy seem a comedy, and vice versa,³¹ but here he clearly frames spectator interpretation by inserting a shot of the wife smiling at Nishi's hijinks. She is in effect the *tsukkomi* – though a cute and motherly one – that provides a frame dividing this act from real pain. One could argue that she performs a similar function for many of Nishi's actions throughout the film.

For instance, Kitano himself has said that the wife, and the feminine she is made to represent, works to render the romantic nationalism palatable to foreign audiences.³²

I think there would be nothing more absurd than having two men stand in front of Mount Fuji, but this is a film about a couple. I felt it was all right if it was a woman standing by my side. If it's a man and a woman, it might work even if it's a stereotypical tourist spot. That is, if you give the characters some burden to shoulder, something like having an illness and not knowing how long you have to live, the scene can actually end up seeming kind of sad.³³

Darrell Davis roundly criticises this move.

Kitano sells Japanese tradition, the icons of 'Japaneseness', by selling out gender. The 'blatantly stereotypical Asian look' (epitomized by samurai films) that Kitano claims to hate is here domesticated, made palatable to a global market, by feminizing it. This is Orientalism at its most stark: the Orient is always feminized for the West.³⁴

To be fair to Kitano, we should underline what he is also reacting against on the domestic front: on the one hand, the hypermasculine aestheticisation of the nation found not only in wartime cinema, but also in sentimental war films produced by Tōhō and Shintōhō after the mid-1950s, where shots of Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms were inserted in stories of young men bravely heading off to die; on the other, the commodification of those same symbols in the postwar era through such domestic tourism campaigns as 'Discover Japan'. Inserting illness and the feminine could work against these stereotypical representations. Yet the feminine frame also projects an image of the nation that is kinder and gentler, one that is aesthetic and can accommodate a little irreverence.

Framing is important to the aesthetic structure of *Hana-Bi* as a whole. Jean-François Buiré confesses a sense that the reality in the film is 'pre-inscribed', already framed before it is filmed.³⁵ As a somewhat self-reflexive film, *Hana-Bi* presents the boundaries of paintings on screen, even when they are not in the diegetic space. When Horibe envisions a painting, it is shown in a spiralling camera movement backwards that eventually reveals the borders of the work. This camera movement also exemplifies the film's aestheticisation of violence, since it is also used on the white yakuza car after the massacre. Inner frames augment this, not just by demarcating characters in mirrors and windows, but by rendering bloodshed artistic (e.g., the blood on the placemat) and doubling real actions with art (the red paint splashed on the painting). The film itself is book-ended by art, as it both begins and ends with Kitano's paintings.

The degree to which frames are crucial to the film's aesthetics is evident from Kitano's account of his use of colour in the film. *Hana-Bi* was remark-

able for its prominent use of a variety of primary colours, moving beyond the generally monochrome colour scheme or the tension between blue and red predominant in his previous films. The bright colours, however, are largely confined to the paintings. Kitano said,

I hate the colours of buildings and things in Tokyo, so I escape into an image that is sombre and monochromatic. But I do occasionally want to show something with colour. However, colour on the set tends to stick out in terms of the overall pattern of the film. It doesn't fit. If I suddenly include a colour I like in an impressive backdrop, the question arises why it's there, because it doesn't connect with the film as a whole. But with paintings, there's no problem at all in showing colours no matter what they are.³⁶

Bright colours on the set threaten not only codes of realism (justification of their use), but also the text's basic structure. Locating them in a frame, rendered distinct from the rest of narrative space, places them in brackets, present but excused for their lack of clear connection. As with the nation and humourous violence, colours become acceptable as an aesthetic element as long as they are bordered.

The focus on aestheticising devices is only to be expected in a film that presents the aesthetic as a central element in its title. The film's American pressbook gave the official interpretation of the title: 'Hana (flower) is the symbol of life while Bi (fire) represents gunfire, and so death.' This opposition, which Tony Rayns called 'a dichotomy which turns out to run through the film',³⁷ could easily be multiplied into a variety of other, often overlapping divisions, such as beauty versus bloodshed, Horibe versus Nishi, humour versus violence. This dichotomy plays out in the fundamental narrative structure, especially in the emphasis on pairs, and the parallel montage structure shaping the last half. Our question is how the film treats this division. To some the insertion of the hyphen creates divisions that the film never fully resolves, maintaining the play between each pole. Thus to Horike Yoshitsugu,

It is the intermingling of these oppositional terms – fixed camera and moving camera, explanatory dialogue and utter silence, shots that solely contribute to the

narrative and those that refuse to – that trifles with the lives of the characters between 'flowers' and 'fire'.³⁸

Abe Kazushige similarly argued that the film itself is neither 'hana' nor 'bi' but the hyphen in between.³⁹ Suzuki sees the movie operating through combinations of elements separated by gaps, from mismatched temporalities to the painted juxtapositions of beasts and flowers, that are still connected by loops and networks of mediation (things relating *through* other things).⁴⁰ Some saw *Hana-Bi* as ultimately breaking down these dichotomies, mixing and melding genres (action and melodrama), moods (violence and sentiment) and personalities.⁴¹ The word 'hanabi' supported this, offering a concept, fireworks, that harmoniously combines vibrant beauty with sudden violence. One could say the title paints Kitano as an advocate of montage, combining two terms to create a third unity. *Hana-Bi* does in fact rely on montage to create connections across space and time that do not exist in the individual shots. The most prominent is the cut from Nishi's lighter to Horibe being shot, a connection that, while inconceivable in reality, visualises the responsibility Nishi bears for Horibe's paralysis – as if he himself pulled the trigger.

The problem with both of these accounts is that they tend to assume that the terms in these dichotomies are not in a hierarchy. Mixture becomes an equal concoction, in-betweenness a space of free play. However, as Abe Kashō argues, 'The paintings as a whole may appear to be "flowers" but they contain "bi" in their details. Consequently, the title *Hana-Bi* implies not a relation of opposition, but one of inclusion.'⁴² Abe is essentially talking about framing devices, as many elements, as we have seen, are only established through being framed by other terms. The power relations here are complex, but the title screen hints at a final force in play. The letters are presented in blue, but framed at top and bottom by two lines, a motif which aligns with other frames in the film, from the carpark lines to the tracks of Horibe's wheelchair in the sand. 'Hana' and 'bi' are thus contained by an external frame, shaped by the same processes of aestheticisation and nationalisation we have already seen. The fact that the title is rendered in

roman letters and not Chinese characters (*kanji*) is also significant because it encourages slippage between homophonic terms. Although 'hana' has few homophones (except 'nose', which could refer to Takeshi's paralysed face), 'bi' can designate many other words, the most significant of which is 'beauty' (the title then in effect becoming 'the beauty of flowers'). The framed title is then reduced to two terms aligned with the aesthetic, rendering that the inclusive term in the film's structure.

Hana-Bi does not leave the aesthetic on an abstract level, but locates it in a particular subjectivity. The first image in the film is of a book cover with the English title, 'Kitano Film volume 7'. Bookcovers themselves are framing devices, but this one also emphasises the work as a product of an authorial subject with a continuous oeuvre. The cover then segues into Kitano's paintings, establishing a motif that will dominate the film. If we had sensed that Horibe's paintings are somehow not his own, it is because he is always overwhelmed by Kitano Takeshi. Kitano in *Hana-Bi* is more obviously foregrounding the biographical source of textual enunciation than most art cinema, presenting the artistic subject as someone who can freely enter the work (in the form of Nishi or the paintings), yet remain aloof, in the frame yet somehow outside it. If asked who the transcendental angel is, I would say it is less Nishi than Kitano himself, a suspicion seemingly confirmed by the last image in the film, a painted angel with the Kitano's credit superimposed on top of it.

Hana-Bi thus assumes a more unified subjectivity, both for its auteur and for its characters, than previous Kitano works. This is one of the major differences from *Sonatine*. If that work doubled its empty characters with a theme of authorial self-destruction, *Hana-Bi* offers substantial psychological characters who ultimately function to confirm, not undermine, the authorial status of the director. Although *Kids Return* points to this trend by beginning with the title 'A Takeshi Kitano Film', it is significantly hollowed by the absence of that author in the world of the text. It is this ascension of Kitano to the status of artist that may provide one of the borderlines within his cinematic career.

Perhaps it was this status that was necessary for *Hana-Bi* to cross borders and enter the global market, especially on the tails of the art-cinema genre.

Regardless of how prominent the gangster elements are in *Hana-Bi*, the authority of the art-cinema auteur persists as the overarching term. That is why, for instance, many of the reviews in the United States reiterated the pressbook's emphasis on Kitano's multitalented, practically Renaissance versatility. Yet Kitano's authorial subjectivity was not a natural product of a biological individual, but created through such textual processes as *Hana-Bi*. Crucial among them is the framing of Japanese identity. Just as national symbols like Mount Fuji serve as moments of recuperation and redemption, Kitano's use of such symbols establishes his status as an author. It was as if becoming a film artist, especially in the international sphere, required the assumption of the discourse of Japaneseness, but framing it in the more palatable language of the global art-cinema market, with both the opening book cover and the title appearing in roman letters. This is the look West (Nishi's name actually means 'West') that is necessary for the creation of the East.

Yet Nishi's efforts to escape the frame can still disturb this. On the one hand, they can symbolise the mobility of the authorial subject itself, one that flaunts its transcendental status by craning up and panning left at the end. But note that the final angel has a broken wing, suggesting the author's inability to transcend and contain everything in the textual frame. Nishi's refusal to take a picture with his wife can also be a rejection of the painting behind her, and the oppressively omnipresent authority it represents. Unlike Horibe, who ultimately comes to copy Kitano's work, Nishi completely ignores it, instead painting a work, the car, that is both mobile and less clearly framed. As *Hana-Bi* likens itself to a book, Nishi keeps his distance from words, becoming the mobile signifier that defers its meaning (asking the detective to 'wait just a bit more') and thus attempts to evade the closure of the text. The irony of *Hana-Bi* is that this occurs at the border (the beach and the sea, the limits of the nation), just before the death of such mobility. This may figure as the last outburst of one kind of Kitano Takeshi, before he framed himself as a Japanese auteur.

Kikujirō

With the success of *Hana-Bi*, Kitano Takeshi was now a director firmly on the global stage. A Western audience, however, posed problems for a filmmaker who preferred to undermine the expectations of his viewers. He could subvert those spectators as well, but sabotaging expectations could also win, not alienate foreign fans. To Max Tessier, the French Japanese film expert,

The overwhelming international success of *Hana-Bi* . . . also brought up the question of how Kitano would exploit or not that unexpected success . . . One could fear that he would try to please his western fans by building up his ritual image of the non-speaking violent yakuza to become a kind of icon. However, his newest film, *Kikujirō's Summer* . . . does break this stereotype and proves that Beat Takeshi and Takeshi Kitano are as unpredictable as their own behaviour in this strange world we live in.¹

Even in Europe, cinematic change was taken as a form of resistance to commercial commodification or the demands of 'Western fans', and thus as a mark of artistic independence.

Subverting foreign definitions of his authorial identity could thus paradoxically serve to reinforce them, but it also created problems in Japan. The plot of *Kikujirō* was surprising to Japanese: a young boy named Masao, living with his grandmother in Tokyo's Asakusa, sets out on the road during summer vacation with a two-bit yakuza called Kikujirō (Beat Takeshi) to see the mother who abandoned him as a baby. They suffer various tribulations along the way, most caused by Kikujirō, until they discover that Masao's mother has remarried and is living a new life. Kikujirō, with the help of some characters picked up along the way, cheers the boy up before taking him back home. This story worried Japanese fans, but not because they expected a gangster movie like their foreign counterparts: it was rather