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# The Homelessness of Style and the Problems of Studying Miike Takashi

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**Résumé:** Les études critiques consacrées au cinéaste Miike Takashi se concentrent généralement sur le caractère outrancier de l'œuvre de ce dernier, de même que sur sa profonde indignation envers la société japonaise. En s'attardant sur l'usage récurrent fait par Miike du plan-séquence, du montage rapide, ainsi que d'une facture visuelle inspirée de la bande dessinée, cet article vise plutôt à faire ressortir le caractère « itinérant » de l'œuvre du cinéaste, dans laquelle abondent les personnages sans foyer et sans identité claire errant dans un environnement marqué par la mondialisation. L'itinérance s'inscrit également dans les multiples changements de ton et de style rendant les préoccupations nationalistes et les dimensions politiques de l'œuvre de Miike difficiles à circonscrire. Le travail du cinéaste soulève ainsi des questions fondamentales dans l'étude du cinéma populaire, de même que dans celle des dimensions politiques du cinéma japonais.

**M**iike Takashi's career emerged in Japan in the late 1990s out of video cinema, prolifically working in a variety of genres until he arrived as a major theatrical film director whose work has garnered significant attention at home and abroad. Although his films have spanned—if not also warped—cinematic categories as wide-ranging as idol movies (*Andromedia* [*Andoromedia*], 1998) and musicals (*The Happiness of the Katakuris* [*Katakuri-ke no kōfuku*], 2002), they have tended to concentrate in violent genres revolving around yakuza and horror, such as the *Dead or Alive* series, *Ichi the Killer* (*Koroshiya 1*, 2001), and *Audition* (*Ōdishon*, 1999). Appropriated by pop culture gatekeepers such as Quentin Tarantino (who appears in *Sukiyaki Western Django*, 2007), Miike has been sold abroad alongside such directors as Fukasaku Kinji and Kitano Takeshi as the purveyor of a hard-hitting, flamboyant and cool stylistics, now fashionable at a moment when the international buzzword is "cool Japan."[1]

Critics writing on Miike Takashi's films struggle to find the proper location for the films in art, politics, or nation.[2] Many authors, worried that "the surface, the gloss, the astonishingly graphic showmanship is so striking . . . that it tends to mask Miike's subtexts and abiding personal concerns"[3] are concerned that the dominant perspective on his cinema only focuses on stylistic bravura, mangaesque narratives, and audacious violence. They seem compelled to argue that there is something deeper going on, something that provides these films with more value. Tony Williams, for instance, relies on metaphors of appearance and reality to argue that the films "contain more than meets the eye," his primary argument being that while they "may appear gratuitously violent and pornographic," they in fact "represent a particular cinema of outrage" based in a Japanese "populist tradition" and "designed to offend civilized sensibilities."[4] More critical writers like Mika Ko complain of the surface qualities just as they attempt to locate them in deeper problems of Japanese nationhood. To her, "the breaking open of diegetic homogeneity and narrative integrity" is linked in Miike's work with metaphors not only of the body, but also, following Mary Douglas, of the body politic.[5] Directly conjoining style with nation, Ko claims the violation of both narrative and body boundaries reflects the larger break-up of the national polity (*kokutai*) in recent Japan. Ko assumes the location of these films (that they are about Japan) at the start of the analysis, which then prompts her to see Miike as a special case of what Tessa Morris-Suzuki terms "cosmetic multiculturalism" in Japan, in which cultural diversity is consumed only on the surface level, confirming both Japan's generosity and the boundary between the consumer and the consumed. To Ko, Miike's depictions of the heterogeneity in Japan must ultimately be called cosmetic because they do not envisage any authentic alternative to the status quo.[6]

In a previous article, I also tried to argue beyond an initial impression of Miike, seeing in his cinematic and narrative excesses an acknowledgement of impossibility steeped in loss and the sad realization of homelessness in today's transnational flows of global capital.[7] I worry, however, about the general compulsion to locate "deeper" meaning in Miike or a set political stance. This is not because his work is not cinematically or politically important. Nor is it my goal in this essay to challenge the general assumption that stylistic excess is of lesser value, either artistically because it lacks thematics or "personal concerns," or politically because it perpetuates a reactionary and nihilistic form of cinematic postmodernism that has broken down all forms of serious meaning through cynical playfulness. One must note that such divisions between surface style and political or personal depth reproduce the principal means through which film criticism and scholarship have approached popular and genre cinema since at least the days of the *politique des auteurs*. Such binaries tend to praise or denigrate films based on whether or not they go beyond the superficiality of mass produced entertainment and find a home in serious artistic or political expression. The problem with these approaches is that, in the case of Miike, they seek a precise location for a director who is not only thematically concerned with homelessness, but who himself seems nomadic in terms of style and politics, and less concerned with collapsing the divisions between surface and depth or the image and reality than engaging in the more complex possibility of wandering between

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Fig. 1. "We are like Japanese but not like Japanese; like Chinese but not like Chinese." From *Dead or Alive* (*Dead or Alive: Hanzaisha*, Miike Takashi, 1999).



Fig. 2. Mocking symbols of national identity in *City of Lost Souls* (*Hyōryūgai*, Miike Takashi, 2000).

these poles. Miike's films seem to stray between the excessive style he is famous for and what seems the opposite of that, a long-take cinematography. Given this oscillation, I want to reflect on the implications this homelessness of style has for a politics of cinema in contemporary Japan. Miike proves to be an intriguing subject of study because his work ultimately challenges our tendencies to locate cinema in categories of style, politics and nation.

## II

First, let us review the themes of transnationality, homelessness and liminality that appear to crisscross Miike Takashi's films, putting aside for now the question of whether they are "deep" or "cosmetic." Miike's work is transnational, first because films like *Rainy Dog* (*Gokudō kuroshakai—Rainy Dog*, 1996), *The Bird People of China* (*Chūgoku no chōjin*, 1998), and *The Guys from Paradise* (*Tengoku kara kita otokotachi*, 2001) are largely filmed abroad, with *Rainy Dog*, for instance, featuring actors prominent in Hou Hsiao-hsien's work and Edward Yang's cinematographer, Li Yixu. These "foreign" elements cross national boundaries and enter the Japanese sphere, especially the Shinjuku of *Shinjuku Triad Society* (*Shinjuku kuroshakai*, 1995), *Ley Lines* (*Nihon kuroshakai—Ley Lines*, 1999), and *The City of Lost Souls* (*Hyōryūgai*, 2000), a location that teems with people from all corners of the globe and spatially resembles the chaotic Taiwan of *Rainy Dog* more so than Japan. These people, however, are not simply displaced persons temporarily residing in an alien country: they have lost their homelands and virtually belong nowhere. The director Zeze Takahisa notes of Miike's work that it is defined by "lack of a center," "wandering," and "mixed blood," themes reiterated by critic Tom Mes in his study of Miike when he argues

the interconnection between such motifs as "the rootless individual," "the outcast," "the search for happiness," "nostalgia," "the family unit," and "violence."[8] Many of Miike's heroes, like Tatsuhito in *Shinjuku Triad Society* or Yan in *Bird People,* are persons of mixed blood caught between different cultures and, like the exiled Yūji in *Rainy Dog*, forced to the margins of society because of their virtually mutant status. The children of *zanryū koji*—returnees from China—are recurring figures in Miike's work.[9] As Ryūichi's childhood friend says of his "people" in *Dead or Alive* (*Dead or Alive—Hanzaisha*, 1999), "We are like Japanese but not like Japanese; like Chinese but not like Chinese" (fig. 1). They thus lack the personal or group definition usually provided by a place or homeland, and thus, one could say, identity itself. Their existence, as expressed in the song Ryūichi sings at the beginning and end of *Ley Lines*, is constituted by an endless journey, their wandering never concluding in rest.[10] Railroad tracks are a prominent motif in Miike's work, symbolizing the nomadic existence of his characters.

But what makes Miike's work more than an evocation of diaspora is the fact that even his Japanese characters are similarly homeless. Yūji in *Rainy Dog*, like Wang in *Shinjuku* and Ryūichi in *Ley Lines*, lacks a passport and thus the ability to go home. Within Japan, not only can Jōjima in *Dead or Alive* not sleep in his own bed (his place, like a guest's, is on the couch), his family itself is lost in a ball of fire towards the end. Miike seems to undermine even the identity of the Japanese homeland in *The City of Lost Souls*, as he shows a bus transporting Kei through a desert even though an on-screen title states the location as Saitama (in truth, a more verdant place). The billboard of the geisha preparing curry in front of Mt. Fuji only seems to mock the symbols of national identity in a global age (fig. 2). The case of Wada in *The Bird People of China* is most compelling. His

own company effectively tricks the young businessman into venturing to a god-forsaken place in rural China. Having thus lost his place, he has the fortune, à la *Lost Horizon* (Frank Capra, 1937), of finding the paradise that, as the archaeologist suggests, may be the forgotten soil from which all Japanese originated. This, coupled with Ujiie's defense of the village against the threat of civilization, may seem to mark the film as a nostalgic quest to recover a lost Japanese home, but as Abe Kashōrightly notes, this is undermined by the "impossibility" (*fukanōsei*) that dominates the film.[11] To get to the village, one must navigate a raging river overflowing with rain, not with huge, inflatable riverboats, but with a rickety wooden raft powered by *turtles* of all things. Not only is the village thus unreachable in reality, but, when Wada returns to Japan, he speaks of thirty years having passed since he left, even though the images we see are of the same era as at the beginning. When he mentions that the development of the village (which means its destruction) continued as expected, it is clear that the vision of the flying bird people at the end—if not the entire visit to the village—is the dream of someone who confesses he has never had a dream of flying.

The impossibility of dreaming something one cannot dream, of feeling nostalgic about a home one never had, is common for Miike characters who have no anchorage. Memories of childhood and children who remind characters of their youth are repeated motifs, but their presentation often marks their failure—their loss of innocence—as beginning far too early. The Chinese mafia leader in *Ley Lines* wants women to tell him true, authentic children's tales from Shanghai, not because it will remind him of his youthful origins, giving him something sure to hold on to in a foreign land, but because he was never told such stories as a child. Not only is this an attempt to relive a childhood he never had, it is a search for an authentic home by someone who has no standard of authenticity. Wada in *Bird People* spends very little of his time in the village trying to decipher the guide to flying, but tries instead to reconstruct the original lyrics of "Annie Lorrie" so as to give Yan a greater connection to her English grandfather and thus her origins. But as Abe notes, that project only ends with the burning of her singing tape and her attempt to perform the impossible act of teaching the song to a deaf musician. The song itself is just another illusion.

An identity one never had can only be "reestablished" as an illusion, and so scenes of familial bliss at the conclusion of *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, while certainly pleasing, remain humorous precisely because of their blatantly fictitious status, founded as they are on a child's perspective and the absurd claymation narration of their rescue. Nevertheless, Miike's characters struggle against the impossible to form associations which will give them definition and their life value. In most cases, these involve families and close friendships. In *Shinjuku*, Tatsuhito fights to save his brother from corruption and to protect his parents; in *Rainy Dog*, Yūji creates an adoptive family; in *Ley Lines*, Shunrei pleads to fulfill his last duty to a friend (*nakama*); in *Dead or Alive*, Ryūichi kills Hiroshi less

because he was stealing money, than because he betrayed their familial group. This almost nostalgic search for home and family, tenuously expressed in rituals like make-shift funerals, grave visits, and get-togethers, somewhat resembles Iwai Shunji's *Swallowtail Butterfly* (*Suwaroteiru*, 1996) in its quest to recover that which never existed, but Miike's world is far from Iwai's reassuringly bittersweet visual totality, where characters are allowed their own *furusato* (hometown) at the end.[12] The fact that many of these families and friendships ultimately dissolve in a sea of blood and corruption (like the family proclaimed by boss Ho in *Rainy Dog*), breaking apart almost as soon as they form, aligns Miike more with directors like Ishii Takashi. Ishii's *The Black Angel Vol. 1* (*Kuroi tenshi, vol. 1*, 1998), with its tale of utter familial corruption descending into patricide, filicide, and matricide, can be considered the female counterpart to the story of men committing patricide, filicide, and fratricide in Miike's *Fudoh: The Next Generation* (*Gokudō sengokushi: Fudō*, 1996). The non-yakuza *Visitor Q* (2001) may give us a reunited family at the end, but we are nonetheless left wondering about the cost: necrophilia, incest, murder, etc.

Miike is not the only director to depict the transnational flows crisscrossing Japan's urban geography. Zeze Takahisa's films have often focused on the forgotten nomads of postwar history, and Yamamoto Masashi, with a similarly strong interest in China, has concentrated, in films such as *Junk Food* (1997), on an international mix of disaffected youth who seek comfort in small communities even if they invariably break apart. Japanese cinema has long featured wandering heroes, from the roaming gangsters of prewar *matatabi* movies to the guitar-toting gunmen of Nikkatsu Action, from the chivalric "knight-errants" of 1960s Tōei yakuza film to the itinerant peddler Tora-san in the *It's Hard to Be a Man* (*Otoko wa tsurai yo*) series. Yet, while such works use nomadic individuals to reinforce the nostalgic longing for home, to emphasize the precarious struggle of traditional against modernity, or imagine the postwar individual subject, the heroes of Miike and his contemporaries lack the emotional securities of an idea of home, self, or yakuza family and wander in a landscape more desolate in terms of feeling and identity. Japanese filmmakers from Kitano Takeshi to Aoyama Shinji have offered cinematic evocations of the lack of identity plaguing present-day Japan, focusing in particular on characters who have no place to belong. Without a secure identity and yet still burdened by an oppressive everyday reality, many characters in recent films inhabit liminal spaces between institutions, states, and places—and even between life and death, and self and other. Only there can they experience momentary freedom and an alternative existence.[13] As Abe Kashō notes, Miike's films feature characters whose existence is best expressed as "in-betweenness" (*chūkansei*), caught in perpetual motion or haunting those urban spaces like Shinjuku or Osaka which, with their never-ending flow of goods, bodies, nationalities, and languages, are globalized to the extent of being places that are to Abe "nowhere."[14] The fact that Ryūichi's family graves are in a
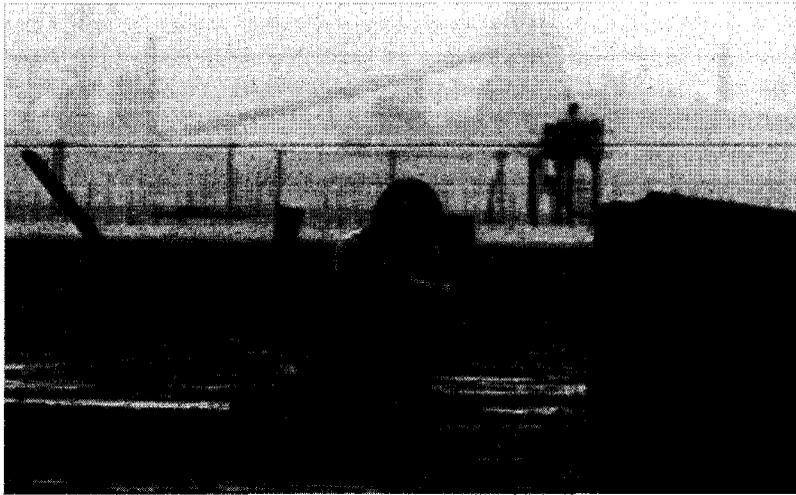
Fig. 3. Liminality in Miike: a graveyard in a tidal swamp. From *Dead or Alive* (*Dead or Alive: Hanzaisha*, Miike Takashi, 1999).



Fig. 4. Impossible to escape: death on the border. From *City of Lost Souls* (*Hyōryūgai*, Miike Takashi, 2000).

tidal swamp in *Dead or Alive,* a place neither on land nor in water, is one of the best expressions of liminality in Miike (fig. 3).

Like his characters, Miike's world then is rendered nomadic and without a home base, made to shift forever (like the water in all his films) by the processes of globalization. In Miike's vision, this can be a profoundly ambiguous experience, one powerfully expressed in the opening minutes of *Dead or Alive.* While expressing an exuberance of cinematic expression, the thrill of concerted movement in space and time is colored by the sense of being trapped. No matter how much Miike's characters move, like Ryūichi in *Ley Lines* or Mario in *The City of Lost Souls,* they cannot escape. Despite the spread of globalism, many contemporary Japanese directors, from Kitano to Aoyama, from Zeze to Kurosawa Kiyoshi, have presented Japan as a closed society from which it is impossible to escape (which is why beaches and other borderline spaces are so important in recent cinema). Zeze himself has noted the same worldview in Miike, and characters like Ryūichi and Mario meet their ends precisely at the border of the nation: the harbor or the Okinawan beach[15] (fig. 4). Yet it is not simply the nation that corrals them. As Riichi says in *Young Thugs: Nostalgia* (*Kishiwada shōnen gurentai: Bōkyō,* 1998) "No matter where you go, it's the same." Lily utters something similar in *Rainy Dog* but with a twist. When asked by Yūji why she doesn't just leave the town she hates so much because of the rain, she responds, "I'm afraid that even my dreams will go away if it's the same wherever you go." Miike's characters fear they will end up in the same place even if they escape, and it is that oppressive reality which hangs like a somber cloud over their heads and darkens the world, sometimes visually so in a film like *Ley Lines.*

### III

Now let us consider how this may be embodied or articulated on the level of style. Writers like Williams have worried most about the stylistic appearance of Miike's works. The prominent use of jump cuts, fast and disjunctive editing, unusual camera angles, and manipulations of the plastic image all seem to bring Miike in line with a postmodern, post-classical stylistics in which "all attention is riveted on the momentary, fleeting and spectacular . . . [and] surface images, outlandish actions, and technical flourishes easily crowd out historical narrative, whatever the purported ideological substance."[16] While acknowledging that "superficially" Miike could potentially be included in this kind of cinema, Williams argues that the director's narrative focus "on the dark aspects of Japanese society" excuses him from such categorization. Thus, effectively dividing style from content, Williams locates meaning in the latter, leaving film form to be the repository of a problematic superficiality or, if this style exhibits something progressive, vaguer qualities such as "the cinema of outrage" or the signs of a "cinematic prankster."[17] Ko is more critical, reading Miike's style metaphorically, if not ideologically, and arguing that the disjunctive elements cited by Williams actually embody the break-up of the national body. Even if Miike's films do not suggest that foreigners and hybrid spaces are to blame for fragmentation, they also fail to offer viable alternatives, instead only offering such multicultural spaces on the cosmetic level for consumption by Japanese spectators.

If Williams saves Miike as an alternative, individual artist by arguing for content over style, Ko uses style to deconstruct his supposed narrative progressivity, embedding the filmmaker in the collective malaise. The two critics, however,

share a description of Miike's style, distinguishing it from content in order to locate Miike in other binaries such as the individual and the collective, the artist and the nation. I would argue, however, that Miike is not so easy to position, as his films not only complicate debates on the politics of style in contemporary Japan, but also problematize, albeit sometimes in questionable ways, efforts to place them in polarized oppositions of the popular and the artistic, surface and depth, and the dominant and the alternative.

I would like to focus on one aspect of Miike's style that seems to constitute the opposite of his much discussed "outrageous" aesthetics: his use of long shots and long takes. Some films, ranging from *Ley Lines* to *Bird People of China*, feature a significant number of shots of long duration. The presence of such stylistic elements has posed a conundrum for some critics, who often end up creating an artificial distinction between the postmodern aesthetics supposedly more typical of Miike and the long-take style that is said to drown out or "suppresses" the former, effectively dividing what is "truly" Miike from what is not.[18] The lack of discussion of his long-take aesthetics emblematizes again how writing on Miike has tended to "locate" this director on one side of various divides, thereby losing sight of the way he wanders between stylistic positions. We need to consider the significance of specific aspects of his style and how they interrelate in a complex, nomadic, fashion.

Mika Ko is correct to relate the disjunctive aspects of Miike's style to the issue of the body. Her move, however, is to treat this metaphor of the fragmented body as a direct sign of ruptures in the national body. This is certainly tempting, since it easily connects cinema to the crises Japanese society has recently experienced, from the burst of the economic bubble to the trauma of the Aum sarin attacks, but putting aside questions of whether cinematic body metaphors really exhibit one-to-one relations with social or political bodies, this reading cannot account for the prominent presence of long takes, either in Miike's work or in contemporary Japanese cinema as a whole. How can Miike represent the disintegration of the national polity if part of his cinema offers, if we are to follow André Bazin, the presentation of singular bodies in an integrated space and time? We have to focus less on Miike's disjointed style than on the homelessness of his style as a whole, as it wanders between different constructions of space and the body within a complex political/cinematic context.

How does the long take function in Miike's work? To begin with, one can say that it occasionally operates within the conflicts and collisions established by the more flamboyant aspects of his style. His effective use of long takes often establishes a rhythm to his films by pitting motion against stillness and noise against silence. After the restaurant massacre scene halfway through *Dead or Alive*, which is violent in its editing and in its content, there is a two and a half minute high-angle long-shot, long take of Jōjima as he arrives on the scene to discover his partner dead and Aoki, the mobster, still alive. This shot can function as the

pause after the mayhem, the period of rest that allows the audience to take a breather and reassess what has just happened. The effect is measured—not excessive—because the camera itself maintains its detachment, never cutting to a close-up of Jōjima's emotional reaction when he finds the body. It is possible to argue that such contemplative moments actually allow Miike to explore relations of emotional and social depth that his excessive editing does not, and thus it is the long takes that really make Miike more than just a superficial postmodern stylist. The long take can even function as the visual equivalent of Miike's stories of lost childhood and lost opportunities, serving as the marker of an older cinema, one now losing out to post-classical purveyors of quicker is better. Ironically, then, typical Miike themes such as nostalgia, the family, and marginality are emotionally enabled more through the long take than his typical "cinema of outrage."

In the delicate balance Miike tries to establish between the dream of a home, of a stable body, and the impossibility of the realization of such a reverie, he must offer occasional views of an integral space and time, and of bodies actually traversing distance instead of only rhythmically bouncing about through pixilated jump cuts. These shots, however, do not simply function as signs of values that have been lost, for what is crucial here is not establishing polar locations (where we are versus where we were or should be), but rather a state of wandering between them. Such a condition could not be truly represented if film style was only located in either surface excess or classical spatial realism, or if we tried to argue that Miike's disjunctive cutting and long takes are in fact "at home" in a third style that unifies them.

Long takes and long shots bear more contemporary political significance. Consider Ko's reading of the scene where Ryūichi's friends declare in *Dead or Alive* that "We are like Japanese but not like Japanese; like Chinese but not like Chinese." She uses their admission that they "are not really anything" as a sign that Miike is not engaged in a positive "cultural syncretism" (she uses Paul Gilroy's term), but rather associates the "break-up of national identity" with "the production of a subjectivity which is described as nothing," which creates more nostalgic feelings of loss than pride in new identities. She says the long shots Miike uses in this scene treat them instead as mere "anonymous 'others'," such as when one of Ryūichi's pals turns and runs away from the cops down some railroad tracks, and the camera fails to close in on the friends to show "who they are."[19] Ko rightly senses the ambiguity or even ambivalence of this scene, but there is a need to relate these shots both to Miike's thematics (note that one of the characters flees by running on railroad tracks) and to a politics of the long shot and the long take in recent Japanese cinema.

In what I have called the "detached style" found in post-1980s films ranging from Hashiguchi Ryōsuke's *Like Grains of Sand* (*Nagisa no Shindobaddo*, 1995) to Suwa Nobuhiro's *M/Other* (1999), the camera is kept at a distance from the actors, rarely moving into the close-ups that, in most films, are used to pro-

vide access to character psychology or emotion.[20] The shots themselves are rather lengthy, refraining from the directing of spectator vision through editing that usually functions to clarify or explain what characters are doing. The integrity of the space between characters—and between characters and the camera—as well as the time it takes to traverse that space, is narratively crucial. It is often distance (significantly the title of a Koreeda Hirokazu film from 2001) and the concomitant problems of the interpersonal and epistemological (how one knows an other) that serve as major concerns of these recent films. Maintaining the integrity of space and time through long takes reinforces the reality of the distances that people must cross to approach an other and encourages spectators to relate to characters not through artifice (the mastery of the world and psychology that editing purports to offer) but through a similarly committed spanning of distance towards a real that stubbornly—and often opaquely—persists in this image-saturated world.

David Bordwell has recently attempted to revive interest in cinematic staging, and in directors pursuing a long take style, in order to focus attention on particular modes of close spectator engagement and precise pictorial manipulation that are not subsumed in the style of "intensified continuity" that he sees dominating contemporary world film production.[21] Such contrasts also exist in contemporary Japanese film, but local concerns have also given them a particular political edge. One must imagine how the close-ups of Ryūichi's friends in *Dead or Alive* that Ko finds absent would be read in the film's contemporary context, especially by Miike's filmmaking colleagues or engaged spectators: it would be considered not only over-explanatory, if not clichéd, but also presumptive and arrogant, using conventional film form to provide easy access to characters who upset conventional notions of location, identity, and knowledge. Miike, of course, does not abandon close-ups in his work, but his frequent detachment from his characters through long shots and long takes reveals less his disinterest in these anonymous others than his linkages with his cinematic peers, sharing their search for means to treat alterity.

Ko cites the New Wave filmmaker Hani Susumu as an example of a director who, unlike Miike, proffers an alternative conceptualization of Japan. Such a contrast may be productive, but in general many independent filmmakers of the 1990s have rejected the project of the 1960s New Wave. The often polemical Aoyama Shinji, the director of such works as *Helpless* (1997) and *Eureka* (2000), distinguished himself from older leftist humanist filmmaking by declaring that his own "materialistic cinematic practice…runs counter to what is generally called 'depicting humanity' or 'depicting sympathy.'"[22] Far from assuming a shared humanity that can allow communication with the "other," Aoyama depicts an impenetrability of the "other" as the basis of a different politics. Rejecting the political work of 1960s Japanese New Wave directors such as Ōshima Nagisa, he stated that a true new wave is "nothing other than a discourse dueling over the sole point of how to treat the other from a political perspective," and argued that such politics must recognize the unknowability of the "other."[23]

After the 1980s, especially after the tragic bouts of internecine leftist violence in the early 1970s, many artists lost confidence in established radical politics, questioning both their professed epistemological certainties and the violence their knowledge entailed. Detached from such certainties, independent cinema sought out what was thought to be a more radical pursuit of nothingness (the empty identities in the early films of Kitano Takeshi or the ambiguities of Kurosawa Kiyoshi), a reconsideration of the "others" Japanese cinema had previously ignored (e.g., the Okinawans or *zainichi* Koreans of Sai Yōichi or Takamine Gō), and a reconstruction of social relations on a micro-level based on an acceptance of the opacity of other individuals (Suwa, Hashiguchi, Aoyama, etc.).

## IV

Miike's films traverse these post-activist concerns but fail to find a home in any of them. He is too pessimistic or perhaps too cynical to accept even the measured hope for contact with the other that Suwa and Hashiguchi hold. His long takes and long shots present integral bodies in space that seek out home, community, and identity, but that quest is always in tension with the rootlessness of the body and the image itself. Taken by themselves, the supposedly excessive elements of his style can be seen as figuring a loss of unity (both individual and national), but looked at in their conflict with the long takes, they become just one part of the film's effort to proliferate rootlessness itself. We can say, versus Williams, that the possibly superficial quality of Miike's style is not an issue separate from his thematic content, but integral to it: these floating signifiers prove essential to the depiction of characters floating over space and materiality, yet still grasping at shreds of identity and location.

Miike certainly shares with other contemporary directors a focus on the body. The extremes of sex and violence and the hard-hitting nature of his cinematic style practically define Miike's work as the collision of bodies, both between characters and things on screen, and between the screen and the spectator. Things and the body are his canvas, like the tattoos that cover the torsos of so many of his characters. Yet sex scenes rarely reach the level of the erotic because they are so often related to violence. One of the most touching—Minami losing his virginity to Sakiko in *Gozu* (*Gokudō kyōfu daigekijō Gozu*, 2003)—is undermined by genre bending and confusion, and eventually rendered grotesquely absurd through a *vagina dentata* and a mutant fetus. For Miike, the body is first proof of humanity's animalistic nature (a stance he has possibly inherited from his teacher, Imamura Shōhei, but without the earthy localism). From the violence and grotesque forms of sex to the extreme emphasis on eating and bodily functions, from Cheng's dog-like life in *Rainy Dog* to the animal that Shibata becomes under Asami's ministrations in *Audition* (1999), people rarely seem able to stay

above the realm of the beast, despite their aspirations for family and friendship. Civilization appears to be but mere veneer covering a chaotic primordial stew that percolates up precisely in locations such as Shinjuku.

His vision of human bestiality, however, lacks physicality because of Miike's more ambiguous rendering of the body in cinema. Izutsu Kazuyuki, who directed the first of the *Young Thugs* (a.k.a. *Boys Be Ambitious*) films (*Kishiwada shōnen gurentai*, 1996), also offers a version of animalistic human society in Osaka, carried over from his *Brat's Empire* (*Gaki teikoku*, 1981), but it is different from that presented in Miike's contributions to the series. If Izuchi emphasized the melancholic physical brutality of his characters by not cutting when a blow is struck in a fight, Miike cuts out much of the extreme violence between the children in his *Young Thugs: Nostalgia*. Brutality is thus more imagined in the gaps between shots than emphasized by the integrity of the shot. Miike's physicality in that film comes to the fore in the "impossible" act of the grandfather shoving the broomstick into Toshio's anus. The collision of bodies reinforced by the collision of shots may seemingly align him with Tsukamoto Shin'ya, who actually appears in several Miike works, but whereas *Tetsuo* (1989) and *Bullet Ballet* (1998) are often frenetic efforts to resurrect the industrial body in the post-industrial medium of light and shadow through sensory assault, Miike's collisions—and thus the bodies they represent—are often as groundless as the muscular hunk that Tsukamoto's Jijii becomes in *Ichi the Killer*.

Miike appears to distrust the body as a stable foundation for identity. Not only is the body fragile and easily susceptible to rupture and dismemberment, it can practically mutate and metamorphose because body parts are themselves not fixed. *Shinjuku Triad Society* itself revolves around organ transplants, and *Audition* cites the dismembered body of the bar madam with too many fingers, an extra tongue and an ear (courtesy of Shibata). But if the body remains amorphous in Miike's work, it is also because his camera is ambivalent towards the substantiality of the physical form. The absurd camera angle from "inside" Anita's vagina in *Ley Lines* as she is being probed by her sadistic customer is only one example of how the excess in Miike's cinematographic style threatens to denude the body of substance and reality, making it just another one of the elements flowing and floating in this world. The body can become mere surface exterior, like the skins transformed into on-the-rack clothes in *Gozu*, except of course when it allows the similarly impossible feat of a full-grown man emerging from a petite woman's womb (fig. 5).

This floating impossibility spreads from human bodies to other objects in Miike's films. His broad and masterful use of cinematic devices reveals not only his pleasure at making motion pictures, but also a borderline cynical stance that potentially renders everything into an image. His wide-spread use of point-of-view shots among the characters, never giving one a dominant perspective, underlines how his films are always ensemble productions (without a center, as Zeze



Fig. 5. Impossible bodies. From *Gozu* (*Gokudō kyōfu daigekijō Gozu*, Miike Takashi, 2003).

notes), but his ascription of such shots to bullets (*Fudoh*) and vaginas not only makes objects equal to people—and visa versa—but underlines the slight comedy of the absurd that runs through much of Miike's camerawork.[24] The prominent use of jump cuts, especially in rhythmic fashion in the opening moments of *Dead or Alive*, approximates the pixillation techniques of stop-motion animation, metamorphosing people into machine-like objects, if not dolls manipulated by the cinematic apparatus. Miike often emphasizes images as images, not only making motifs out of photographs in *Bird People*, computer images in *Rainy Dog*, and video in *Audition*, but also, with Aikawa Shō and Takeuchi Riki beginning *Dead or Alive* with the call "One, two, three," turning his narratives into music videos, images without strong grounding in a diegetic world.

It is crucial to emphasize again that Miike's style does not find its home in these rootless images. The wandering is not just among ambiguously grounded images or bodies denuded of physicality, but also between these images and long takes of individuals traversing distances, of bodies physically roaming in space. The different styles can seem to work together. His long takes, for instance, set the stage for stylistic violence, or they can provide a necessary respite. The long take in the restaurant in *Dead or Alive* and a similarly long take of Ryūichi meeting the drug dealer in the barge end with sudden violence: an abrupt cut to a gun shooting. The stillness, one could argue, is essential in rendering the subsequent bloodshed all the more shocking. In this, one could argue a similarity between Miike and Kitano, a director who has honed a style that contrasts moments of stillness with sudden outbursts of violence. Kitano, however, is much more the minimalist, stripping the mise-en-scène, dialogue, and even character expression of excess, thus rendering the abrupt bloodshed even more surprising. Takeuchi

Riki's almost melodramatic scowl is practically the opposite of Takeshi's poker face, underlining how the tension Miike builds up in his moments of violent stylistic excess continues to reverberate through the long takes, seething under the surface. Kitano's violence is shocking because the tension during the long takes is often dampened by the dead time at the beginning and end of shots—a tactic Miike rarely uses. This effectively renders Kitano's bloodshed emotionally colder but also seemingly more real because of its detachment from melodramatic narrative. The shreds of reality in Miike's cinema never achieve the brute force of Takeshi truly and repeatedly slapping a person's face in the infamous long-take bathroom scene in *Violent Cop* (*Sono otoko kyōbō ni tsuki*, 1989). Miike's camera is less sure of its ability to detach itself from either conventional narratives or the oppressive rule of the image. It fails to find a home in the floating signifiers of stylistic excess and thus wanders into the realm of contemplative, detached long takes, but there it also fails to discover a real resting place, as the excess always threatens to invade.

It is important to note that these wanderings are not borderless or without limitations—rootlessness does not result in a supposedly postmodern freedom of movement and creation. Just as Miike's long takes are delimited by bursts of stylistic excess, so those moments of creative delirium are inevitably brought back to earth by a long-take reiteration of the weight of the continuous shot and integral space and time. The wandering of his characters is often represented by their movements in real space in a single shot. Many of his long takes involve camera movements, some of which, like the images of the celebration in the tidal flats in *Dead or Alive*, provide thrilling evocations of liberation in liminality, the freedom away from home. But just as his characters are often stopped at the border, so most of these long takes feature spatial limitation. Visualizing the sense of being trapped, many of his long takes take place in closed spaces like the barge or the interrogation room in *Dead or Alive*. Even where there is movement, as in the almost two-minute-long long take of Jōjima walking through the alleys of Yokohama's Chinatown, it is often confined by walls or ultimately, as in that shot, window frames. Small windows or sounds from off screen will hint of spaces outside, but there is never the opening up onto the world evinced through Jean Renior's windows. The frame is much more violent, cutting people off at the leg as it often does in *Yakuza Demon* (*Kikoku*, 2003). Miike repeatedly shows a character talking to or referring to another person in one shot but waits excessively long before providing a reverse shot (e.g. Ryūichi at the ward office in *Ley Lines* or Minami at the rice shop in *Gozu*). The spectator is tensely trapped in the in-between spaces of Miike's reverse-field editing, neither able to comfortably enter the diegesis, nor to escape its violent pull. The camera and the spectator are as much unable to live in this world or leave it as any Miike character.

## V

Miike Takashi is not the only Japanese director who is hard to "place" in terms of style. Critical discourse in Japan on Kitano Takeshi, for instance, has emphasized the impossibility of locating him in a single cinematic identity, as he has swung back and forth between the empty violence of *Boiling Point* (*3-4 x jūgatsu*, 1990) and the tearful youth romance *A Scene at the Sea* (*Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi.*, 1991), between the absurdist comedy *Getting Any?* (*Minnā yatteru ka*, 1994) and the highly aestheticized *Dolls* (2002). The critic Horike Yoshitsugu, for one, has claimed that, "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."[25] Such descriptions, however, as I have argued elsewhere, have mostly functioned to lift Kitano onto a pedestal above other directors, to praise his genius as an artist who can transcend restrictions of style and signification.[26] One can argue that the stylistic wanderings of Kitano and Miike engage with a film theoretical context in Japan, developed in the work of such scholars as Hasumi Shigehiko and Maeda Hideki, who have tended to criticize the very notion of style itself as an overly restricting conceptualization of the activities of directors and the complex operations of the cinematic image.[27] However, Miike is distinct from Kitano. While Kitano's stylistic homelessness is usually recuperated in visions of the individual artist or the transcendent angel that figures prominently in his recent films, entities free of both commercial considerations and mundane critical categories (including auteurism), Miike's wanderings are rarely elevated to such artistic heights, as his nomadic plain is closer to popular cinema and is shaped significantly by industrial concerns (especially the format of V-cinema, the genre-centered nature of rental video, and his position as a director for hire). Kitano's stylistic shifts from film to film are celebrated as the resistance of a rebellious trickster (but one who owns his own media company), whereas Miike, with his prolific production schedule involving various genres and production companies, is seen as the street-smart player, navigating various demands and using those smarts to negotiate his films. The changes of style within each film reflect the inherent tensions of that position. Kitano's homelessness is thus ironically located on one definite side of the oppositions between the individual and the mass, the artistic and the industrial, whereas Miike's cinema more truly wanders between these poles.

The homelessness of Miike's style is partially shaped by these conditions of production, but what makes it fascinating is that it is intimately interwoven with Miike's thematics, as his wanderings between modes of filmmaking overlap with his characters' nomadic urges. The borders that restrict and sometimes even kill itinerants in the films can be paralleled, if not embodied, by the pressures of definitions of a style bearing down on anyone using it. Each style offers opportunities for expression (cinematic, political, social) but also equally the cutting off of

other opportunities. Just as his mixed-blood characters are caught in the liminal spaces between nations, Miike is "homeless" in terms of the binary oppositions between editing and the long take, excess and minimalism, or simulation and the real. Yet he is not therefore "free" to transcend such divisions. Wandering in style may proffer the illusion of creative freedom, but it is crucial to emphasize that the sense of loss and sadness in Miike's work stems from the lack not just of home, but also of the freedom of homelessness. It is like Ryūichi's friends in *Dead or Alive*: just as their assertions of one identity (say Japaneseness) are undermined by others imposing another identity (Chineseness), so any freedom from identity is refused by the assertion of borders. This is why we must be careful about assuming the rubrics of Japan or Japanese cinema as a precondition for analyzing Miike's work. This is not to deny its relation either to the socio-political conditions of contemporary Japan or to the history of Japanese film, but we must say that assuming such borders for a body of work that is precisely about the loss resulting from the imposition of such borders potentially loses sight of the crux of Miike's cinema. Focusing on Japan can lead one to overemphasize Miike's description of a given Japan (its loss or destruction) and thus underplay his narrative of how the creation of Japanese borders undermines nomadic desires to flee this space.

Miike presents various challenges to the cinema scholar: how to describe style as a sign of auteurism without locating a filmmaker in any one style; how to analyze a Japanese filmmaker without necessarily assuming the borders of Japanese cinema; how to discuss products of contemporary Japanese culture without always reducing them to Japan; and how to consider the politics of style while recognizing that politics may not reside in just one style. The latter is a crucial point because we can say that one of the senses of loss that hovers over Miike's work is the feeling, against such historical examples as Eisensteinian montage, the alternative cinema of 1970s *Screen* theory, or even the detached style of 1990s Japanese cinema, that a progressive politics can never find a home in a particular film style. His work less illustrates the lack of a progressive cinema than, stuck as it is between a homelessness of style and a homelessness of politics, figures the very difficulty of staking out a progressive cinematic position in a contemporary situation where the opposition between dominant and alternative cinema is not necessarily clear.

There is a pessimism here that some may find debilitating or, from another perspective, representative of the political swamp of contemporary Japan. Just as Miike's nomadic characters are not free but trapped, so his film style is not a marker of artistic liberation or "outrage," which presumes a conventional opposition between dominant sensibilities and outrageousness. It conveys a lamentable sense of being lost, unable to take cinematic technique to a definite destination. Perhaps this is one reason why some of his recent films give the impression that he is going in circles, repeating himself. The sense of being homeless but confined infects Miike's
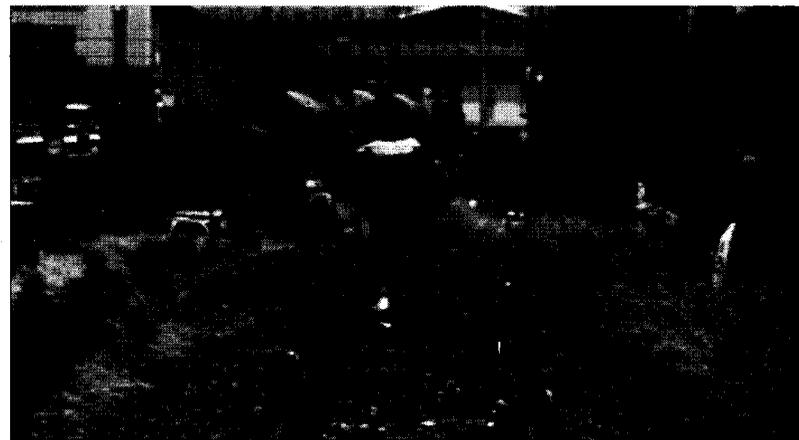


Fig. 6. Fleeing between the tracks. From *Dead or Alive* (*Dead or Alive: Hanzaisha*, Miike Takashi, 1999).

politics as well, which can find no secure position from which to feel outraged or a clear critical distance from conventional sensibilities. This is the danger of Miike's cinema: being so homeless it cannot take a stand against a particular cinema or social issue, and thus falls into cynical "anything goes" pessimism. This may sound like Jameson's postmodern condition, but Miike does not celebrate that. He rather hovers precariously and ambivalently between meaningful depth and surface playfulness. When the nation parodied in *The City of Lost Souls* returns as an object of nostalgia (the Zero fighter) in *Yakuza Demon* or when the horror and yakuza films deconstructed in *Gozu* remain in more conventional form in *One Missed Call* (*Chakushin ari*, 2003) and *Yakuza Demon* respectively, one is more likely to sympathize with Mika Ko's suspicions about Miike's political commitments than Tony Williams' optimistic support of "outrage."

Miike Takashi remains on the border between being a filmmaker who critiques his situation and one who reflects it, between one who mobilizes film as a political and artistic medium and one who goes with the popular flows. He is thus hard to analyze because he moves in the space between significance and surface and thus between the competing methodologies for conceptualizing film texts within popular culture. If it is a cinema of "outrage," it is directed not just against the Japanese establishment, but against categories for fixing and conceptualizing films. While Miike does not undermine those categories, one can imagine him speaking like one of his characters: "I am like X but not like X; like Y but not like Y," where X and Y can be a variety of fundamental binaries, including long takes and montage, home and homelessness, the global and the local, and the artistic and the popular. When we try to impose any of these on him, he turns and runs, fleeing forever, but still caught between the rails of the tracks he follows (fig. 6).

## NOTES

1. The "cool Japan" thesis was most famously put forward by Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* 130 (May/June 2002): 44-54.

2. This article is a significantly revised version of an essay first published in Italian as "Stile senza dimora e tristezza di un cineasta," in *Anime perdute: Il cinema di Miike Takashi*, ed. Dario Tomasi (Milano: Museo Nazionale del Cinema, 2006), 61-77.

3. Art Black, "The Films of Takashi Miike," in *Japanese Cinema Essential Handbook*, 5th edition, eds. Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser (Miami: Vital Books, 2003), 416.

4. Tony Williams, "Takashi Miike's Cinema of Outrage," *Cineaction* (March 2004), 54-62.

5. Ko is interested in "Douglas's account of the body as a metaphor of the body politic." She stresses that "Douglas identifies the body as a site of information, a coding and transmitting machine, arguing that 'the body communicates information for and from the social system of which it is a part.'" For Ko, as for Douglas, "the body expresses the relationship of the individual to the group and it both represents and contributes to the social situation at a given moment." See Mika Ko, "The Break-up of the National Body: Cosmetic Multiculturalism and the Films of Miike Takashi," *New Cinemas* 2.1 (2004): 34-35; and Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1975).

6. Ko 29-39.

7. See my "La tristezza del sogno impossibile: mancanza ed eccesso del cinema transnazionale di Miike Takashi," in *Noir in Festival 1999*, ed. Marina Fabbri (Courmayeur: Courmayeur Film Festival; Rome: Edizioni Fahrenheit 451, 1999), 25-28. The present article is an attempt to revisit this piece some eight years later, using portions of that essay while re-casting and re-framing it.

8. Zeze Takahisa, "Miike Takashi ga kakaemotsu dai-yon no meidai," *Kinema junpō* 1258 (15 June 1998): 58; Tom Mes, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike* (Guildford, UK: FAB Press, 2003).

9. When Japanese, who had colonized areas of China and Manchuria before and during World War II, were compelled to return to Japan after the war, a large number of their children were left behind, whether orphaned, abandoned, or lost. These *"zanryū koji"* (orphans left behind) were largely forgotten until improved relations with China helped some of these children and their families return to Japan thirty or forty years later. The fact they have been raised in China and have married Chinese has made it difficult for them and their children to adjust to Japanese society.

10. The tune is the old American song, "I've Been Working on the Railroad," but the Japanese version has different lyrics: "The train tracks continue / Forever and ever . . ."

11. Abe Kashō, "Akirameru koto no yutakasa, sore e no izanai," *Kinema junpō 1258* (15 June 1998): 53-54.

12. For a critique of Iwai's film in the context of recent cultural nationalism, see my "Consuming Asia, Consuming Japan: The New Neonationalist Revisionism in Japan," in *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*, eds. Mark Selden and Laura Hein (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 74-95.

13. I have analyzed these themes in a number of articles: "Recognizing 'Others' in a New Japanese Cinema" *Japan Foundation Newsletter* 39.2 (January 2002): 1-6; "Aoyama Shinji," in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2002), 16-25; and "A Scene at the Threshold: Liminality in the Films of Kitano Takeshi," *Asian Cinema* 10.2 (Spring/Summer 1999): 107-115.

14. Abe Kashō, "Ajian barokku," in *'Nihonsei eiga' no yomikata 1980-1999*, eds. Mutō Kiichi, et al. (Tokyo: Film Ātosha, 1999): 84-89.

15. Zeze 58.

16. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *A World in Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2003), 16, quoted in Williams 56.

17. Williams 56.

18. Williams, for instance, can only seem to deal with *Dead or Alive 2*, a film with fewer elements of the "cinema of outrage" that he singles out as a Miike trait, by treating it as somehow other to that style: "Miike's cinema of outrage occasionally appears in this film. But it becomes subordinated to a more muted narrative which might disappoint viewers expecting another excessive *Dead or Alive* sequel." Williams 59.

19. Ko 17.

20. See, for instance, *Kitano Takeshi* (London: BFI, 2007) or "From the National Gaze to Multiple Gazes: Representations of Okinawa in Recent Japanese Cinema," in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, eds. Laura Hein and Mark Selden (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 273-307. This long-shot, long-take style was arguably the dominant style of 1990s independent Japanese cinema, evident in works by directors such as Aoyama Shinji, Kawase Naomi, Kitano Takeshi, Sai Yōichi, Matsuoka Jōji, Hiroki Ryūichi, Shinozaki Makoto, Zeze Takahisa, Koreeda Hirokazu, Kitano Takeshi, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and Sono Shion.

21. David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

22. Aoyama Shinji, "Yo wa ika ni shite Gareru shito ni nari shika," *Cahiers du Cinema Japon* 21 (1997), 175.

23. Ibid., 168. The reader should note that Aoyama's use of the term "other" (*tasha*) is not equivalent to that in postcolonial studies, where the "other" is seen as a construction of the imperial "self" meant to reinforce the colonial power as "subject" against an inferior "other." The term actually signifies that alterity which colonial—or any other discourse of the "self"—often tries to suppress because it threatens the self's mastery of knowledge.

24. Zeze 58.

25. Horike Yoshitsugu, "Jitensha no kioku," *Yuriika* 28.12 (October 1996): 233.

26. See Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*.

27. See for instance Hasumi Shigehiko, *Kantoku Ozu Yasujirō* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1983), and Maeda Hideki, *Ozu Yasujirō no ie* (Tokyo: Shoshi Yamada, 1993).

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