

Filmbites presents : Takeshi Kitano

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FILMBITES PRESENTS

TAKESHI KITANO



PRESENTED BY THE SHOWROOM CINEMA

in association with

SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

Tutor: Shelley O'Brien

Takeshi Kitano aka 'Beat' Takeshi

Takeshi Kitano has gained a reputation as the most original Japanese director of recent years. He can also be regarded as a renaissance man in that he is a multi-talented film editor, screenwriter, actor, comedian, television personality, painter, tap dancer and author. Each of these facets underpin his work as a director. Indeed, Kitano can be regarded as an auteur - in the truest sense - writing, directing, acting in and editing films under his company label Office Kitano, as well as employing the same personnel such as actor, Susumu Terajima, and composer, Joe Hisaishi.

The youngest of four brothers, Kitano was born in Tokyo in 1947 and lived in poor conditions in the aftermath of World War II. His family life had a significant impact on the films he would later create, not least the influence of his father, Kikujiro - a hard-working but violent man. Extremely bright and talented, he was accepted at Meiji University but soon left. After a variety of jobs he decided to try his hand at comedy, eventually becoming one of The Two Beats, a *manzai* act. He would go on to use the name 'Beat' Takeshi when working as actor, comedian or TV personality. His first main acting role was as Sergeant Hara in *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence* (Nagisa Oshima, 1983). Asked to star in Kinji Fukusaku's *Violent Cop* (1989), he became the director by accident when Fukusaku withdrew. By 1997, Kitano had become a highly-regarded filmmaker to European audiences and critics, despite being underrated by the Japanese public who were more used to his antics as a comedian and TV host.

His work during the 1990s established Kitano as Japan's premier director when he made films like *Sonatine* (1993) - a controlled, existentialist *yakuza* piece, *Kikujiro* (1999) - influenced by his relationship with his father, and his masterpiece, the elegiac, multi-award-winning *Hana-Bi* (1997). All these works exhibited his unique mix of humour, human drama and bursts of violence, combined with sparse dialogue, an extraordinary editing style and controlled use of space and composition.

Also during this period he sustained serious facial injuries in a near-fatal motor-scooter accident - suggested by some as a failed suicide attempt. This incident, however, seemed to trigger an even more reflective and poetic quality in his work when he returned to directing with *Kids Return* (1996). *Hana-Bi* saw Kitano back in front of the camera - but with a noticeably different expression and facial twitch - where arguably he gives his finest performance as Nishi, a police officer confronted with difficult decisions to make in both his personal and professional life.

His later work - some of which we are watching on this course - reveals a filmmaker who has not stagnated and who continues to be prolific in all his creative pursuits.

FILM NOTES

Brother (2000)



Kitano's only overseas production to date, *Brother* divided the critics and even Kitano fans. Despite the fact that it is mostly set in Los Angeles it is unmistakably Japanese, and perhaps that was the problem for the film's detractors. There may have been a certain expectation that Kitano would somehow make a more American film. What we get instead is every typical Kitano convention simply being played out in an American city rather than in Tokyo.

Kitano (as Beat Takeshi) plays Aniki Yamamoto, a *yakuza* gangster, who is exiled to the US. He makes contact with his half-brother, Ken (Claude Maki from Kitano's *A Scene at the Sea*) and becomes the driving force behind the multi-racial gang Ken runs. This leads to all-out war, whereby they despatch a rival Mexican gang and eventually take on the Mafia. In the midst of this, Aniki (Japanese for 'elder brother' and used specifically by the *yakuza*) forms an unlikely friendship with Denny (Omar Epps) after initially wounding his eye with a broken bottle.

Expect to see a fractured narrative, long-held shots of characters, brilliant framing and composition of shots, rhythmic camera movement, humour amid the bloodshed and, of course, a scene at the sea. Unlike most of his other films however, there is little emphasis on colour here apart from red (it is a film which is drenched in blood) and the black über-cool, Yohji Yamamoto designed suits! The film also features three of his regular collaborators - Susumu Terajima (as Aniki's loyal henchman, Kato), Ren Ohsugi (as Harada), and behind the scenes, Joe Hisaishi, scoring his sixth Kitano film.

Brother is certainly no *Sonatine* or *Hana-Bi*, but it is a far better film than its reputation suggests. On the surface the film may seem to be an exercise in style over content but it actually features the key themes which Kitano constantly returns to - life, death, revenge, honour, obligation, and violence. The violence is presented in typical Kitano fashion - sudden, brutal bursts of gunfire where we more often than not witness the aftermath rather than the event itself. The code of honour and *giri* (duty of obligation) is played out via Aniki's relationship with Denny, as well as with Kato and Harada, to the point that we see the act of *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment) and the *yakuza* tradition of cutting off the little finger as penance/apology. Brief moments of tenderness and friendship prevent the film from simply being a contemplation about violence and death however. Despite its detractors, *Brother* has an elegance about it which is hard to resist and Kitano's themes and style intertwine seamlessly to create a sort of brutal existentialism which is underscored by the lush, lyrical beauty of Hisaishi's music.

Dolls (2002)



Kitano's tenth film as director is perhaps best viewed as a visual poem about love, life and death. Beginning and ending with a *bunraku* puppet show, the three stories about undying love are tied together by a couple who are literally bound together by a red rope - they are the focus of the first tale. Matsumoto leaves his true love, Sawako, to marry his boss's daughter for status and money. Sawako attempts suicide which triggers Matsumoto to accept his betrayal and to atone for it. Their subsequent journey as "the bound beggars" takes place across the four seasons - beginning with Spring - as they wander through an avenue of cherry blossoms in full bloom. This is the first metaphor of many which is linked to life and death. Their

journey of reconciliation weaves through the other two stories as they travel through the seasons. An ageing yakuza boss is reunited with his lost love, but only fleetingly. A pop star is disfigured in an accident and hides from the world, so her most devoted fan blinds himself so that she will allow him to meet her. Ultimately, each tale ends in death.

Although regarded as atypical of his work and even rather self-indulgent, in many respects it is still typical Kitano. Most of his work has a certain meditative quality to it even though *Dolls* takes this to extremes. The use of slow motion and constantly tracking and zooming camera underpins the key themes, as well as creating a sense of rhythm which is central to all his films. Juxtaposed with this sense of motion are Kitano's typical cropped shots, static close-ups and long shots on characters and objects, and fragmented, un-coded flashbacks. There is a striking use of primary colours throughout the film along with heavily saturated pinks. The emphasis on bright colour, especially the lush cherry blossoms and deep red Japanese maples, is later contrasted with the luminous quality of the snow in the final sequence. Along with the use of colour, Kitano's most common motif - a scene at the sea - also makes its inevitable appearance. Furthermore, Joe Hisaishi's final score for Kitano functions as a minimalist, subdued musical meditation underlining the sense of melancholy which is prevalent throughout the whole film.

Zatoichi (2003)



After making *Dolls*, Kitano returned to what he does best - a *yakuza* film. Although *Zatoichi* is, strictly speaking, a *jidaigeki* (period drama) set in 19th Century Japan, its plot revolves around a *yakuza* gang war and features many of the tropes associated with Japanese gangster movies - extravagant tattoos, gambling, corruption, revenge and, of course, violence (albeit with samurai swords rather than guns).

Commercially and critically successful, even in Kitano's native Japan, *Zatoichi* won the Silver Lion Award for Best Director at the 2003 Venice Film Festival. This was Kitano's first period piece and only the second time he had made a film from an existing idea, that of a blind masseur, gambling genius and master swordsman - the cult anti-hero, Zatoichi. The character had been played in film and on TV by Shintaro Katsu from 1962 to 1989 and was extremely popular with Japanese audiences. Kitano was conscious of not wanting to impersonate Katsu and therefore made him quite different visually by dyeing his hair platinum blonde and giving him a blood-red cane sword. This was not the only change which Kitano made to the legendary Zatoichi though, he also brought his own inimitable style! It is both parody of, and homage to, the original series, and uses a good deal of typical Kitano humour (both verbal and slapstick) along with copious amounts of bloodletting. In terms of camerawork, for once, he does not rely so heavily on long-held shots, but he does retain the moving camera and slow-motion of *Dolls* as well as the fractured narrative time evident in all his work.

Zatoichi features a fine cast of seasoned film and TV actors such as Michiyo Ookuso, Gadarukanaru Taka (one of Kitano's comedy protégés), Yuko Daike, and Tadanobu Asano. Stunningly handsome, and often called "the Japanese Johnny Depp", Asano is one of the most popular and in-demand Japanese actors of recent times. He plays the exceptional swordsman, Hattori Genosuke - a *ronin* bodyguard - who eventually has a showdown with Zatoichi (by the sea, unsurprisingly!). The choreographed sword fight sequences are unusual in some respects in that Kitano did not want duels with lots of clanking sounds, rather he wanted to keep them short, fast, and precisely timed. As with all Kitano's work, these sequences set up a particular rhythm to the film and this is further heightened by the music score and the dance sequences.

Kitano and Joe Hisaishi ended their lengthy partnership after disagreement over *Dolls*, so he collaborated with Keiichi Suzuki in this instance. Suzuki is well known in Japan as a performer with the group, Moon Riders, and as a music producer. His score for *Zatoichi* is vibrant, percussive and inventive, and fuses perfectly with the images on screen. Indeed, one of the highlights of the film is its use of rhythm and dance. The joyous dance sequence at the end features a group of Japanese performers called The Stripes, who mash-up clog dance and African-American street-style tap dancing wearing modified *geta* (traditional wooden shoes) rather than tap shoes. Only Kitano would dare to conclude a *jidaigeki* with a modernised, musical tap routine!

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Violent Cop (1989)

Boiling Point (1990)

A Scene at the Sea (1991)

Sonatine (1993)

Getting Any? (1994)

Gonin (Takashi Ishii, 1995) (Actor only)

Kids Return (1996)

Hana-Bi (1997)

Gohatto (Nagisa Oshima, 1999) (Actor only)

Kikujiro (1999)

Battle Royale (Kinji Fukusaku, 2000) (Actor only)

Takeshis' (2005)

Outrage (2010)

