

## Reigniting Japanese Tradition with *Hana-Bi*

by Darrell William Davis

*This article interrogates Kitano “Beat” Takeshi’s Hana-Bi (Fireworks, 1997) for its appropriation of traditional Japanese iconography and its insertion into a global marketplace for Asian auteur-gangster films.*

For Western critics, Kitano “Beat” Takeshi is the greatest filmmaker to come out of Japan since Akira Kurosawa—to “come out,” that is, into the international Euro-American art-cinema market. Years before his triumph at the 1997 Venice film festival, European and American critics praised Kitano for his contemplative treatments of violence, youth, and repression. In England, he was compared with Bresson, Melville, Scorsese, and Ozu. The BBC included *Sonatine* (1993) on its list of the one hundred most representative films of world cinema<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1.). Critics at the *Village Voice* named *Hana-Bi (Fireworks, 1997)* one of the top ten films of the decade. Does all this acclaim have anything to do with Kitano’s refusal to portray Asian stereotypes? Are Western critics tired of Asian exoticism and rewarding Kitano accordingly? Or is he just telling us what we want to hear? As the director himself put it:

I feel like when anybody calls me an “Asian director” it’s loaded with preconceptions. . . . I would really like to get rid of the typical Asian traits, cultures, and aesthetics in our films. I don’t mean to put down Kurosawa, but I would rather see contemporary Japanese films succeed over *samurai* films. I hate seeing people sell a blatantly stereotypical Asian look. I realize that this is what sells right now, but that’s what I am trying to get away from.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, Kitano’s “putdown” of Kurosawa was only a ploy. Japanese television channel NHK carried a story on Kitano’s victory at Venice and asked Kurosawa for his impression. It turned out that Kurosawa, like almost everyone, was a Kitano fan. And despite Kitano’s mock disparagement, the admiration was mutual. The television show arranged a meeting with *Sensei* (the master). Kitano, ordinarily shielded behind his shades, was beaming with boyish pride. In fact, he appeared happier than he had at Venice, where he seemed simply bewildered. Back at home, savoring his day with Kurosawa, Kitano clearly relished his moment of triumph with the famous master.

Another Japanese master, Oshima Nagisa, seems to share Kitano’s desire to move beyond a “blatantly stereotypical Asian look.” In his 1995 British Film Institute compilation documentary *Nihon Eiga no Hyakunen (One Hundred Years of Japanese Cinema)*, Oshima concluded with a statement suggesting imminent

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Figure 1. Director-writer-actor Kitano Takeshi refuses to portray Asian stereotypes. Publicity still from *Sonatine* (1993) courtesy of Miramax.

transcendence over Japanese nationality: “Now in its second century, Japanese cinema is still experiencing growing pains. Japanese cinema will have matured when we do not recognize it anymore as Japanese, only as cinema” (my translation).

Maureen Turim notes that “Oshima seemed entranced by an international artistic identity, one that was no longer completely and specifically Japanese.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, when the documentary was shown on Japanese television, Oshima, dressed in a kimono and drinking green tea, introduced it on a stylized Oriental set while chatting with kimono-clad Sawachi Hisae, a noted writer. In such a self-consciously “Japonesque” posture (nearly auto-Orientalist), Oshima invoked the very stereotypes and icons of nationality on display in his documentary—only to locate them as antiques, quaint as the wooden *geta* (sandals) he wore on his feet. In this performance of his own persona, Oshima both previewed and questioned the point he made in voice-over in the documentary.

**National Cinema as Antique Show.** In this light, certain questions arise: Is “Japaneseness” something Japanese cinema is bound to outgrow? Has national distinctiveness always been no more than a marketing ploy? Have representations of what is commonly recognized as “Japanese” outlived their usefulness? If not, then to whom are they useful? With the pace of global compression (of data, access, space, and so on), how has film criticism come to terms with questions of nationality within transnational institutional circuits?

Kitano's sensitivity to "typical Asian traits" and to what sells in the international marketplace raises an important issue of mediation. The privileged cultural institution by which Japanese film comes to the world's attention is international film festivals, which harbor their own special politics, discourses, rituals, and cultures. Film festivals require a separate study, but they are often thought of as celebrations of international diversity and experimentation (or at least eccentricity), a respite from the juggernaut of commercialized blockbusters. Nonetheless, festivals are an exemplary case of globalization. They do not provide transparent representations of, or even allow much space for, the expression of national cultures. Festival audiences and juries are "distant observers" of the vernaculars used in foreign films and must deal with the glamorous, distracting presence of stars, directors, and the press. Even if there were no celebrities or prizes, the politics of programming—the quests for premieres, reputations, guest lists, black lists, grudges, and programmers who want to be producers—would make film festivals less inclined to national articulations than to be what James Clifford calls traveling cultures: "*discrepant cosmopolitanisms* . . . cross-cutting 'us' and 'them.'"<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, traveling cultures require national cultures as a kind of prop or background, both spatially and temporally, before which they take definition and come to life.

Within the cosmopolitanism of international film festivals, nationality typically becomes an issue when a film is entered as a coproduction and its pedigree must be fixed. This is especially true if the film is a contender for awards. For filmmakers, one's nationality can be a liability (e.g., Chinese who are denied permission to attend) or an asset. Imamura Shohei shared the 1997 Palme d'Or at Cannes (with Abbas Kiarostami) for *Unagi (The Eel)* thanks, it is said, to the presence on the jury of fellow Asian Gong Li. The larger point, however, is that success on the international festival circuit does not necessarily entail the success or vitality of a national film industry—either critically or financially. Far from representing a nation or a region, a filmmaker like Kitano wants to be known as an auteur who breaks out of the constraints of national cinema. But how?

Kitano shrewdly inserts himself into an unorthodox, atypical nationality that suits the transcultural forms international festivals celebrate. He references Kurosawa, the icon of Japanese national cinema, only to disavow the comparison. However, Kitano's disavowal of any family resemblance with samurai-Kurosawa-Asian stereotypes indirectly reinforces that lineage. Japanese tradition, as embodied in a canonized national cinema, is invoked, then dropped in favor of Kurosawa's brand-name value. This splitting off of a "typical" national cinema from an authorial "international artistic identity" (Turim), to the latter's advantage, plays directly into festival programming and international critical discourses.<sup>5</sup> In this alternative, back-door fashion, a Japanese auteur gains attention through contemporary networks of globalization.

In contrast, the front-door approach to corporate globalization is exemplified by blockbusters in the *Armageddon/Titanic* (both 1998) mode. This commercial conception assumes an antithetical, predatory relationship to national cinemas, often imagined in terms of their imminent disappearance, like endangered species. David James, like Oshima, sees national cinema as a heuristic: "In film studies, the

response [to globalization] has been primarily a re-investment in the national as a fundamental historiographical concept, a somewhat paradoxical development since the world-wide hegemony of the American entertainment industries leaves the concept of any other national cinema with little more than a heuristic value—a fact that is often the very point from which these studies begin.”<sup>6</sup>

**The Auteur Culture Industry.** In this network of transnational authority, Kitano and Oshima are more than just film directors. In both cases, Japanese television complicates, and perhaps undermines, these directors’ international pretensions. Here I want to anticipate a possible misunderstanding. Am I reproducing hackneyed local/global, domestic/international, and national/transnational dichotomies? Will I make a case for the priority of the local, televisual side, arguing that it carries greater weight? If I have access to Beat Takeshi on Japanese TV, can I use it to “trump” your subtitled Kitano Takeshi at the film festival or (later) on video? No. This form of nativist one-upmanship will not work because it assumes that a local, vernacular version of culture is more real or authentic than an export. Besides, television appearances and festival films are apples and oranges; they are not easily compared without reconstitution, and they are not merely different versions of the same artist’s expression.

Instead, the proposition offered here is that Kitano—as culture industry—encompasses disparate, often contradictory products. Kitano (and to an extent Oshima) presents himself as a personality first, with ready access to television, print, advertising, music, and fine art, as well as to screen acting and directing. The roles of comedian, quiz-show host, educator, public-affairs commentator, and (for Oshima) marriage counselor also fall within the repertoire. Kitano as media figure is not just an auteur writ large across disparate media but a cultural production, a little industry in his own right. Products of “Office Kitano,” the name of his company, require different tools than does an auteurist framework constructed by critics as a policy or theory. Yet that framework is exactly the one Kitano solicits for his films, keeping the impositions of national cinema at bay. Between the films and the much larger body of other production, there is a gap, something Kitano has freely discussed:

My biggest insurance as a director is that I am a comedian. Whether my film bombs or succeeds, I can laugh about it. I sympathize with full-time filmmakers. People can come up to me and say “Takeshi-san, no one is coming to see your films,” and it’s easy for me to say, “You’re right. No one is coming.” People find it funny. But I would think any other filmmaker would get offended. I can be more adventurous because I have this insurance. I also try to keep my film career and my television career completely separate. I have my fees for doing television and a separate contract for doing film. Also, I do not use money made in television to fund my films even though I make so little as a filmmaker (the budget for *Hana-Bi* was \$2.3 million). I sometimes think about how much money I could make if I were on television all the time I spend making films. But the day people start seeing me as a television star making a movie, it’s the death of me as a director. So I refuse to go on television and advertise my films. That would destroy me.<sup>7</sup>

Like a good politician, Kitano plays up different parts of his persona for different constituencies. His television performances provide a sense of how unpredictable and unstable he is, not to mention ubiquitous in Japanese media. Although his films are famous for their violence, they are also quite subdued. Not so “Beat Takeshi,” former *manzai* comedian, who is irrepressible and ribald. (*Manzai* is a popular Osaka-based form of standup comedy.) His TV appearances manifest a scathing, merciless wit. Someone described him as a bad, brilliant adolescent, like Howard Stern without Stern’s skewering of celebrity. In contrast, Takeshi wallows in his fame. According to an NHK poll, Takeshi was Japan’s favorite TV celebrity every year from 1990 to 1995, and in 1996 he was the regular host of no less than seven prime-time network TV shows.<sup>8</sup> In 1998, he regularly appeared on up to eight shows, on five different channels, including educational, discussion, and comic variety programs. Beat’s humor is nonsensical, grotesque, raunchy, sadistic, xenophobic, homophobic, chauvinist, and intermittently nationalistic. His skits are often offensive to the point of provoking organized protests. This happened in 1994 when a skit about Hokkaido had “Ainu” natives dancing in bikini underpants with oversized penises, with which they did tricks like spin plates and swat balls. The NTV network apologized to the Ainu association, which had registered a strong protest, but Takeshi stayed on the air.<sup>9</sup> He is too anarchic to be of much use to the organized right wing, but it would be surprising to learn of ultranationalists or *yakuza* that do not find him funny (this was not true of the late Itami Juzo, director of *The Funeral* [1984], *Tampopo* [1986], and the *Taxing Woman* films [1987, 1988]).<sup>10</sup>

**Provoking National Identity.** More recently, Beat Takeshi launched a show called *Japanese, You Are Out of Line* on the TBS network.<sup>11</sup> Featuring a large contingent of fluent expatriates from more than 150 countries, Takeshi solicits scathing comments on everything from *enjo kosai* (compensated dates between teenagers and older men) to professional sports, and from foreign labor practices to nuclear arms races. There are always defenders of Japanese customs (like ex-sumo star Konishiki, who comes originally from Oahu, Hawaii) on the show and so the emotional pitch heats up quickly; when things get out of hand, Takeshi, dressed as a clown, steps in with his toy gavel for a commercial break (Fig. 2).

A Venezuelan says she does not understand why Japanese couples never say “I love you”; a Chinese businessman cannot believe how willful and self-centered Japanese women are; according to a Swede, the ritual gift giving between people who barely know each other is wasteful and corrupt; an Iranian wonders why Japanese fathers take baths with their daughters; a person from Senegal charges the Japanese with hypocrisy for criticizing Pakistan and India’s nuclear programs but saying nothing about the United States. Audiences across Japan send more than two hundred letters and faxes each week to complain, and most are variations on the “love-it-or-leave-it” riposte. They criticize Takeshi for allowing *gaijin* (foreigners) to attack Japan, so he accommodates them by bringing on Japanese real-estate agents, flight attendants, and tourists who tell horror stories about dealing with unruly outsiders. Of course, this ratchets up the intensity several notches, along with the ratings for the show, which enjoys a very high 16 to 18 share at 10:00 P.M. For years, foreigners



Figure 2. When things get out of hand on the television show *Japanese, You Are Out of Line*, Beat Takeshi, dressed as a clown, steps in with his toy gavel for a commercial break. Courtesy TBS network, Japan.

have appeared on Japanese television as commentators or *talento* (comedy “talent”). The difference here is that ordinary, long-term expatriates are invited to come on and vent their frustrations.

Beat Takeshi’s television persona is the furthest thing imaginable from the “traditional” stereotype of the harmonious, consensual Japanese. It is tempting to think that his “take-no-prisoners” style is a release mechanism for ordinary Japanese ruled by conformism. For the most part, however, ordinary Japanese are painfully aware of the pressures of conformity, group compliance, and self-denial. The problem is that this mass ideology, which often runs counter to individual fulfillment, is intricately intertwined with people’s notions of what it means to be Japanese. National identity, therefore, is mixed up with what people recognize as an ideology of resignation and submission to authority. As a rule, people do not blindly internalize this dogma, although their teachers and tax collectors might like them to. Separating identity from ideology is difficult (i.e., the ability to combine, like Beat Takeshi, a robust national identity with a psychology of assertion, humor, irreverence, and sometimes aggression). Not only is Takeshi increasingly questioning what counts as national identity—the adequacy of simply pointing out distinctive signifiers and grouping them together by nation—but so are millions of his viewers.

Nonetheless, Japanese national identity has distinct, easily recognizable signifiers. This is because “Japaneseness” is a thoroughly processed ideology: it has

been under reconstruction for a very long time, even before Japan's mid-nineteenth-century encounter with American gunboats and the Meiji restoration of 1868. Gardens, haiku, geisha, samurai, and all the other trappings of tradition have shifting relations with ideologies of "Japaneseness." Their meanings, especially with respect to national traditions, change with time.

Using a nice pun, Maureen Turim observes that "the Japanese nation is a *forged* homogeneity, syncretic and complex. . . . Icons are themselves mutable in a changing Japan."<sup>12</sup> When Japanese photography and cinema picture such national icons, they do not just reveal but execute this "forgery." They stand within a long lineage of formal, cultural, and technological dialectics. Studies of national cinema—and English-language Japanese cinema studies are exemplary—have not paid enough attention to this complexity, assuming Japanese culture was just "there" to be "taken" by cameramen and performers. As Edward Said states, "[The Orient] is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either."<sup>13</sup>

Technological, commercial, and political imperatives helped produce and constitute "Japaneseness" in tandem with specific national needs. Cultural stereotypes took on use-value as pictorial and narrative representations. These stereotypes were useful for Japanese as well as non-Japanese purposes, but to different ends. Stereotypes about culture, as a form of representation, cannot simply be exposed by peeling off their deceptions to reveal a truthful core, or by identifying ruling colonial discourses on whose behalf they serve. What is being argued here is not the inevitability of cultural stereotypes but their "exteriority." They circulate visibly on the surface of texts, films, and popular culture; they are replicated, accelerated, and catalyzed through intertextual, intercultural fertilization.<sup>14</sup> Stereotypes of the nation are distinguished and enhanced by their durability, because these qualities are both malleable and adaptable.

With globalization, migration, diaspora, and the end of the Cold War, nationalities now seem to be evolving into something else. But will they dry up and blow away? Never, because national identities, and their accompanying stereotypes, are too useful—to global corporations and enterprises, to political and professional elites, and to ordinary individuals. Stereotypes and the iconography of the nation continue to have their uses. They are signs with labile signifieds: a flattering comparison to be coyly disavowed (Kitano), a provincial cradle that should be outgrown and discarded (Oshima), a continuing struggle between traditions and modernity, a stifling ideological construct interpellated onto Japanese subjects, and so on. Japanese national identity is not one thing, it is many things; it is emphatically not nothing.

Kitano, then, raises a number of interesting, though suspiciously familiar oppositions: contemporary Japanese films (*gendai-geki*) versus samurai costumers (*jidai-geki*); everyday life versus Asian stereotypes; Beat Takeshi, comedian, versus Kitano Takeshi, director; ephemera (TV) versus Euro art cinema; popular versus respectable (if not a masterpiece, à la Kurosawa); and, most familiar, Japan versus the world. In the late 1950s, Kurosawa himself lamented the lack of appreciation in the West for *gendai-geki*: "Japan produces contemporary-life films of the caliber of the De Sica picture [*Bicycle Thieves*] at the same time that it also produces those period films, exceptional and otherwise, that in large part are all that the

West has seen and continues to see of Japanese cinema.”<sup>15</sup> Have we traveled in circles since 1959? Has Western criticism moved beyond the local-global cultural chasm alluded to by Kurosawa?

**Three Models of National Cinema.** Kurosawa’s statement, in the foreword to *The Japanese Film*, brings us to major English-language studies of Japanese cinema. Although it may employ native histories, Western scholarship mediates and thereby constructs non-Western cultures (i.e., “Orientalism”). The evolution of Western constructions of Japanese cinema shows changes in the motivations for doing Japanese cinema scholarship. Following is an outline of three rather loose models of the relation between film and national culture as they are worked out in existing studies of Japanese cinema. These are the reflectionist, dialogic, and contamination models.<sup>16</sup> These assumptions are commonly visible in Japanese cinema studies and in studies of other national cinemas as well. Because globalization intensifies rather than attenuates national cultural identities, it also prompts a re-reading of the history of national cultures with an eye to the constructedness and hybridity of what was once thought to be authentically “Other.”

**Reflectionist: Cinema as Mirror.** Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie’s *The Japanese Film* best exemplifies the assumption that film reflects preexisting cultures. This book was originally published in 1959 and draws liberally on Tanaka Jun’ichiro’s 1957 multivolume *Nihon Eiga Hattatsu-shi* (Development of Japanese Cinema).<sup>17</sup> According to Anderson and Richie, cinema functions as a mirror to Japanese society, a window onto a culture that is not very accessible to readers of the book: “The Japanese, then as now, were constantly afraid of missing a point, of not understanding everything, and demanded a complete explanation. This the *benshi* (commentator) gave them, usually expanding his services to the extent of explaining the obvious.”<sup>18</sup> The authors show a distinct culturalist assumption (i.e., culture determines artistic expressions like cinema).

The film industry, too, comes under the culture rubric. Reflectionist and culturalist assumptions are very common, although not very fashionable in academic film criticism. Nevertheless, such titles as *Cultures on Celluloid*, *The French through Their Films*, *Cinema East*, and *Currents in Japanese Cinema* plainly manifest reflectionist assumptions, along with Peter High’s *Teikoku no Ginmaku* (The Imperial Screen), an in-depth study of Japanese imperialism in film. For all these writers, the direction of influence between culture and cinema is one way: cinema reflects conditions in the culture that produced the films, even if (as High says) the latent pacifism of some films reflects badly on militarist hegemony.

David Desser’s sustained work on Japanese cinema is also predominantly reflectionist, manifesting a deep curiosity about the links between film and Japanese culture. Desser shares with Donald Richie a gift that enables him to elegantly describe complex movements like the Japanese New Wave in accessible terms.<sup>19</sup> But, unlike Richie, Desser shows a consciousness of methodology, even though, at the end of the day, cultural explanations take precedence.<sup>20</sup>

In a reflectionist study, French, English, or Japanese film is basically the way it is because that is how French, English, or Japanese people and their society are.

In this correspondence model, documentary and nonfiction reflections do not count for much because the prime examples are feature films. The Japanese film industry, like most others, is based on box-office revenue, which in turn depends on features becoming popular. Yet, curiously, for reflectionist-minded critics and historians, popularity enters the equation but is by no means the most important determinant. The emphasis for these critics is on films that present a clear picture of national psychology in its most orthodox, typical, and artistically worthy forms. Reflectionist critics look for what is special about a national cinema, its specificity, through the lens of national specificity. Because of its cultural determinism, this approach is sometimes circular: why is Japanese cinema special? Because it is Japanese. It also tends toward connoisseurship because it takes for granted the essential stability of the “Japanese” designation. In contrast, the succeeding dialogic model brought Japanese cinema to bear on the West, culturally and cinematically. More specifically, during the 1970s, the West both discovered Ozu and became aware of Japan as a new international power.<sup>21</sup>

**Dialogic: Cinema as Interaction.** The work of Noël Burch and David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson are frequently opposed, but they are united in using a dialogic framework in their respective studies of Japanese film. To the question of why Japanese cinema is special, the answer is because it relates in arresting ways to Western cinema. For Burch, Japanese cinema is diametrically opposed to Western film because Japanese signifying practices pose a material critique of Western logic, logocentrism, and aesthetics. Japanese cinema—its presentationalism, privileging of surface over depth, its anti-illusionism, and overall artificiality—has an affinity with the Brechtian avant-garde in the West and with early cinema before 1910. As Burch notes, “What was a mass cultural attitude in Japan was a deeply subversive vanguard practice in the Occident.”<sup>22</sup> These comparisons are meant to exalt Japan and its cinema, to the denigration of Hollywood and European commercial cinema.

Burch’s oppositional vision of Japanese cinema reverses the cultural determinism of reflectionist models. If reflectionists have trouble seeing cinematic trees for the cultural forest, Burch twists Japanese culture to fit his view of cinema. He wrenches Japanese signifying practices from their social and political location in favor of an overdetermined aestheticism. This rhetorical move is an example of what Karatani Kojin calls “aestheticism,” a tendency for Europeans to damn Asian cultures with the faint praise of arts and craftsmanship.<sup>23</sup>

Japanese cinema may be useful in supporting Burch’s commitment to poststructuralism, but Japanese culture can interfere with his critique. If so, then so much the worse for Japanese culture. As Edward Said puts it (paraphrasing Karl Marx), “If the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux* for the poor Orient.”<sup>24</sup> Citing Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*, Burch declares himself uninterested in the real Japan, to the chagrin of scholars of Japanese literature and history.

Some critics of Burch accuse him of opportunism and Orientalist essentialism, attempting to refashion Japanese culture into a semiotic utopia. The counterargument is that Japanese culture, including its cinema, possesses immanent

meanings proper to itself.<sup>25</sup> For the most part, Asian studies professionals took Burch at his word and regarded his rendition of “Japan” as a singular fancy. However, Burch’s polemics, while imaginative, are questionable at best. At worst, they reinforce age-old stereotypes about the Far East and outmoded cultural binaries.

In contrast to Burch’s poststructuralism, we have Bordwell’s modernism. Bordwell is more empirical than Burch, and for him, Japanese cinema is not diametrically opposed but dialectically related to film in the West. If for Burch Japanese film in the 1930s reflected a refusal to accept American cinema, for Bordwell it was a cautious salutation. Bordwell and Kristin Thompson propose that Ozu, that most “Japanese” of all directors, was a modernist.<sup>26</sup> Criticized for cultural imperialism, they were likened to art historians who pronounced African tribal masks modernist based on purely formal similarities to Pablo Picasso and other European artists. Bordwell and Thompson’s studies demonstrate Ozu’s “parametric” use of style along with his ultra-rigorous narrative patterns. Parametric (a term borrowed from Burch’s *Theory of Film Practice*) means an experimental, playful style marked by systematic use of technique outside its narrative functions. This makes Ozu comparable to European modernists like Jacques Tati and Robert Bresson, not because his work looks like theirs but because it shows a complete mastery of classical Hollywood norms plus a separate, puzzle-like formal system of its own. Ozu could not have devised his system without intimate familiarity with Hollywood filmmaking norms, while African mask makers never saw Picasso.<sup>27</sup>

A dialogic orientation is based on a textualist assumption rather than on a culturalist one.<sup>28</sup> Whereas Burch is unconcerned with empirical Japanese culture, Bordwell and Thompson *are* concerned but do not think culture determines cinema. Bordwell’s *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* is full of details about Japanese culture: social, political, economic, literary, studio histories, biographical material, and facts of everyday life in Japanese cities. But for him culture is a limited and indirect explanation for Japanese film style. Instead, he explains style as the product of choices made by directors, producers, and spectators, all working within the intertextual norms available at a given historical moment. Thus, Bordwell and Thompson call their method historical poetics, or neo-formalism (from the Russian formalists).

Burch, Bordwell, Thompson, Edward Branigan, Stephen Heath, and other dialogic critics, including Donald Kirihaara on Mizoguchi and Turim on Oshima, exemplify a historically specific “use-value” of Japanese cinema. This expression, used by Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, is a poignant reminder of the institutional constraints of Japanese cinema studies.<sup>29</sup> At a 1999 workshop on Japanese cinema, Yoshimoto gave a prognosis for the field. Unfortunately, he maintained that Japanese cinema today is not as useful to film scholars as it once was, even though there are dozens of intriguing films and more people interested in Japanese cinema than ever before. The implication is that no matter how prolific or exciting Japanese cinema may be, unless it is made to engage the interests and priorities of Western scholarly paradigms, its utility to the field of cinema studies is limited.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of methodological differences, dialogic critics reconstructed Japanese cinema in a way that addressed the problems of film studies generally in the late

1970s and 1980s. They put Japanese cinema securely on the film studies map. Japanese cinema was variously construed through Marxist, poststructuralist, neo-formalist, cognitivist, and psychoanalytic agendas, depending on the problems occupying scholars at the time. Feminist criticism was also prominent, though usually quite reflectionist, as in the work of Joan Mellen.<sup>31</sup>

Ozu was crucial because he was “discovered” at a time when cinema studies was trying to account for film form in a way that did not consign it to incommensurable cultural differences (e.g., Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film*).<sup>32</sup> It is no accident that the Bordwell, Thompson, and Janet Staiger volume *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* appeared shortly before Bordwell’s book on Ozu. Bordwell configured Ozu in terms of a poetics based on classical norms. In Bordwell’s later study, Ozu provided a stylistic paradigm that reconciled the “aestheticcentrist” poststructuralism of Burch with a universalizing notion of classical norms, even though the “classical” Hollywood cinema was just one of several modes assimilated in prewar Japan. As a modernist, parametric director, Ozu supports the plausibility of the models of narrational modes Bordwell outlined in *Narration in the Fiction Film* because Ozu’s innovations cut across cultural divisions.<sup>33</sup> For Burch, Ozu and Japanese cinema were useful because they functioned as a kind of “primitive” cinema unwittingly critical of what he called “zero-degree filming” or the “institutional mode of representation.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Mizoguchi was useful in explaining larger problems in mainstream film studies. Mizoguchi had long been known and praised by critics in France, well before the appreciation of Ozu in the mid-1970s.<sup>35</sup> Two important articles on Mizoguchi by Bordwell and Donald Kiriara appeared in 1983.<sup>36</sup> Robert Cohen published articles in 1978 and 1981.<sup>37</sup> The utility of Mizoguchi for Cohen is revealed in his doctoral dissertation.<sup>38</sup> Like Ozu, Mizoguchi was rounded up into the corral of contemporary critical and theoretical problems in film language, semiotics, and modernism.

Since the mid-1980s, the circulation of national cinemas has accelerated with globalization, even as Asian film industries reel from Hollywood’s onslaught. Now, national cinemas and national cultures seem to bleed into one another, producing what I call contamination models.

**Contamination: Film as Syncretism.** This idea concedes that national cultures are fabricated piecemeal out of available bits and fragments, often from outside national borders. Nationality arises out of difference; it only becomes an issue, and can only be constituted, in relation to others. But this is a relative difference, not an absolute, binary difference. Contamination models avoid binary categories like black-white, east-west, or *uchi-soto* (inside-outside, a distinction beloved by cultural anthropologists working on Japan). A national cinema, then, is not a one-way reflection of a culture, but neither is there only a dialectical, intertextual relation between cinemas and cultures. Instead, national cinema is both of these, a reflection and a dialogue, plus the next stage in its evolution. As an ongoing historical process, the study of Japanese cinema should accommodate new historical data as well as changing historiographical paradigms.

One such paradigm is globalization and transnational cultures, in which national specificities jostle, catalyze, and “thicken” without eclipsing or canceling

one another out and without synthesizing into some new postnational order.<sup>39</sup> While globalization might signify national disintegration or fading, like a photograph left too long in the sun, more likely it sparks nationality and nationalism as well, if only because globalization focuses attention on the syncretic construction of nationality during its formation. A historical work like Louise Young's *Japan's Total Empire* shows how annexation of a puppet colony transformed Japan, the colonial subject, as much as it did its Manchurian object.<sup>40</sup> Another example is a volume on Taisho Japan (1900–1930, roughly) called *Japan's Competing Modernities*. This book adds to the growing literature on Japanese popular culture by including essays on radio audiences in colonial Korea and popular songs as distinct media in 1930s Tokyo.<sup>41</sup> In both these books, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism are approached piecemeal, as it were, inductively documenting the links between subjects' everyday lives and large-scale programs imposed by authorities. The writers aim to show how greatly national and colonial orthodoxies depend on the consent, acquiescence, or outright domination of outsiders like colonial settlers, Koreans, and the indigenous Ainu. Orthodoxies of Japaneseness apparently need outsiders.<sup>42</sup>

These books employ a historiography sorely needed by national cinema studies: an understanding of nationality that is fabricated through struggle, negotiation, and pressure from the margins and also a thorough grounding in the language, scholarship, and historical archives of Japan. The inclusion of Japanese-language research within Western film studies is not just a matter of language facility and translation but of more struggle, requiring strenuous effort to reconcile divergent research paradigms and institutional horizons.<sup>43</sup>

Another important anthology of essays is the collection *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*. Sheldon Lu's introduction proposes a revisiting of national cinema "backwards" from a transnational, syncretic point of view.<sup>44</sup> The whole history of Chinese cinema is thereby retroactively changed by heightened attention to new questions. My *Picturing Japaneseness* was conceived and written with this in mind: Japanese national identity as patchwork, salvaged from bits and pieces using cultural technologies (films embedded in the charged modernity of the 1930s) that produce as well as reflect that identity. If Donald Richie focuses on reflections of Japanese character in films, and David Bordwell activates parametric, modernist potentials of Japanese film, then a contemporary researcher ought to be contaminated by paradigms and institutions of globalization—regardless of what historical period is under scrutiny. There is no doubt that all three models remain Orientalist, in Said's broad sense, although the concept of Orientalism itself necessarily changes under contemporary pressures and critiques.

There is a distinction to be made between globalization as a paradigm and older, descriptive terms like internationalization or cross-cultural communication.<sup>45</sup> Globalization is not *kokusai-ka*, the Japanese buzzword for "internationalization" that has persisted since the 1960s. New technologies of globalization provide instantaneous transmission of market information, blanketing the globe with American-style popular entertainment, news, food, and fashions. An incessant transplantation of

communities, commodities, and corporate activities across national borders is the object and consequence of this global information explosion, resulting in new varieties of exploitation and alienation, as well as emerging identities. Cultural studies, along with the related fields of media studies, commodity culture, and identity politics, took the challenge of analyzing this late-capitalist development.<sup>46</sup> In the term “globalization” there is a convergence between a geopolitical process and an attempt to model and grasp it conceptually.<sup>47</sup> National identities and nationhood, already a subject of great interest in British cultural studies, tend to be recast as malleable, ambiguous, and uncontainable by nation-states. Colonial and postcolonial histories have become central in these discussions.

Concepts such as diaspora (Stuart Hall), hybridity (Homi Bhabha), and “double-consciousness” (Paul Gilroy, after W.E.B. Du Bois) illustrate the theoretical and historical complications of perceiving nationality as a contentious process. Power is always at stake in defining the nation, including the terms with which defining gestures are made. Hall, Bhabha, and Gilroy take issue with the ethnocentric assumptions of an earlier generation of British cultural studies scholars, such as Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams.<sup>48</sup> Leela Gandhi writes that “diasporic thought finds its apotheosis in the ambivalent, transitory, culturally contaminated and borderline *figure* of the exile, caught in a historical limbo between home and the world.”<sup>49</sup> However, these postcolonial revisionists are themselves challenged by writers from another margin, Australia: Meaghan Morris, Ien Ang, Tony Bennett, and Graeme Turner. As someone who engages film studies and national cinema particularly, Turner is an interesting example of the contamination of national cinema by postcolonial cultural studies.<sup>50</sup>

Proponents of contamination assumptions, through concepts of globalization and cultural studies, see national cinemas as made up of “foreign” matter (hence the vaguely unsanitary sense of the term),<sup>51</sup> but the model does not shrink from work done with reflectionist or dialogic premises.

These three models need not be incompatible, competing frameworks but may be permeable assumptions that can supplement one another. From a historical point of view, national cinemas were not only contaminated but also initiated by foreign agencies (e.g., Lumière, Edison). Medium specificity is contaminated by intertextual and intercultural flows from other arts and social practices, and the contamination model itself is permeable to material from reflectionist and dialogic frameworks, not to mention crossings into Asian studies, cultural studies, and other fields.<sup>52</sup>

Japanese cinema is a strong, if not an incorrigible, national form in an age of global proximity and contamination. It provides cases, such as Kitano, of the retail(or)ing of national images, rather than just cutting them to the measure of globalization and electronic reproduction (Fig. 3). Globalization is not simply corporate homogenization; nor is it a transcendence of historical contradictions between national rivalries. It is a paradox, signifying for Stuart Hall “a contradiction at the heart of modernity which has tended to give nationalism and its particularisms *a peculiar significance and force* at the heart of the so-called new transnational global order.”<sup>53</sup>



Figure 3. On the set of *Hana-Bi* (*Fireworks*, 1997), director-writer-actor Kitano Takeshi retail(or)s national images, rather than just cutting them to the measure of globalization. Courtesy Milestone Film.

**Cut to the Cannes Film Festival, 1997.** The *Caméra d'Or* prize for new directors was taken by a young Japanese woman, Naomi Sento, for her film *Suzaku*. Imamura shared the grand prize with Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, although when the winners were announced the veteran Japanese director had already returned home. Imamura is a director who exposes the primitive underbelly of modern Japan, stripping away its pretenses to civility and culture. Despite *Unagi's* “anthropological” themes, which reduce human motivation to animal urges, Imamura, like Kitano, chases after notions of redemption. Kitano won his big prize a few months later in Venice, but the international press had already been praising him for some years. *Unagi*, made by an old master of Japanese cinema, is a countryside film that gets down to primordial basics of mud and fornication; *Hana-Bi* is suburban and suave but by no means domesticated. There is a generation gap, moreover, between Imamura/Oshima and Kitano. Both Imamura and Oshima are established masters, major figures in the Japanese New Wave of the 1960s, who experiment with radical politics in their films. Compared to them, Kitano is a political novice, although his media persona is that of provocateur.

When informed of his award at Cannes, Imamura put it in the context of a still younger generation (like that of Kawase/Sento), the dropouts and art students struggling to work in the media. He paid his respects to the “bad boys” working on the fringes of the film industry, in television, pornographic movies, and amateur formats.

Since the early 1990s, Japanese society has begun to unravel as a result of economic, political, and social factors such as the upsurge in violent crime, especially

among youth. As a result, Imamura says, angry young filmmakers started scripting and shooting interesting stories. Imamura says that to make good films, it pays to be “bad”: “I wish I had recognized it at the time, but Japanese cinema went downhill after the 1960s because all the badness went out of this society. Today many young scriptwriters dye their hair and pierce various parts of their bodies and are thoroughly bad. . . . But they are also the ones who produce the most interesting scripts because in cinema badness is good.”<sup>54</sup> What Imamura means by badness are ways of perception not beholden to anybody, a will to expression heedless of the judgment of society.

**Genre, Festival Gangsters, and *Hana-Bi*.** *Hana-Bi* should be discussed in light of its “badness,” not its aesthetics but its reinvestment in a peculiar national, and maybe nationalist, iconography. Kitano does not censor himself or water down his style to suit the international market, but he does depart in *Hana-Bi* from past practice by insistently invoking Japanese tradition. This is the first film in which he has done this, and he does it by employing gender difference as a way to neutralize or naturalize some of the charged images of the national.

Kitano has a strong, cold vision. He makes mostly cop and gangster pictures, but they are unconventional in their reticence. They are quiet films, with static, flat compositions and minimal dialogue. They take a piecemeal approach to narrative, asking viewers to puzzle together seemingly disconnected episodes. He has a touching fondness for the details of everyday life, the commonplace routines that characterize Japanese behavior. They are punctuated by moments of startling violence, magnified by their uncoupling from narrative chains of cause and effect (Fig. 4). Sometimes the injuries are as funny as they are agonizing. When Kitano wants to shock, the viewer is unprepared; we never see the brutality coming because of his habit of cutting to the “punchline” before the setup is done. *Hana-Bi*'s opening scene in a carpark is an example, where the impact of a fist is elided, yet somehow also accentuated.

Working primarily in the gangster (*yakuza*) genre, Kitano employs gangster conventions and narratives toward a reworking of familiar elements.<sup>55</sup> Mob hierarchy is balanced by an eccentric individual (Kitano usually takes the latter role); *yakuza* trappings, such as tattoos, sunglasses, and silk shirts, are ridiculed; and swaggering toughs are humiliated by quiet, lethal loners. Suicidal veterans like Murakawa, the hero of *Sonatine*, are rendered playful and slightly foolish, organizing mock sumo wrestling bouts on an Okinawa beach. Without warning, he begins another game, Russian roulette, in the same spirit of goofy fun. The abrupt juxtaposition of comedy with violence leads to a flattening of affect. For spectators, the laughter in *Sonatine* is nervous, once we witness how a setup timed for comic release tilts suddenly into a casual drowning. Another example of this tension is a brief moment in *Hana-Bi* when Yoshitaka Nishi (Takeshi Kitano), dressed as a street cop, playfully aims his revolver at a laughing workman. The spectator's superior knowledge is doubly manipulated. We know who Nishi really is (the laborer does not), but we also know that the narrator is fond of throwing curves in story and mood.



Figure 4. *Hana-Bi* is punctuated by moments of startling violence. Ex-cop Yoshitaka Nishi (Takeshi Kitano) robs a bank in order to look after his leukemia-stricken wife, and flashes of brutality shatter the placid surfaces of the film. Courtesy Milestone Film.

Kitano's unpredictable, sadistic patterns of behavior and storytelling represent a kind of hazing of younger characters—and audiences—attached to him. His bullying tricks are also sexualized, whether Kitano's appetites are homoerotic (*Violent Cop*, 1989, his first film) or sadomasochistic (*Boiling Point*, 1990). In these “training” sessions, a crazy veteran both teaches and exploits youngsters—often at the same time. Here we see a version of a traditional Japanese relationship, *oyabun-kobun* (boss-apprentice), which is common in both *yakuza* and *samurai* films. The parallels go beyond film genres; such ties also govern the structure of Kitano's own *gundan* or “mob.” Coming of age through humiliation is clearest in *Kids' Return* (1996), in which parallels are made between the worlds of *yakuza*, boxing, *manzai* comedy, and high school.

More pertinent even than the *yakuza* genre is the way it is inflected by international film festivals and revisionist gangster cycles associated with American director Quentin Tarantino. Like Tarantino, Kitano debuted his film on the festival circuit, garnering awards and word of mouth for six months before distributing it in Japan. *Hana-Bi* is similar to *Pulp Fiction* (1994) in that it was marketed as a festival prize winner but did not lose its genre appeal.<sup>56</sup> The violence, comedy, and romance of a *yakuza* vehicle are exploited together with its prestige as winner of the Golden Lion at Venice. The imitation of the *Pulp Fiction* formula is exemplified not only by its many variations but also by what could be called a “festival-gangster” genre (e.g.,

Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, 1998, and its sequel), which combines familiar genre elements with "exotic" locales and a hip music score.<sup>57</sup> *Hana-Bi* boasts all of these, as well as a director explicitly linked with Tarantino and Scorsese—via interviews, criticism, and advertising—more than with Imamura, Oshima, or *yakuza* director Fukasaku Kinji.<sup>58</sup>

Miramax's video packaging of *Sonatine*, for instance, features the critical blurb "Goodfellas" as prominent as the title, while Tarantino's face and logo dominate the cover.<sup>59</sup> Kitano continues the transnationalization of *yakuza* with his current project, *Brother*, a British-Japanese co-production set in Los Angeles. Mode of production and genre both appear to be expanded and "contaminated" by the globalization of entertainment marketing.

How, then, should we understand the invocation of Japanese traditional icons in *Hana-Bi*? Following David James, we might regard it as a heuristic device, but one that is flawed. *Hana-Bi* has an intricate pattern that goes beyond Kitano's earlier pictures; one might call it "pointillist," like the mosaics painted by Georges Seurat. The film is literally pointillist because one of the characters, Horibe, an ex-cop forced to retire after a near-fatal shooting, takes up painting. The evolution of his pictorial style is a crucial theme because it tracks his fascination with death, and especially with suicide. The theme of a Japanese artist's infatuation with suicide calls up all kinds of echoes in literature, theater, and art history (Chikamatsu Monzaemon, Akutagawa Ryunosuke, and Mishima Yukio, to name only three writers). An ambitious device, this premise is unorthodox for a cop film, but it is integral to *Hana-Bi*.

This theme parallels the story of Horibe's partner, Nishi, who robs a bank in order to look after his leukemia-stricken wife. The two stories, plus a number of subplots, are shuffled in time and space, backward and forward, so that one is invited to work out hypotheses before the film's resolution. There is a certain urgency and tension to this activity because of the flashes of brutality that shatter the otherwise placid surfaces of the film. Kitano's masklike, twitching face is a disturbing token of this tension. In interviews with the foreign press, Kitano has likened his "neutral" faces to those of traditional theatrical masks, like those used in *Noh* (Fig. 5).

The structural pointillism of Kitano's handling of time and space is a real innovation in the crime-film genre. Suspense is generated less from a teleology of cause and effect than the chance to puzzle out different spatiotemporal pieces and entertain plausible relations between them. The characters constantly play with puzzles and decks of cards, as well as with the disconnected pieces of their lives. These devices are reminiscent of Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai's use of time in *Days of Being Wild* (1990), another influential festival-gangster film.

**Gendering the National.** Finally, Kitano invokes Japanese tradition in a direct, iconographic way. Images of Mt. Fuji, *kare-sansui* (raked sand) gardens, a famous Buddhist temple, cherry blossoms, a Japanese *ryokan* (inn), and other Japanese landscapes not only are metonymic, standing in for Japanese tradition in much the way palm trees or the Hollywood sign represent Los Angeles, but also are strongly



Figure 5. Kitano has likened his “neutral” faces to those of traditional theatrical masks, like those used in *Noh. Hana-Bi* (1997). Courtesy Milestone Film.

coded as timeless, sacred, and feminine. They are idealizations, and their inclusion in a modified gangster film is a kind of deviance. As such, they are disconcerting, a bold detour from the generic and narrative patterns of Kitano’s other films. According to Kitano, he mustered the courage to include these images only by processing them through gender:

How shall I put this . . . If it were two men standing in front of Mt. Fuji, there would be nothing more absurd. But in this film it’s a couple. I figured it was all right if it was a woman standing next to you. If it’s a couple going to a typical tourist spot, it works all right, especially if the characters are loaded with dark pasts. Like a terminal illness.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, the presence of a woman warrants the inclusion of these images, with their Japanese conventions of evanescence and melancholy. Without a woman, they would just be “absurd.” What is it about women, especially when they are dying, that naturalizes the codes of traditional Japanese landscapes and rescues them from absurdity? If it is a couple standing before Mt. Fuji, then “it works all right”? 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. Women and children are used to domesticate an invocation of highly charged Japanese traditions. This feminization is in sharp counterpoint to Beat Takeshi’s “bad boy” television persona in Japan. His provocative misogyny and xenophobia are not readily accessible to global audiences for Kitano’s films.

This is the first film in which Kitano has taken on such potent symbols of Japaneseness, and he gives them a casual, once-over-lightly treatment. The doomed couple discovers such things as the temple bell and *kare-sansui* garden ingenuously, like foreign tourists. These “traditional” icons are not treated with reverence or patriotism. Instead, they function as reminders of vitality for characters who face death. Because they are brought into the pointillist orbit of the painter, and because they furnish hope for the last days of the ex-cop Nishi and his wife, these national symbols are appropriated for personal, therapeutic ends.

However, it is wrong to assume that the typical feminized tourist Japan “works all right.” In spite of their ostensible innocence, as if discovered by orphans or foreigners, these objects are “cheap shots,” exploitations of stock images. Presented as *objets trouvés*, they seem gratuitous and unsettling, just as Kitano’s gruesome brutality can be. They are semireligious icons, but the characters do not recognize them or they ignore them. They are political, highly charged invocations of myth, and they upset the order of the mosaic so painstakingly built up. It is possible that Kitano is trying, like Oshima, to be iconoclastic, but these national references are introduced rather late in the film. It seems doubtful that Kitano is taking aim at them, because they work as set pieces to enhance mood. These signifiers are not burlesqued; indeed, they are meant to be taken straight, and they “contaminate” the freshness of *Hana-Bi*’s overall design, giving it a right-wing taint.

Someone familiar with Beat Takeshi’s television work might wonder about the casual link in *Hana-Bi* between personal redemption and national iconography. Why would Kitano invoke such hackneyed representations? Why the attempts at cultural sanitation? Could not national identity be represented more as a challenge, something more consistent with the strokes from Kitano’s paint box? Could there be some shortage in Kitano’s palette, something missing, perhaps, in the vocabulary of nationality? Unlike Oshima, who found international success by deconstructing Japanese ideology, Kitano found it useful as ornamentation and packaging for a modest redemption story that enjoyed unexpected international triumph. Kitano is not just telling a good story; he is selling Japanese film, but mostly he is selling himself, and doing this in a global market requires adjustments for global tastes. Adding dashes of “Japaneseness” to a brew that is already quite potent, like having Mt. Fuji in the background of a tragic couple, is little more than a flourish. Maybe the hope is that the “aestheticist” Orientalism of the global market will rub off on Japanese audiences, lending a form of “auto-Orientalism” (like Oshima’s *One Hundred Years*).

But such thinking is also a symptom of some intriguing representational blockages. There is a fundamental lack of consensus within Japan on the symbolic forms nationality should take. The most basic question of how Japan should be represented, particularly in Asia, has been systematically avoided since the postwar period. Existing forms of Japanese nationality are still inextricably linked to nationalism and imperialism and have never really been disavowed. So, in Stuart Hall’s “peculiar and forceful way,” *Hana-Bi* points toward an important contradiction: the need to express and sell a national identity that cannot even be faced. Icons of Japaneseness have a concrete history that no amount of disavowal, sanitation, or

domestication can erase. Their globalization and circulation in a worldwide market through Kitano's films may activate new connotations, but it does not cancel out the old ones. Kitano's attempt to use them as therapeutic ornaments and heuristic devices therefore seems naïve and a little fraudulent. *Hana-Bi*'s structure is just too fragile to carry that kind of weight.

This is not to say that *Hana-Bi* is a failure; the film is very satisfying but somehow unsatisfactory, unfulfilled. There is nothing ominous about its invocations of Japanese tradition, especially to the art-house market viewer who knows little of its director's incarnations within Japan. It would be misleading to conflate the auteur who made *Hana-Bi*, *Kid's Return* (1996), *Sonatine* (1996), and other interesting films with Beat Takeshi, the TV buffoon and razor-wire raconteur. That would be, as he says, "the death of me as a director," something that he has come close to doing to himself. I allude to his near-fatal traffic accident in 1994, but there is another sense of the death of Kitano. He describes the humbling experience of attending a screening of Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983), Kitano's big-screen acting debut, and hearing the audience burst into laughter at the sight of Beat Takeshi playing a sadistic POW camp guard.<sup>61</sup> At one point, the David Bowie character looks at Kitano and says, "Such a funny face, such beautiful eyes." Japanese audiences howled. But when Kitano the director started getting international notices and winning prizes, the Japanese responded more respectfully.

The resolution of these two bodies of work, those of Beat and Kitano Takeshi, is not just an academic exercise; the contradiction exemplifies the precariousness of Japan's global face, a face that lacks resolution. There is a highly productive yet volatile tension between dispersals of Japanese culture out into the global marketplace and the often agonizing social pressures at home to secure a consensus and seemingly out-of-reach prosperity. Kitano is at home in both spheres, yet he represents himself in mutually incompatible, even incomprehensible, dual registers. To a reporter at Cannes, he says, "The more you are Japanese, the more you will be universal—that's what Kurosawa said too."<sup>62</sup> For Kitano's Japanese fans and for those abroad, that incommensurable precariousness is just fine—for the time being.

**Coda.** Beat Takeshi's television show features foreigners who bark fluently, in Japanese. Are these two spheres—the global and the Japanese national—so incompatible after all? The motivation for inviting these foreigners is not necessarily to educate Japanese but to expose stereotypes of all kinds. Takeshi has apparently found a use-value for stereotypes, which is their public exhibition as highly profitable spectacles or entertainment measured in ratings and audience shares. People write in to complain and argue, but they still like the show and say they would like to see it expanded. People from embassies and consulates also write, cautioning the network that the expatriates on the show do not present true pictures of their countries. Some questions divide the "contestants," like whether the professional athlete from Brazil should be allowed to skip games to see the birth of his child (Fig. 2). But there are sometimes issues on which they agree: school shootings in Colorado, NATO raids on Kosovo, and so forth. America as global hegemony invites reinvestment in a national space from which to comment. What sort of space is this, at the

turn of the twenty-first century?<sup>9</sup> It is a Japanese space, overseen by Beat Takeshi, media prodigy, and it is articulated in the Japanese language, on Japanese television. But these are not Japanese people. Consequently, it seems that as Kitano domesticates the national for export in his films, he could also be “savaging” it at home, throwing it into a pit of antagonism in which it cannot help but fight for its life.

## Notes

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1. Mark Schilling, *Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997), 256. See also Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film* (New York: Weatherhill, 1999).
2. *Hana-Bi* press kit (New York: Milestone Film and Video, 1998), 13.
3. Maureen Turim, *The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 271.
4. James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 20.
5. Besides Kitano (whose film *Kikujiro* was an audience favorite at Cannes in 1999), Oshima, Imamura, Itami, and other big names discussed in this piece, a large number of younger Japanese filmmakers are getting recognition at festivals and in markets around the world. The 1999 Hong Kong International Film Festival held a special tribute to horror/thriller director Kurosawa Kiyoshi. Japanese films, such as *Bounce ko-Gals* (Harada Masato, 1997) and *Ring* (Nakata Hideo, 1998), do well in Hong Kong. At the 1998 Toronto festival, young Japanese filmmakers were the subject of a special program. But it is in Europe that mini-festivals devoted to Asian, particularly young Japanese, cinema are mushrooming. The London pan-Asian festival had its third successful year, and there are now new Asian specialty festivals in France and Italy. Kitano won an award for *Sonatine* at the 1993 Italian Taormina festival, although he did not know this until 1995, because of the highhandedness of Shochiku’s Okuyama Kazuyoshi. Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, 96. At the Rotterdam festival in 2000, there was an alternative overview of Japanese cinema under the title “No Cherry Blossoms,” which consisted of sixty titles ranging from *yakuza* and science fiction to *manga* and experimental films.
6. David E. James, “Toward a Geo-Cinematic Hermeneutics: Representations of Los Angeles in Non-Industrial Cinema—*Killer of Sheep* and *Water and Power*,” *Wide Angle* 20, no. 3 (July 1998): 24.
7. Interview, *Hana-Bi* press kit, 12. The “insurance” works the other way as well; in another interview, Kitano said his film work insulates him from the young competition coming up through the ranks in television. Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, 99.
8. Schilling, *Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture*, 254.
9. *Ibid.*, 256.
10. Itami had his face slashed by gangsters in 1992 after the release of his film *Minbo no Onna* (*The Gentle Art of Japanese Extortion*). In 1997, he killed himself after tabloids revealed his indiscretions with a young girl.

Kitano's international critical appeal might be clarified through comparison with Itami. Both take gangsters, at least in part, as their subjects. Both twist the conventions of the *yakuza* genre, the former toward art-film stylization, the latter toward lampoon. With respect to class and gender, however, the two part company. Kitano's romanticizing of gangsters is sympathetic, consistent with his masculinist, sometimes homoerotic, interest in outsiders and underdogs. Itami's ridicule of gangsters is part of a sharper indictment of corruption and authoritarian society, employing an aggressive, taxing woman (Miyamoto Nobuko) as his invariable alter-ego. In his directorial ethos, Itami is more feminist, more middle class, and more broad in his comic and visual style. This may tell us something about critical preferences in festival circuits. *Yakuza* burlesque may not go down as well as lonely robbers and cops. Taciturn, exquisitely framed gangster fantasies engage generic and stylistic norms on the festival circuit, as well as fulfilling (better than Itami) expectations about Japanese film.

11. *Yazhou Zhoukan* (Asia Weekly Magazine), May 31–June 6, 1999, 28–29.
12. Turim, *The Films of Oshima Nagisa*, 23; emphasis added.
13. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 4.
14. *Ibid.*, 26. Said singles out television, films, and electronic media as intensifying the “imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient.’” On the methodological concept of “exteriority,” see 20–21.
15. Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 13.
16. Adapted from Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japanese: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17–22.
17. Donald Kirihara, “Reconstructing Japanese Film,” in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 507.
18. Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film*, 23.
19. David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: Introduction to the Japanese New Wave* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
20. According to Desser, “We can see the danger of applying Western categories to Japanese revolutionary practice. The notion of individualism, retrograde to Western Marxists and other radicals, became a radical necessity juxtaposed against a culture which maintains its status quo by encouraging docility and a ‘transcendental’ view of life.” *Ibid.*, 211; emphasis added.
21. David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 16.
22. Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 115.
23. Karatani Kojin, “Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism,” *boundary 2* 25, no. 2 (summer 1998): 145–60. The French embrace of Mizoguchi, whose long-take moving camera forged a “traditional” landscape, was categorically rejected by Oshima and other younger directors. A case of “aestheticism” in cinema? See Turim, *The Films of Oshima Nagisa*, 20–23.
24. Said, *Orientalism*, 21. The epigraph to *Orientalism* comes from Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”
25. Kirihara, “Reconstructing Japanese Film,” 512; Joseph Murphy, “Re-reading Burch,” Web site, <<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/jmurphy/BURCHfile/BurchIntro.html>>; and Brett de Bary, review essay, *Journal of Japanese Studies* 8, no. 2 (1982): 405–10.

26. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "Space and Narrative in the Films of Ozu," *Screen* 17, no. 2 (summer 1976): 73–92, and Kristin Thompson, "Notes on the Spatial System of Ozu's Early Films," *Wide Angle* 1, no. 4 (1977): 8–17.
27. For a review of this debate, see Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order," in Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds., *Japan in the World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 338–53; originally published in *boundary 2* 18, no. 3 (fall 1991): 242–57.
28. Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995), 64–65.
29. See Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 7–50.
30. A telling detail: the film faculty at the University of Michigan, including some prominent visiting professors who in the past had written on Japanese cinema, conveyed their regrets for not attending the workshop, along with their feelings that they were not "specialists" and would leave the proceedings to scholars of literature, religion, and other area studies. Evidently, for them, the cinema part of the field "Japanese cinema" had dropped out of the equation. This workshop had been called precisely to reflect on this apparent disciplinary shift—or abdication, depending on one's point of view.
31. Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan through Its Cinema* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
32. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
33. According to Bordwell, "A genre varies significantly between periods and social formations; a mode tends to be more fundamental, less transient and more pervasive. In this spirit, I will consider modes of narration to transcend genres, schools, movements, and entire national cinemas." Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150. Ozu is crucial to Bordwell's model because Ozu's narrational system "resists interpretation" (289; see also 76, 82, 310, and 317). For Burch, early Ozu resists "realist" readings because they "are too highly informed with artifice." Burch, *To the Distant Observer*, 278. According to Burch, Ozu works like a photographic negative of Hollywood realism. Murphy, "Re-reading Burch," Web site.
34. Burch, *To the Distant Observer*, 66.
35. "Trois interviews de Mizoguchi," *Cahiers du cinéma* 116 (February 1961): 15–21.
36. David Bordwell, "Mizoguchi and the Evolution of Film Language," 107–15, and Don Kirihiro, "Kabuki, Cinema, and Mizoguchi Kenji," 97–106, in Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp, eds., *Film Language* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983).
37. Robert Cohen, "Mizoguchi and Modernism," *Sight and Sound* 47, no. 2 (spring 1978): 110–18, and "Toward a Theory of Japanese Narrative," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6, no. 2 (spring 1981): 181–200.
38. Robert Cohen, "Textual Poetics in the Films of Mizoguchi: A Structural Semiotics of Japanese Narrative" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1983).
39. See Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson, eds., *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), esp. Featherstone and Lash, "Globalization, Modernity and the Spatialization of Social Theory: An Introduction," 1–24. Whether globalization is best understood in cultural terms or in social scientific systems is discussed here. It also deals with the temporal conditions (premodern, modern, postmodern) assumed to hold for globalization.

40. Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
41. Sharon Minichiello, ed., *Japan's Competing Modernities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).
42. The question of Japan itself as an outsider, problematizing many assumptions about postmodernity and globalization, is taken up in books such as Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootyan, eds., *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989) and *Japan in the World* (Duke University Press, 1993). Roland Robertson says the concept of "glocalization" (*dochaku-ka*, "indigenization") was devised in 1980s Japanese business circles to increase their market share abroad. Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson, *Global Modernities*, 28.
43. Criticism of Japanese cinema in Western languages referenced other Western writing and mostly disregarded Japanese-language commentary. This was partly because so few film scholars were literate in Japanese but also because of a prevailing notion that a film text is a self-contained object (cf. New Criticism) that can be understood apart from its discursive webs and cultural functions. Another factor was the reluctance of Japanese-language and culture specialists to take cinema and "mass culture" seriously. All of these limitations are being overcome, but it may already be too late. See Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical," 347–49.
44. Sheldon Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997). The other essays in the book sadly do not follow through on Lu's interesting conception.
45. On globalization as an international consolidation of Hollywood industries, see Tino Balio, "'A Major Presence in All of the World's Important Markets': The Globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s," in Steve Neale and Murray Smith, eds., *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), 58–73. A more theoretical, political account of globalization is given in M. Medhi Semati and Patty J. Sotirin, "Hollywood's Transnational Appeal: Hegemony and Democratic Potential?" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26, no. 4 (winter 1999): 176–88.
46. Stuart Hall is suspicious of identity politics because of its potential cooptation into "multicultural" ideologies. These can be used to split off and exclude ethnic or sexual minorities, especially in America, consolidating a constantly shrinking, hegemonic definition of the national. Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (1990): 21–23.

This "multicultural" discourse can be seen in many of the following films about corruption or prejudice in Japan: Harada Masato (*Jubaku* [*Spellbound*, 1999], *Bounce ko-Gals*, 1997, *Kamikaze Taxi*, 1995); Sai Yoichiro (*All under the Moon*, 1993); Yanagimachi Mitsuo (*About Love, Tokyo*, 1992); Matsuoka Joji (*Twinkle*, 1992); Nakajima Takehiro (*Okoge*, 1992); Suo Masayuki (*Sumo Do, Sumo Don't*, 1992; *Shall We Dance?*, 1996); and Iwai Shunji (*Swallowtail Butterfly*, 1996). These films were preceded by earlier films about Asians in Japan, such as *Beijing Watermelon* (Obayashi Nobuhiko, 1990) and *World Apartment Horror* (Otomo Katsuhiro, 1991).

47. Robertson writes that when the issue is globalization, the distinction between "reality" and "theory" is ultimately untenable. Robertson, "Glocalization," 28.
48. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization," in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 394, 399. Hall makes points about the pitfalls of ethnocentricity

- and the insularity of cultural studies repeatedly. See also Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, "On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies," in Morley and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, 376–81.
49. Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 132. Paul Gilroy's sense of "double-consciousness" is outlined in contrast to that of Cornel West, who locates it with Du Bois and American pragmatism. Gilroy, "Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism," in Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, 197. In the same essay, Gilroy strenuously objects to the "dogmatic" Euro-American obsession with nationality (188).
  50. Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. chap. 2, and "'It Works for Me': British Cultural Studies, Australian Cultural Studies, Australian Film," in Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, 640–53.
  51. Cf. Stuart Hall's appropriation of Said's metaphor "worldliness": "the 'dirtiness' of [cultural studies]: the dirtiness of the semiotic game. . . . I'm trying to return the project of cultural studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below." Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, 278.
  52. An issue of *Asian Cinema* has two articles on Japanese cinema whose titles alone reveal reflectionist and contamination assumptions: Keiko I. McDonald, "Images of Americans in Postwar Japanese Cinema," 1–17, and Aaron Gerow, "A Scene at the Threshold: Liminality in the Films of Kitano Takeshi," *Asian Cinema* 10, no. 2 (spring/summer 1999): 107–15. The latter is about Kitano's preoccupation with liminality, especially the space between shots, between death and life, stillness and motion, Japan and the foreign, self and other. Thanks to Aaron Gerow for posting this information on the Kine Japan list.
  53. Stuart Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation," *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 3 (October 1993): 353–4; emphasis added.
  54. Velisarios Kattoulas, "A Second Flowering of Japanese Filmmaking," *International Herald Tribune*, July 8, 1997, 20
  55. *Yakuza* films are distinct from gangster films; David Desser goes so far as to say they "owe nothing to the West," an overstatement showing the priority he places on Japanese culture. Desser, *Reframing Japanese Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), xiv. Yet to say *yakuza* and gangster genres developed relatively independently and that *yakuza* films have a strong affinity with Japanese feudalism does not prevent us from outlining generic resemblances: gang affiliations as surrogate family; rites of initiation and belonging; romanticizing of outlaw life; fetishizing of violence, and so on. An interesting example would be Ozu's *yotomono* (hoodlum) cycle of crime pictures from the 1930s. These clearly owe a lot to the West, although they are admittedly different from orthodox *yakuza* pictures, which are a product mainly of the 1960s.
  56. Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood," in Neale and Smith, *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, 81.
  57. The music of Joe Hisaishi, who is a regular collaborator on Kitano's scores, has crossed over into its own considerable popularity.
  58. Fukasaku Kinji was the focus of a special tribute at Rotterdam in 2000.
  59. Miramax's video packaging of *Shall We Dance?* (*Suo Masayuki*) suppresses its Japanese origins by simply cutting off the figures above the waist, leaving only two pairs of legs with the tagline "He's an overworked accountant. She's an accomplished dancer. Passion is about to find two unlikely partners." The company also cut twenty minutes of footage for its American release. Miramax tends to buy American rights to Asian

pictures like *Sonatine*, *The Princess Mononoke*, and certain Hong Kong films, then, apparently lacking faith in the commercial potential of Asian material for North American audiences, it shelves them for months and sometimes years.

60. Makoto Shinozaki, interview with Kitano Takeshi, *Studio Voice*, November 1997 (excerpt, *Hana-Bi* press kit). Here Kitano explicitly compares his landscapes in *Hana-Bi* to Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983).
61. Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Cinema*, 96.
62. Joan Dupont, "Two Faces of Kitano: Director Feels at Home in Tragedy or Comedy," *International Herald Tribune*, May 22, 1999, 20.