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Kitano Takeshi (review)

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of a society where you *couldn't* speak out, or if you did, you ran the gravest risks to your freedom. One doesn't get any sense of this profound social context from reading *Bird*. There is a *voulu* element to the author's procedure here; apparently it's still not the "done thing," in certain circles, to mention the wickedness of the system. Yet one is talking about Soviet communism, after all, not the watered down Western European version; and in these matters the responsible critic, in my opinion, shouldn't beat about the bush. Why be more backward on the issue than Tarkovsky was? It is only one of several large issues that *Bird* isn't willing to face candidly, including the twin topics of spirituality and religion. Whenever we come near these matters, warning lights go on and alarm bells start ringing. Yet they are central to an understanding of Tarkovsky, and not impossible to talk about sympathetically, even if, as a critic, you don't necessarily subscribe to the filmmaker's precise system of beliefs. *Bird* doesn't write about religion in a sophisticated way, as something which, being part of culture—and a huge part of culture—it's reasonable to have an allegiance to.

The author of *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* is an explicator, and an erudite one. But that is not quite the same thing as being a critic. The films of Tarkovsky are admired by *Bird*, but not appreciated artistically: he doesn't convey how wondrous they are. It is a paradox. Evidently, few people know more about the movies than he does; but the greatness of their utterance, in the last resort, eludes him. *

Kitano Takeshi

by Aaron Gerow. British Film Institute

2007. \$85.95 hardcover; \$25.95 paper. 264 pages

by DAISUKE MIYAO

The assumption of auteur theory is that the films an auteur has directed can be analyzed to uncover recurrent themes and aesthetic patterns that express the unique cohesion of his or her personal vision of the world, transcending historical contexts.¹ Kitano Takeshi's films, for example, include recurrent themes and aesthetic patterns such as the motif of dualities, the obsession with the color blue, and self-annihilating violence. In light of these

1 Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (1985): 12.

motifs, Kitano might be considered an auteur in the traditional sense. However, many have declared that if there is anything unchanging about Kitano it is that he is always changing. Thus, Kitano may be enshrined in the list of masters appreciated by contemporary cinephiles, but he also remains something of an outsider to auteur theory.

In his insightful book, Aaron Gerow undertakes the extremely difficult task of explicating the consistent inconsistency of Kitano Takeshi. Gerow calls Kitano the embodiment of “postmodern authorship.”² Gerow’s strategy is self-consciously dialogic: he refrains “from predetermining the ‘Kitano as consistent’ versus ‘Kitano as ever changing’ debate by dividing the book into two main sections: one devoted to summarizing accounts of the stylistic and thematic consistencies in his work, relating and sometimes problematising [the films] through historical and biographical context, and another that analyzes each film from *Violent Cop* [1989] to *Zatoichi* [2003] for its uniqueness—as well as for the problems it poses to the vision of the ever-changing auteur.”³

In his conclusion, however, Gerow tries to solidify Kitano’s “fluid identity.”⁴ Gerow claims, “With many dualities in Kitano’s cinema, especially in his later work, framing structures have operated to unite opposing terms through creating hierarchies or subsuming the terms in a transcendental third term. This is the case with the two Kitano Takeshis: in concert they have elevated Takeshi’s status to someone who is both an auteur and someone who self-consciously critiques auteurism, who pursues his unique worldview and yet escapes any who would define it, who is both a master director and can play with that very concept.”⁵ Despite using such a cliché in auteur theory as the “transcendental,” Gerow does not mean to elevate the status of Kitano as another auteur who is a little more sensitive to his status than other masters. In *Fireworks* (1997), Kitano’s own painting of an angel has wings, but Gerow calls Kitano an “angel with the broken wing . . . , a transcendental figure who cannot fly.”⁶

We might well contrast Gerow’s Kitano to Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history.” While the “angel of history” is transcendently “looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating,” his “wings . . . spread,” the broken-winged Kitano is entangled with history.⁷ Gerow’s book appears to be “postmodern” auteur criticism, but in fact, it is a historical project on Japanese cinema, media, and celebrity culture since the 1980s, which typically embodies what Alex Zahlen calls “the age of liquefaction.” Referring to Manuel Castells’s work, Zahlen argues that both the world and the network society are embedded in a “space of flows [of data, capital, goods, etc.],” which is also “dominating our economic, political and symbolic

2 Aaron Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 9.

3 Ibid., 11.

4 Ibid., 225.

5 Ibid., 220.

6 Ibid., 225.

7 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 278.

life.”⁸ I once argued that the division between Beat Takeshi as a performer and Kitano Takeshi as a filmmaker embodies “the gap between cinephilia and telephilia,” a means by which “Kitano problematizes the inevitable coexistence between TV and cinema in Japan.”⁹ The divisions are not so simple any longer. If identity is becoming more and more imagined via the media of recording and storing bodily data, aren’t we already doppelgängers of ourselves, insofar as recorded images and bodily data themselves are immortal? As long as we identify ourselves via recorded images and bodily data, is there any valid reflection of the self onto a projected self? And, in a period of media celebrities and reality shows, is the split between person and decorporealized shadow already collapsed into mediated self-imagery?¹⁰

In his later work, Kitano often mediates his own identity as a doll or a puppet: a static figure. In an interview, Kitano explicates, “I rarely see myself objectively. I do not think about what kind of man I am. After all, it is as if I am using two puppets. In reality, I am a director and use two puppets of myself in my film. They are simply my puppets and I cannot answer the question of which is most like myself. As a filmmaker I seem to be the closest to myself.”¹¹ Here, apparently, Kitano himself tries to solidify his status over his fluid images but in a transcendental manner.

The puppet motif is developed in *Takeshi’s* (2005), in which Kitano plays both “Beat Takeshi,” a famous actor named for his own real-life star image, and “Kitano,” a down-and-out actor who bears a striking resemblance to the famous Beat. A bobblehead doll of Beat also features prominently. Kitano drives a taxi as unexpected events occur: a naked black man with a searchlight on his forehead passes by the taxi; an *on-nagata* falls onto the front window; numerous corpses lie on the ground. When the taxi Kitano is driving falls into a strange black hall, the camera zooms in to the bobblehead doll standing on the shelf at Kitano’s apartment. This bobblehead doll could be the owner of the authoritative perspective in the film, metaphorically pulling the strings and manipulating the actions of Kitano. In other words, the objectified/solidified image of Kitano controls the mental states and the actual lives of the living human being Kitano.¹² Perhaps it was Kitano’s attempt to give puppets a chance to regain control over their own actions and identities: an uncanny experiment of reversal of fortunes and blurring of boundaries between human beings and dolls.¹³ In *Glory to the Filmmaker!* (2007), the filmmaker Kitano as a character turns into a doll of himself and comes back alive over and over again.

8 Alex Zahlten, “Brand New Worlds—*Confusio, Commixtio*, and the New Paradigms of the Medium of History,” Kinema Club IX at Harvard University, March 14, 2009.

9 Daisuke Miyao, “Telephilia vs. Cinephilia = Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano?” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 56–61.

10 Lisa Bode, “Digital Doppelgängers,” *M/C Journal* 8, no. 3 (July 2005), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0507/07-bode.php> (accessed April 11, 2009).

11 Kitano Takeshi, interview in *Bessatsu Kadokawa: Kadokawa Mook*, no. 225 (2005): 19.

12 Daisuke Miyao, “From Doppelgänger to Monster: Kitano Takeshi’s *Takeshi’s*,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 6–23.

13 Steven T. Brown, “Machinic Desires: Hans Bellmer’s Dolls and the Technological Uncanny in *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*,” *Mechademia*, no. 3 (2008): 222–253.

Films and history, however, are ultimately beyond the authorial control of Kitano. When *Takeshis* was completed and premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in 2005, Kitano confessed that he became “really exhausted” and felt “sick” while watching it. He “was not able to catch up with” his own film and thought, “What the hell is this?”¹⁴ The auteur’s supposed transcendental worldview, if there was one, was swallowed up in the complication of the loaded viewing perspectives that Kitano’s work presents. *

14 Kitano, interview in *Bessatsu Kadokawa*, 15.

Abel Ferrara

by Nicole Brenez. University of Illinois Press
2007. \$50.00 hardcover; \$19.95 paper. xiv + 210 pages

by MARK JANCOVICH

Nicole Brenez’s volume is an unapologetic championing of Abel Ferrara’s films that not only draws on a long tradition of cinephilic writing, but also explicitly identifies itself as a species of cinephilia. It even suggests that “Abel Ferrara himself” is “someone whom every cinephile immediately recognises,”¹ thus positioning its author as a cinephile and its topic as a figure with whom every true cinephile is already familiar. The book passionately asserts the director’s importance, placing him in a league with “those grand eccentrics who maintain the fragile continuity between the industry and the avant-garde,” figures such as “Joseph von Sternberg, Erich von Stroheim, King Vidor, Orson Welles . . . and Nicholas Ray.”²

Brenez praises Ferrara’s films for their preoccupation with compulsion, and for their characters, who exist in a state of “impassioned bondage.”³ Driven by obsession without compromise, they risk “every

1 Nicole Brenez, *Abel Ferrara* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 151.

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid., 80.