

Between Comedy and Kitsch: Kitano's *Zatoichi* and Kurosawa's Traditions of "Jidaigeki" Comedies

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Introduction

If I make a film starring Kitano, it will be *Zatoichi*. (Akira Kurosawa, quoted in Sugimura, 2003: 96)

The "jidaigeki," or Japanese historical drama, has seen a resurgence in recent years, fuelled by interest in the genre and action by Japanese and Western directors. Films such as *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* (2003 and 2004) and *The Last Samurai* (2003), have produced interesting and popular films borrowing from the style and conventions created much earlier in the development of Japanese jidaigeki films. Any samurai film, whether made in or outside Japan, undoubtedly draws comparisons with Akira Kurosawa's samurai classics. In none of these works is recognition of a specific cultural context more important than in Takeshi Kitano's recent adaptation of the original *Zatoichi* (1962).

Set in nineteenth-century Japan, Kitano's *Zatoichi* (2003) tells the story of Ichi (Takeshi Kitano); a blind, wandering masseur with a gambling problem and sword-fighting skills. Ichi wanders into a remote mountain town ruled by corrupt officials and a gang of rough mobsters. When he befriends a widow (Michiyo Ookuso) and her nephew Shinkichi (Gadarukanaru Taka), a dice gambler, he learns that the town is in the middle of a massive gang war in which two mob bosses (Saburo Ishikura and Ittoku Kishibe) lay waste to the competition with the help of the highly skilled ronin named Hattori (Asano Tadanobu). Hattori takes a job as an assassin for one of these gang lords in order to pay for treatment for his sick wife. Meanwhile, Ichi meets and attempts to help two geisha assassins, Okinu and Osei (Yuko Daike and Daigoro Tachibana), who seek revenge on the criminals who slaughtered their family. Ichi eventually finds himself in conflict with Hattori, and demonstrates the virtues of training and humility in equal measures in despatching the arrogant forces of wickedness afflicting the lives of those he cares for. Having done so, he continues his wandering, not unlike an ancient version of *Shane* (1953).

Zatoichi is Kitano's biggest domestic box-office success to date, with around two million Japanese theatre admissions. Like Kurosawa, Kitano has had more success abroad than in Japan. Foreign audiences began to take notice of Kitano after the 1993 release of *Sonatine*. *Hana-bi* (1997) paved his status internationally as one of the foremost Japanese filmmakers of his time. For years, Kitano's largest audience had been the foreign highbrow or non-mainstream audience. *Zatoichi* was consciously targeted at a younger, more mainstream Japanese audience, for the first time taking advantage of moving cameras as opposed to his more characteristically static method to the action.

The film was both a commercial and critical success; it won several international film awards, including the Silver Lion (Special Director's Award) at the sixtieth Venice Film Festival. The success recalls the moment when Japanese cinema first hit international headlines, when Akira Kurosawa won the Gold Lion at Venice in 1950 with *Rashomon*, deconstructing the code of the jidaigeki genre. Needless to say, Kurosawa's classics influenced not only Kitano's remake, but also the very *Zatoichi* original. Kurosawa's classics influenced the director, Kenji Misumi, in filming the original *Zatoichi*. Misumi made an intensive study of *Yojimbo* (1961), *Seven Samurai* (1954) and other Kurosawa samurai classics. Misumi assembles some kinetic and visceral elements of Kurosawa's cinematic actions and violence, but he does so to reassure audiences and eradicate difficulty. Kitano's remake is both parody and homage to the reassuring aesthetics of the original *Zatoichi*.

In this paper, I contend that Kitano offers us a vivid, comprehensive example of how a Japanese artist can translate both Kurosawa's classics and the myth of *Zatoichi*, reflecting on contemporary Japanese concerns about the gap between youth and their preceding generation. To bring about this achievement, Kitano deploys both the comedy inherited from Kurosawa and the aesthetics of kitsch translated from the original *Zatoichi*. The points of reference in this paper are not only divided between Kurosawa and Kitano, but also triangulated across the comic, popular and critical. In order to meet the triangular points of reference, I will first trace how Kurosawa's classics have influenced the original *Zatoichi*, before dealing with Kitano's adaptation.

Divided into two parts, Part I of this article examines the receptions of Kitano's *Zatoichi* in order to explore how they reflect Japanese social anxieties caused by the generation gap. Part II examines how Kurosawa's classics have influenced the original *Zatoichi*. I argue that the original *Zatoichi* assembles some of the kinetic and visceral elements of Kurosawa's classics, but it does so to soften the "facts of life and death." I present arguments which claim that the original *Zatoichi* replaced Kurosawa's ethic and aesthetic goals with commercial ends, namely cynicism, fetishism and iconicity, an amalgamation of which is regarded as ethically and aesthetically immature. Part III discusses Kitano's adaptation of the original *Zatoichi*, and Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies, in particular those with "happy endings." Among them are *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (1945), *Seven Samurai*, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Yojimbo*, and *Sanjuro* (1962). Kitano's *Zatoichi*, it will be argued, draws on the comic code that his predecessor, Kurosawa explored in his early jidaigeki. Like Kurosawa, Kitano explores the balance between the facts of life and death, the theme of individual and society, the relationship between audience and the film. It should be noted, however, that Kitano reinforces non-authenticity, fragmentation and repetition, and places comedy in a quite different context from Kurosawa. I shall further argue that Kitano adopts Kurosawa's critical comedy without discarding the aesthetics of kitsch from the original *Zatoichi*. Thus, Kitano both reflects and resists Kurosawa's comic traditions simultaneously.

1. Two Generations and the Receptions of Kitano's *Zatoichi*

Kitano's *Zatoichi*'s domestic commercial success was unexpected considering that the jidaigeki movie seems to have fallen out of favour with Japan's young audience and jidaigeki's popularity has tailed off dramatically since its heyday over thirty years ago. Today, as a genre, jidaigeki is as deeply unfashionable as the Western movie has been perceived in America. NHK's (Nippon Hoso Kyokai, Japan's public broadcaster) Sunday night historical drama, *Yoshitsune* (2005), failed to invigorate the jidaigeki's declining popularity, despite a desperate effort from NHK to get a young audience by casting a pop star in the leading role.

A majority of jidaigeki fans are of the older generation. For this older generation, the original *Zatoichi* represents what jidaigeki should be like.

The original *Zatoichi* franchise has its roots in the stories of writer Kan Shimozawa, and was first brought to the silver screen in the 1962 film entitled *Zatoichi Monogatari*, starring Shintaro Katsu and directed by Kenji Misumi. Ichi is a blind wandering swordsman who disguises himself as a masseur and occasionally hires out his skilful sword-fighting services to various clans in order to make a living. The character of Ichi proved highly popular, repeated by Katsu in the original series. The original *Zatoichi* turned out to be one of the longest running series in the history of jidaigeki. It consists of twenty-six films and one hundred TV episodes spanning almost three decades (1962 -1989).

Kitano's *Zatoichi* (2003) is a completely different style in every conceivable way from the original. It is interesting to note that Kitano's first reference to the original *Zatoichi* appeared as a ten minute parody sequence in his 1995 comedy *Getting Any?*, in which he lampooned the character of Ichi. Although Kitano had little interest in this character other than as a foil for a parody, he later revealed that his affection for the character of Ichi did have a place in his creativity. His 2003 remake was a fresh take on the character of Ichi.

The original character of Ichi has been virtually synonymous with the late Katsu. Some unfamiliarity of Kitano's remake troubled the jidaigeki fans, in particular those of the original *Zatoichi*, while it enjoyed a positive reception from a younger audience who are not jidaigeki fans. According to Asian film scholar, Tatsu Aoki:

Katsu freaks are everywhere in Japan, because he's one of the biggest heroes for the older generation. They felt this role pretty much belonged to Shintaro Katsu and didn't want to see Ichi played by a different actor. I talk to younger people now, who kind of like this new *Zatoichi*. We are of the generation to say, "No, this is not the real thing," but to them there wasn't any real thing to begin with. So we split our opinion on that. (Hart, 2004)

The jidaigeki convention represented in the original *Zatoichi* does not appeal to the younger generation. Jidaigeki is saddled with the conventions and stereotypes, formulas and clichés which were established in postwar Japan. All these are codified into the jidaigeki genre. Jidaigeki has epitomised Japanese national identity, its masculine past and the dialectic of the relation between individual and society, modern and traditional. In today's Japan, these boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred, and what has emerged is the fashionable cult of cool mixed with individualism. Jidaigeki is what Japanese young people come to regard as "oyaji-kusai," "jiji-kusai," "toshiyori-kusai," "ossan-kusai" (meaning "old fashioned"), "sekkyo-kusai" (preachy), "shibai-kusai," and "engi ga kusai" (overacting/artificial). "Kusai" (smell) is here referring to emotionally-charged atmosphere.

To Japanese young people, the jidaigeki offers incongruity. It is precisely because the cult of cool has taken root with Japanese youth. The unaffected and unaffecting culture is represented in the slang, the despised "uzai," an adjective for young people to describe older people who are "uncool." The Japanese young audience can sit back and be amused rather than being affectively involved. In today's Japan, indeed, the very notion of an embodied engagement is eschewed. The challenge Kitano has to respond to is the radical detachment of the postmodern kind, different from what Kurosawa did in his time. In contrast to Kurosawa, who challenged the postwar collective conformity and sentimentality, Kitano tackles the

contemporary context in which the cult of cool mixed with individualism imposes ethics, and in which society is undervalued.

The current Japanese cultural shift to the overvaluation of individualism, the undervaluation of the society is caricatured by Kitano's *Zatoichi*. Kitano's concern is expressed in one of his books, in which Kitano criticises Japanese young people's unconditional worship of North American individualism as the best policy to emulate without considering its historical background. The Japanese conceptualisation of "individualism" is, in his view, merely "me-ism." (Kitano, 1998: 177) According to Kitano what has emerged full-blown in today's Japan is the state of "super-free." (Kitano, 2003a: 204)

Such a cultural and social climate provides some insight into how he approached updating the *Zatoichi* legend for contemporary young audiences. Kitano tackles this generational incongruity and misunderstanding in a new Japan, which is quite different from the Japan of postwar decades. Kitano creates a comedy of misunderstanding with the mobster who, in the enthusiasm to attack Ichi, draws his sword with such force it cuts his comrade's arm standing next to him; the merchants who want to test their new sword on a passing Ichi, suffer similar consequences; "the idiot son of a neighbour," a semi-naked lunatic man with a spear who runs around yelling and bumping into things. These scenes caricature the generational malfunctioning of communication. They could also allude to the old generation's perception that young people are so self-absorbed that they are not able to focus on their surrounding and the impact of their actions.

The most hilarious scene of misunderstanding involves the formation training sequence in which Shinkichi attempts to train a group of neighbours in the art of combat with swords, while three men wind up taking turns beating Shinkichi on the head rather than striking his sword. This scene is reminiscent of the young generation's perception that the old generation is obsessed with archaic ritual and routine. Kitano's success lies in his ability to comically deal with the generational incongruity that prevails in contemporary Japan. Playful anachronism can be found everywhere: not in the least by representing Ichi with blonde hair and tap dancing.

Comedy and dance decentre main characters and the narrative effect. That is to say, comedy and dance are located beyond the primacy of narrative or diegesis, and the limit of realist film. Comedy and dance remain a source of audience fascination that compete directly with plot and character development. Comedy and dance develop in sufficient number and demand enough interest that these comic and dance details cease to be servants of the narrative. They instead assume a greater affective charge than the narrative within which they are embedded. It is Kitano's way of embedding the modern inside the traditional. Such an extensive use of comedy and dance is absent in the original *Zatoichi*, as it is strictly within the scope of the generic conventions of realist jidaigeki, and its dominant tone is cynicism. In the following section, I contend that the original *Zatoichi*, in comparison to Kurosawa's films, is immature cynicism, which renders the film ethically and aesthetically imbalanced.

2.1 Critical vs. Popular: From Kurosawa's Comedy to the Cynicism of the Original *Zatoichi*

"Yana tosei dana" (It is a terrible world) is a catch phrase of Ichi, the protagonist of the original *Zatoichi*. Ichi, a wanderer, has a sense of justice, protects the weak, and criticises society from an outsider's "objective" point-of-view. Ichi, in the original *Zatoichi*, is a

cynical, victimised thinker. As Stuart Kaminsky points out, there has been a tradition of physical deformity in postwar jidaigeki resulting from the disgrace of defeat (Kaminsky, 1972: 313). Ichi is an example of such a victimised hero; discriminated, shunned and ridiculed because of his disability. He is treated like an outcast in every town he visits. Like the samurai in a jidaigeki, and the gunman in a western movie, Ichi is driven by a desire for revenge. [1] What makes Ichi a hero is that he is always one step ahead of society: The blind man "sees" much more than those who have perfect eyesight. The original *Zatoichi* invokes and satisfies audience expectations, allowing an uncritical identification with Ichi.

The original *Zatoichi* emphasised liberal-individuals and their values to such a degree that the film departed from jidaigeki tradition because jidaigeki traditionally showed the samurai acting as part of a group. The huge commercial appeal of the original *Zatoichi* is predicated on the growing belief in liberal-individualist values in postwar Japan. David Desser positions the original *Zatoichi* as a Sword Film, a subgenre of jidaigeki in his essay, "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Postwar Samurai Film." Desser states:

The Sword Film, as defined here, begins with Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961). Although typically described as a "Japanese Western," *Yojimbo* has much in common with American gangster films, hardly surprising ... The introduction of elements from the Westerns and gangster genres (with their very different mythologies) marks a change in the mythos of the Samurai Film. (Desser, 1992: 156)

In new or postwar jidaigeki, liberal-individualism has been defined as a powerful cultural drive. Traditional or prewar jidaigeki shares the characteristics observed by Desser as "the overvaluation of society, the undervaluation of the individual." (Desser, 1992: 162) Darrell Davis draws attention to the effects of government intervention on prewar jidaigeki and its changes toward nationalistic collectivism between the years of 1936-41. He has dubbed the prewar jidaigeki the "monumental style." The style is best exemplified in *Genroku Chushingura* (1941), which prizes loyalty to one's lord over all other virtues (Davis, 1996: 131).

The original *Zatoichi* reversed this, instead emphasising the undervaluation of society, the overvaluation of the individual. Initially, the traditional jidaigeki was the dominant form of samurai drama but, with the new wave of directors in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a shift in focus towards the new jidaigeki with morally ambiguous, troubled and, at times, narcissistic heroes/anti-heroes.

Needless to say, Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* helped free the samurai genre from traditional collective morality. He popularised the figure of the "ronin" who mocked conformity and compliance. Kurosawa's jidaigeki were all created in a historical context in which authority strongly imposes ethics and morals upon an individual. Disturbed by the fanatical militarism present in Japan during World War II, and ruthless postwar capitalism, Kurosawa aimed to reshape Japanese society for ideals of individual autonomy. As examined by Stephen Prince (1991), Kurosawa forged a politically committed model of filmmaking, and participated as a filmmaker in the tasks of social reconstruction. The image of Toshiro Mifune on the watchtower in *Yojimbo*, watching the conflicts below with amused detachment, is an apt metaphor for individual autonomy. Prince refers to the ethics of *Yojimbo* as "one of isolation, a celebration of alienation." (Prince, 1991: 235) Like a typical new jidaigeki, Kurosawa's

Yojimbo and its follow-up, *Sanjuro*, mock the over-valuation placed on "bushido" (the Way of Samurai) and the samurai's loyalty to the clan as being more significant than life itself.

Despite his emphasis on the liberal-individual, Kurosawa maintains the composition and balance of contrasts with society, in particular through the use of comedy. In *Yojimbo*, the playful music fitting the scruffy hero scratching his unclean head, the dog trotting with a human hand in its mouth, and foolish villains, all provide the audience with the significant mood of a sometimes savage comedy. In *Sanjuro*, much of the humour emerges from the contrast between Mifune's shabby samurai, always asking for money, and his incongruity with the stereotypically noble, virtuous behaviour of nine clean-cut samurai and two genteel ladies.

Kurosawa mentions in an interview that he ensures that comedy is activated in balance with dramatic tension in his film (Shibutani, 1993: 26). Comedy is a significant means by which Kurosawa creates a certain moral equilibrium of power between individual and society, life and death.

Kurosawa's first jidaigeki, *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*, is a comedy and an adaptation of a famous medieval Japanese tale that became a "kabuki" play, *Kanjincho*. [2] The film was shot under the strict regulations of the Japanese military authority during World War II, and the American authority during the early days of American occupation. The story relates to Yoshitsune (1159-1189), who is a fugitive from Yoritomo. *Kanjincho* tells the story of Benkei's desperate attempt to protect his young lord Yoshitsune by disguising him as his servant and beating him, in order to pass the barrier at Ataka which is guarded by an officer. Kurosawa criticises the way modern kabuki sentimentally rationalises bushido, including its rigid sense of loyalty and duty. Kurosawa comments on his claim that *Kanjincho* as a modern kabuki exposes unnecessary sentimentality:

For example, out of sight of the barrier, Yoshitsune thanks Benkei for his resourcefulness. Bursting into tears, Benkei excessively apologizes to his lord for what he had to do to fulfil his duty. I feel that there is something wrong about pushing sentimentality forward in this manner. (Shibutani, 1993: 46)

In Kurosawa's adaptation, the kabuki repertoire of feudal devotion was parodied as a musical comedy. Challenging domestic viewers' familiarity with the kabuki format, Kurosawa creates a new role of the porter as fool. As a result, the film was the object of double censorships: Japanese censors accused him of trivialising an authentic historical drama, and postponed the release of the film. Ironically, the American Occupation authority also delayed the film's release, because they perceived that the film promoted a feudalistic loyalty. The film finally reached cinemas in 1952, seven years after its completion. The porter's constant comic presence is Kurosawa's ingenious way of both playfully mocking the deadly-serious proceedings, and allowing the audience to participate and witness the action through his eyes. The porter is both an insider and an outsider; an insider in that he is a character in the film, an outsider in that he does not quite understand the meaning of samurai conventions. The porter plays an essential role as a comic character caught betwixt and between, "neither the one thing nor the other." By making the porter play the role of the catalyst for the threshold between "play" and "real," Kurosawa stimulates his audience's critical self-reflexivity.

Such an artistic homage to comedy given by Kurosawa to his jidaigeki is absent in the original *Zatoichi*. The director, Misumi, only makes a half-hearted effort in humour. For

example, Katsu stumbles at the beginning of the original *Zatoichi*. As the tone of the comedy is attempted but is not established successfully, the audience do not find this scene funny. Despite some awkward humorous scenes and slapstick touches like this example, comedy never plays any significant role in Misumi's original *Zatoichi*. The overall tone of the original *Zatoichi* is static cynicism, which replaced Kurosawa's comic dynamism and integrity. Cynicism in the original *Zatoichi* is particularly evident in the scenes where the protagonist overhears the villains' secret conversation involving their doubts and fears over the effective usefulness of a blind swordsman in the upcoming war with a rival gang. When Ichi eavesdrops on villains' conversation, confronts them and gives a speech of victimisation, he has a highly ironic tone. In contrast, a similar scene in Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* has a clear playful and comic tone: The swordsman played by Mifune listens to the villains plotting his death with jocular flippancy.

While Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* has a comic tone, the original *Zatoichi* is predominated by a tone of cynicism. The shift from comedy to cynicism clarifies what differentiates Kurosawa's jidaigeki from the original *Zatoichi*. The original *Zatoichi* inherited the liberal-individualist dimension of Kurosawa, by adapting the image of the anti-hero wanderer. The individual-oriented Kurosawa's style was persuasive in the original *Zatoichi*, even as the comical and balancing integrity of Kurosawa's filmmaking was not. The original *Zatoichi* is a cynical indictment of the society, and the over reliance on the individual destabilising the balance of work.

2.2 Comedy to Kitsch Abuse

The original *Zatoichi* replaced Kurosawa's cinematic goals with a further commercial end, namely not only cynicism, but also kitsch abuse. In his influential 1939 article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg defines kitsch as "vicarious experience and faked sensation." (Greenberg, 1965: 10) He defined kitsch broadly to include Hollywood movies, jazz, advertising, commercial illustration -- all of which are generally regarded now as popular culture. What may mark kitsch as low-brow, especially in cinema, is the perception that kitsch is a form of popular discourse that aim primarily for a physical rather than an intellectual response. Kitsch creates a mood of intimacy, and calls for the spectator's bodily, affective immersion. In this sense, kitsch can be regarded as necessary for successful cinematic communication. In this paper, beyond the conventional negative view of kitsch, kitsch is viewed as a necessary, heavily but not entirely, commercial mode of discourse. That is to say, kitsch can be employed for good cause, or abused for bad cause.

The aesthetic problem with the original *Zatoichi* is not that it is kitsch, but that it misuses or indulges kitsch. In the original *Zatoichi*, Ichi is not only a killer but he is a masseur who gives comfort and erotic pleasure to people. Katsu played Ichi as a lovable character, a teddy-bear persona who hides a sense of justice and skill for swordplay. While tenderness and eroticism are at odds with the cynicism-oriented dimension of the anti-hero, they are deployed to make him and the film more sexually available. For example, in the first episode, when Ichi meets rival Master Hirate Miki, he realises that they are akin to one another; both are for-hire lone swordsmen. In the original *Zatoichi*, Ichi and the bodyguard become friends, sympathise over their tragic history, dream of escaping their irreversible plight and fight, however reluctantly, in the final scene. As the original *Zatoichi* series developed, subtle touches in homoeroticism, romance, and Ichi's "nureba" (love scenes) with bawdy women were added. The indulgence of kitsch is what destabilised the balance between audience and work in the original *Zatoichi*.

These misused qualities make the audience respond to the film in an uncritical way. Such a relationship between the audience and the film leaves the audience emotionally saturated.

Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies restrain their kitsch elements by means of laughter. A prime example can be seen in *Hidden Fortress* which revolves around two comic peasants, Tahei and Matakichi and their journey with more "serious" main characters, General Rokurota and Princess Yuki. In the plot, the peasants are coerced into a scheme to smuggle a fugitive princess and her cache of gold back to her homeland.

A clichéd romance between the Princess and the General is absent, in spite of Tahei and Matakichi taking for granted that the Princess and the General are sexually involved. The peasants are depicted as sexually uninhibited, licentious and indulgent, repeatedly attempting to make sexual advances towards the young princess. Kurosawa tackles voyeurism by "presenting" the audience's expectation through the actions of Tahei and Matakichi. The fetish gaze toward the princess's body is presented through the eyes of the peasants only to be playfully mocked at the next moment. On one hand, Kurosawa deploys "serious" characters, The General and the Princess, to satisfy audience desire for heroism, loyalty and honour. On the other hand, he deploys comic characters, Tahei and Matakichi, to tease the audience so that the audience acquires critical self-reflexivity. The two comic peasants are employed as a mirror to reflect the audience's initial expectation and desire. The playful shift from attachment to detachment prevents Kurosawa's films from misusing and indulging kitsch.

2.3 Comedy to Iconicity: Mifune to Katsu

As mentioned earlier, the original *Zatoichi* became associated with the actor Katsu, who repeatedly appeared in the television series. The problem with Katsu's iconic status was his ubiquity. Katsu's Ichi corresponded with his eccentric star persona image (his involvement in a series of scandals being one factor). Katsu's body became a construction site for the personality that consists of separate parts moulded together by the camera. The close-up shots of Ichi's closed eyes and ears, for example, had enormous implications for the spectator's relationship to Katsu as a star. Misumi commercially foregrounded Katsu's personality. Misumi's cinematic image disassembles Katsu in order to reconstruct it for the spectator. Presenting Ichi in this way proved to be more enduring than Kurosawa's creation, *Yojimbo*, by evolving into a fetishised meta-icon.

In contrast, Kurosawa dealt with the actor in a different way. Needless to say, Toshiro Mifune is an actor who came to be a celebrated star in parallel with Kurosawa's rise to glory. Mifune's athleticism, rugged handsomeness, and intense screen persona made him a popular jidaigeki hero in dozens of jidaigeki made by various other directors. Kurosawa repetitively employed Mifune in his jidaigeki comedies. In those films, Mifune succeeded in a variety of different roles including comic (*Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*), honourable (*The Hidden Fortress*) and wild and reckless (*Seven Samurai*). Kurosawa mentions in his autobiography, "Mifune's attraction is something his innate and powerful personal qualities pushed unwittingly to the fore," which "could turn into a terrible burden." (Kurosawa, 1982: 162) To negotiate an actor's subjectivity and the weight of his own art, Kurosawa deploys comedy as a creative equaliser. This is evident in Kurosawa's use of Mifune in his role of Kikuchiyo in *Seven Samurai*. Kurosawa cast Mifune for this comic role at the height of his stardom. Kikuchiyo is a character who poses as a samurai but actually comes from a poor farming village. Kikuchiyo's restless actions and monkey-like exaggerated giggles and laughter, serve as a contrast to the group-oriented samurai. His individuality is symbolised by the huge sword that

he carries over his shoulder, in contrast to the other samurai who have swords that are fairly ordinary-looking. Individualism should never supersede the group, and when Mifune's character does, he is reprimanded.

In the original *Zatoichi*, such a powerful use of comedy is absent. Katsu's personal component was indulged in the original *Zatoichi*, while Mifune's is restrained in Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies. In comparison to Kurosawa's films, the original *Zatoichi* is ethically and aesthetically imbalanced between audience and actor. Kurosawa extracts his actor's blustering and bravado range for all its comic effect. Kurosawa takes liberties with Mifune's character, maximising his humour for the audience. Using the power of comedy, Kurosawa prevents the actor's personal component from pushing unwittingly to the fore.

3.1 Kitano's *Zatoichi* and Kurosawa's Jidaigeki Comedies

I wanted a sense of balance to the film. I didn't want to have just action scenes throughout the film. I wanted to add some humour to lighten up the film. (Kitano, 2003b)

The comical and balancing integrity of Kurosawa's film is revived in Kitano's *Zatoichi* in a unique manner. Like Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies, Kitano's *Zatoichi* negotiates balance and maintains a constant level of comedy throughout the film. In his early years as a film director, Kitano drew a veil over a part of his career as a comedian (Gardner, 2000). His early films such as *Violent Cop* (1989) and *Boiling Point* (1990) disturbed audiences with their absurd violence and nihilistic humour, disconcertingly combined with asceticism and emotional inscrutability. Comedy and laughter, beyond nihilistic humour or cynicism, started to be interwoven with increasing emotionality in his later films, *Hana-bi* (1997) and *Kikujiro* (1999). An element of comedy was introduced with the melancholy displayed in *Hana-bi* (1997). Comedy is further developed with more joy and plenty of self-deprecation in *Kikujiro* (1999). In the new *Zatoichi*, Kitano's comedy is seen to full effect, along with comic symbols such as "tengu" (goblin) and tap dance, also evident in *Kikujiro*. Building on Kurosawa's comic traditions, Kitano deconstructs the jidaigeki code of genre further. In contrast to Kurosawa's realistic and authentic jidaigeki comedies, the constant reminder that we are indeed watching artifice punctuates Kitano's *Zatoichi*.

Comedy decentralises both the main characters and also the narrative effect. It is true that the new *Zatoichi* has some "serious" characters -- Oume, Hattori and Hattori's wife, Okinu -- who are located strictly beneath the primacy of the narrative. However, it also has destructive characters -- Ichi and Osei -- who travel back and forth between serious and comic, and the entirely comic character, Shinkichi. These destructive and comic characters decentre not only the serious characters but also themselves.

This is particularly evident in the scene following the escape from town by Ichi, Shinkichi, Okinu and Osei, during the storm to Oume's house. While talking about the painful past and the present it becomes apparent to Okinu that Ogi, one of the bandits, may well be one of the men responsible for their parents' murder. At the height of this serious revelation, Oume turns to Ichi for his thoughts on the matter. Her face suddenly breaks into a smile and she says, "Masseur, don't make those eyes at me." It is then that the camera switches to Kitano and the audience see that he has two fake eyes painted on his eyelids. This, of course, was done to allow Ichi to cover his identity when escaping from the villains of the town. Oume's amused reaction to Ichi's made-up eyes concludes the scene in a hilarious tone.

Kitano's destruction of fascination is also made manifest in the scene in which bandits decide to set fire to Oume's house to force out Ichi who, unknown to them, has already left. Shinkichi is forced to flee the house whilst still dressed as a geisha, complete with white face make-up and kimono. The local neighbours then arrive to see what is happening. After being drawn to the house fire, they slowly become aware of Shinkichi's appearance. Their bewildered looks at his feminine attire provide the audience with another destructive comic interlude to the narrative.

The comic rhythm deliberately destroys the audience identification with the film itself and the major characters such as Ichi, Hattori and Osei. In the conventional jidaigeki, identification with these characters would have been natural, and would have caused the audience to become absorbed in the diegesis. By using comedy in the new *Zatoichi*, Kitano evokes our sense of what is and is not real, and maximises "real" in contrast with "play". That is to say, Kitano's *Zatoichi* pushes the notion of comedy even further than Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies, probing the relationship between the recording of actual space and the spectators' perception of space as symbolic.

Our sense of what is and is not real is stimulated by two comic characters in the new *Zatoichi*: Ichi and Shinkichi. As both a director and a TV comic star, Kitano negotiates his own personal assets; before *Zatoichi*'s release, Kitano bleached his hair for several months so that people would have a notion of what to expect. The Ichi played by Kitano is a comic character, in-between star and director, and insider and outsider. The characterisations of Kitano's Ichi, far from the cynical anti-hero with a victimised past in the original *Zatoichi*, is acutely evocative of two agrarian ritualistic figures, namely, "tengu" or a comic goblin and a scarecrow.

Firstly, Kitano-as-an-actor's association with tengu is implied by Ichi's red cane, and the symbolic appearance of tengu in the form of a mask, which appears in the final ritual dance scene. In Japanese folklore, tengu has a red face, long nose and looks like a wandering Buddhist monk, wearing "geta" (wooden clogs). The tengu is the patron of martial arts, and is always portrayed as having a mischievous sense of humour. Tengu's mischief is only equal to its arrogance. "Tengu-ni-naru" is an expression still commonly used to ask for someone not to be as arrogant as a tengu.

Like the folkloric tengu, Ichi is a skilled swordsman, using the blade hidden in the cane to dispatch the villains in brutally satisfying ways. Like the tengu, Ichi is both arrogant and mischievous. Ichi's character lacks psychological complexity; he has neither background nor human motivations. The only flashback the audience sees of Ichi's past is his bloody swordfight in the rainstorm without context.

Secondly, Ichi's association with a scarecrow is suggested in several scenes. The first instance is the scene where villagers are bringing the scarecrow to place in a field to protect their crops. They pass Ichi, walking the other way, which implies that Ichi will play a similar role as a scarecrow in protecting them. The scarecrow has a sword, so does Ichi. Furthermore, the scarecrow exhibits an erected phallus as a humorous reminder of Japanese traditional fertility rituals which glorify human genitals. The second instance is just before the climactic final battle, when Ichi passes by a scarecrow left in the middle of the path, he picks it up and plants it back into the field. With his hair bleached a yellow-blond, straw-like colour, Kitano further insinuates Kitano-as-an-actor's association with the scarecrow. In the film, although a scarecrow is at first provided with fertility offerings of food and flowers at its feet, it ends up

being a victim of the village children's mischievous swordplay. Drawing a parallel with their ritualistic meanings, the symbol of the scarecrow represents the passiveness and vulnerability of Beat Takeshi as a star, and the symbol of tengu represent the aggressiveness, human hubris and arrogance of Kitano as a director. Ichi is shaped within the comic characterisations of a scarecrow and tengu.

The comic quality of Ichi is contrasted with that of Shinkichi, Ichi's luckless dice-gambler friend. Most of the humour in the film surrounds Shinkichi, played by the comedian Gadarukanaru Taka. Ichi's actions are repetitive not only in swordplay, but also in gambling. Ichi hardly talks, or shows any expression at all. Even during the gambling scenes, he does not engage in the trickery displayed by Katsu's Ichi in the original, but just sits quietly winning round after round while Shinkichi idiotically amuses himself beside him. Shinkichi is an essential foil for Ichi. Ichi and Shinkichi create a liaison with the audience and highlight the make-believe nature of the show. The interaction between the two is reminiscent of the Japanese stand-up duo comedy, "manzai," combining the fool ("boke") and the straight foil ("tsukkomi"). Ichi evades reality, while Shinkichi faces it. The frame of comedy duo allows Kitano to reflect his own two personas, the director Takeshi Kitano and the TV comic star "Beat" Takeshi, and dramatises a constant tension between the two.

In the new *Zatoichi*, Kitano discards the cynicism, fetishism and iconicity that prevail in the original *Zatoichi*. Kitano incorporates the fool as "audience within the film." Shinkichi plots to overcome all the other major characters, including Hattori who is deadly serious. Kitano directs the audience to participate and witness the action through Shinkichi's eyes and body. Shinkichi becomes infatuated by three major characters, Ichi, Hattori and Osei, and attempts to mimic each character in the following distinctive ways. Firstly, when Shinkichi sees Ichi's dice skills, he tries to emulate Ichi's dicing mannerism. Secondly, as Shinkichi peers at Hattori's flamboyant swordplay, he attempts to imitate Hattori and his masculinity but fails. Shinkichi tries to teach a group of neighbourhood boys how to stage a sword fight with strikes in the right sequence to match his blocks. However, after a short period of success, they break the routine which Shinkichi arranged, and start to attack him at random. Lastly, after he sees the beautiful dance of Osei, the female impersonator, he attempts to experiment with make-up to transform his gender identity like Osei.

Throughout these actions, we are aligned with Shinkichi, who assumes the audience's point-of-view in the most overt way. It is through Shinkichi's eyes that we witness and "try out" Ichi, Hattori and Osei. Kitano incorporates Shinkichi as the audience within his films. In this way, Shinkichi assists in the make-believe game and fools around with other characters, who evade reality or, rather, realise a dream. Leading his audience to another angle and another perspective, Kitano is interested in moments of disjunction where perception is momentarily put into question and boundaries are revealed, challenging the viewer to make connections between one context of meaning and another. An unseen dimension in something familiar surprises the audience. Kitano's comedy encourages them to see the relative nature of meaning with its explicit shifts in perspective between fiction and reality, film and audience.

Kitano, therefore, generates critical self-reflexivity through comedy, and upstages the great jidaigeki comedies of Kurosawa in his adaptation of the original *Zatoichi*. The next section explores a further achievement of Kitano in the new *Zatoichi*, specifically that critical self-reflexivity is generated through comedy without damaging kitsch, the sensational and affective part of the equation. Kitano's adaptation of Kurosawa's critical tradition does not necessarily mean that he discards kitsch or commercial essences from the original *Zatoichi*.

While celebrating Kurosawa's artistry, Kitano pays equally high regard to the kitsch essences in the original *Zatoichi*.

3.2 Kurosawa's Noh-oriented Aesthetics and Kitano's Kabuki-oriented Aesthetics

In Kitano's *Zatoichi*, kitsch essences, which carry an affective charge, are not condemned. As a director, actor, screenwriter, novelist, essay writer, film editor, poet, painter, musician, game show host, stand-up comedian, and even tap dancer, Kitano straddles Japanese popular culture with ease. In a closer and more embodied way, wholly different from Kurosawa's carefully detached way, Kitano understands Japanese culture innately, deeply, and across the boundaries of social classes. Kitano's vision is comic, and he is an observer of himself and the Japanese society while acting. Unlike Kurosawa with a family of samurai descent, Kitano was born to a drunken gambler father and an education-oriented mother in Tokyo's "shitamachi" (the old working class neighbourhood). Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies often encourage the emotional detachment inspired by high culture, while Kitano celebrates affect, sensation, and sentimentality inspired by popular culture.

In terms of aesthetic and kinetic orientation, Kitano differs from Kurosawa. Both directors affect the senses of the audience in a direct manner. Kurosawa, however, unlike Kitano, encourages emotional detachment inspired by "noh." Noh theatre is the art that most obviously feeds into Kurosawa's cinema, and it is this tradition that disrupts and contests the comfortable conventions of immature sentimentality. Kurosawa regards a good structure for a screenplay as "that of the symphony, with its three or four movements and different tempos." (Kurosawa, 1982: 193) Kurosawa has suggested as a rhythmical model "the noh play with its three part structure: 'jo' (introduction), 'ha' (destruction) and 'kyu' (haste)." By pacing the whole work in the living rhythm of noh, he builds a critical detachment as the vehicle by which a sensory charge is translated from filmmaker to audience, whole attention is deflected away from empathy and onto detached critical contemplation. Kurosawa's stylistic and semiotic borrowings of noh art forms reflect his concern about issues of aesthetic detachment. He states:

Watching something does not mean fixing your gaze on it, but being aware of it in a natural way. I believe this is what the medieval noh playwright and theorist Zeami meant by "watching with a detached gaze. (Kurosawa, 1982: 195)

Kurosawa often expressed his dislike of modern kabuki elements celebrated in the conventional jidaigeki. In an interview in 1966, Kurosawa remarked:

Today's kabuki is no longer kabuki in a real sense. The kabuki in a real sense is more tolerant and magnanimous. Nowadays kabuki has become like a shingeki with psychological details. (Shibutani, 1993: 45-46)

Kurosawa regards the emotional detachment of noh as essential to the dramatic experience, while emotional exaltation seen in kabuki is either downplayed, or included as necessary to refer to stereotypes that can be exploited for parody.

Kurosawa's images and sound arouse "yugen" and "wabi-sabi," the aesthetics of noh, which value the practice of restraint in expression, to make the images and sound resonate with his audience in a detached manner. Yugen is the aesthetic sense of distance; "Yu" (invisible) and

"gen" (profound). Kurosawa elaborated the "wabi" idea, seeking richness in an individual detached from society. As wabi was derived from "wabishi" (lonely), "sabi" came from another similar word meaning loneliness, elderliness and calmness. In its background, there stands the Buddhist worldview recognising the existential solitude of all human beings, trying to resign oneself to that solitude, and to discover its aesthetics.

Yugen and wabi-sabi aesthetics are evident in Kurosawa's kinetic action scenes, such as those involving dance and violence, which are intrinsic to Kurosawa's classic. Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies are an artistic exploration of cinematic yugen and wabi-sabi. In most of Kurosawa's jidaigeki, dance scenes, such as the dance of noh, farmers' ritual and festival, are used to emphasise emotional detachment. In *Hidden Fortress*, for example, the fire festival scenes show the tension within this relief. In these scenes, the protagonists mistakenly get caught up in a fire festival deep in the woods; joining in this festival dance provides them an opportunity to hide from their enemies. Kurosawa frequently mediates fire in front of the participants and characters by way of executing detachment. Kurosawa makes tension visible in this spectacular fire-worshipping sequence, in which the participants dance wildly around a bonfire and sing: "This floating world's a dream, so burn in mad abandon":

The life of a man
Burn it with the fire
The life of an insect
Throw it in the fire
Ponder and you'll see
The world is dark
And this floating world
Is a dream.

This song returns later in the film to emphasise the emotional restraint of the yugen and wabi-sabi. Furthermore, wabi-sabi aesthetics signify liberation from materialistic and emotional anxieties. This ascetic attitude toward "the floating world" is apparent in the novel beauty of Kurosawa's classics.

"The floating world" has a derogatory meaning according to Kurosawa's "highbrow" aesthetics. From Kitano's perspective, "the floating world" is the aesthetic ideal of libertines, emphasising the transience of earthly existence. In sharp contrast to Kurosawa, Kitano draws his material from the Japanese theatrical tradition of kabuki in order to encourage emotional bond and embodiment. Influenced by his grandmother who was a "gidayu" (kabuki chanter) with whom he lived in his childhood, he was familiar with the traditional sentiment that is expressed in kabuki. Unlike Kurosawa, who incorporated the higher art and noh aesthetics for his jidaigeki, Kitano reimagines the traditional kabuki's aesthetics which Kurosawa judged to be missing in modern kabuki. Kitano reproduces kabuki's original, subversive roots, its common touch, its association with the masses with everyday vulgar low life, involving an intensive interplay between eroticism and comedy.

Kitano's *Zatoichi* could be regarded as a rediscovery of the emotional aesthetics lost in modern kabuki, namely, "iki" aesthetics. [3] In iki aesthetics, as in kitsch aesthetics, the embodiment of emotional and corporeal pleasure, fear and pain is a virtue. In the former, unlike in the latter, eroticism and laughter are related. [4] Kitano originally debuted as a comedian performing in the strip clubs and vaudeville theatres of Tokyo's Asakusa district in the 1960s, where he mastered the expertise of period dramas and sword fighting. Inspired by

the Asakusa culture of entertainments, Kitano rediscovers melodramatically refined iki aesthetics, quarrying the low art distinct from the high art form of kabuki. A clear example of this can be seen in Kitano's use of Daigoro Tachibana in his role of Osei. Osei's character is a cross-dressing geisha who travels with his sister in search of their parents' murderers. He is portrayed as a sympathetic character who was molested as a child and eventually prostituted himself and acquired dancing skills in order to survive. Osei's urge to live is contrasted to Hattori's drive to death. Kitano uses the flashbacks to Hattori's past when he was a samurai with a master, being humiliated and maliciously beaten by a ronin. They suggest that his choice to become a paid killer results from a desire for revenge. Hattori ignores the pleas of his consumptive wife to stop killing. Hattori's mental state reflects upon the physical illness of his wife, emphasised by her scene in a white kimono signifying death. The flashbacks to Hattori's past not only explain the motives and intentions for his own brutal killings, but also reveal Hattori's victimisation, which differs from Osei's.

To recreate iki aesthetics, Kitano takes his inspiration from an art-form that is considered as "lower" and as more popular than kabuki, namely the "taishu engeki" (traditional Japanese "boulevard theatre" or vaudeville). Kitano underscores the combination of eroticism and laughter in casting Tachibana, an Asakusa female impersonator or "onnagata" star who is a part of the taishu engeki. Kitano revitalises iki aesthetics through the melodrama combined with comedy. The melodramatic scenes are as intensive as the comedic scenes. The audience's corporeal reception is intended to generate a sensory awakening. Kitano reproduces a sense of shared space outside of immediate body-to-body encounters. Furthermore, Kitano accomplishes humour without turning the melodrama into mere parody. This is manifested in Osei's extensive dance sequence.

When Okinu and Osei practice their song and dance routine in harmony with the rain outside, Okinu sadly remembers how Osei prostituted himself and learned his dance moves as a child in order to make money. Kitano uses montage by inserting the same dance sequence during his past and present practice, culminating in the sister breaking down in tears. By crosscutting between Osei practising his dance routine as an adult to his dancing as a boy, Kitano evokes iki aesthetics consisting of three features, "bitai" (erotic allure) with "hari" (warrior-like pride) and "akirame" (resignation and also sophisticated indifference) (Kuki, 1979: 23). Kitano attributes iki to Osei's vitality manifested in her dance.

This is immediately followed by Shinkichi, moved to tears by the performance, who decides to go in to town and asks to borrow Oume's umbrella. The scene then shifts to the outside where it is raining heavily. Shinkichi emerges from the doorway and puts up the umbrella, which is so torn and full of holes it is virtually no use at all. The audience then see a comical dance sequence of farmers in a muddy paddy field. These humorous scenes detach the audience from the previous melodramatic scene. The audience have to adjust their bodies to accommodate the mood they should now adopt for themselves. Before the audience finish laughing, the scene ends just as abruptly as it started.

Laughter is also enhanced by the confusion of gender in Tachibana's role for Osei. On one hand, Osei assumes the melodramatic character in his relationship to his elderly sister, Okinu. Kitano allows the viewer to witness his sister's dominance over Osei. Osei's effeminate and erotic posture effectively dramatises the frustration and helplessness of those victimised. On the other hand, gender distinctions comically blur the characterisation of Osei in relation to Shinkichi. This is evident during the scene when Shinkichi is about to take a bath:

Shinkichi: I'll have a bath.

Osei: Me too.

Shinkichi: No! Men first.

Osei: I am a man!

Shinkichi: ...

Then, Shinkichi and Osei take a bath in the same bucket. The conversation continues:

Shinkichi: I have to say it's incredible. You really look like a woman!
Does make-up make men beautiful?

Osei: It doesn't work on everyone. It depends on the face.

Through the sexually ambiguous presence of Osei, and his interaction with Shinkichi, Kitano achieves high humour without turning it into mere pantomime. His best trick is to amalgamate eroticism and laughter, dream and reality without diluting the power of either.

3.3 Comedy and Kitsch Firework: Kitano's Dance Scheme as Embodiment and Kurosawa's as Detachment

I enjoyed the process of presenting comedy, fighting and dancing in distinctive ways, and intersecting them. (Kitano, 2003a: 36)

"Kitano's *Zatoichi* might best be described as the first samurai musical," wrote the correspondent of *The Guardian* (2003). Limiting verbal language in *Zatoichi*, Kitano takes full advantage of the viscosity celebrated by the musical genre. Viscerality is based on deep feeling and emotional reactions rather than on reason or thought. He does so in such a way that the action restores kitsch to his practice. In *Zatoichi*, the dance is as central or dominant as comedy. Dance, along with comedy, decentres the characters and the narrative. Dance is almost destructive to the diegesis, not only as a jidaigeki, which usually glorifies masculine control and violence, but also as a musical in which the central character plays the dominant role in the dance scenes. The dominant roles in the dance scenes are taken by the supporting roles, Osei and the four nameless villagers. Kitano employs specialist dancers for each dance form: Tachibana for classical Japanese dance, and performance group, "The Stripes," for tap dance. The Stripes appear as farmers and carpenters dressed in traditional kimonos and wooden clogs and they perform a contemporary-style of tap dancing accompanied by Keiichi Suzuki's hip-hop rhythms.

Film musicals, as Jane Feuer asserts, promote "conservative" self-reflexivity, the myths of audience, and integration. According to Feuer, "successful performances are intimately bounded up with the integration of the individual into a community or a group, and even with the merger of high art with popular art." (Feuer, 1977: 319) The new *Zatoichi* conforms to Feuer's definition. Like the conventional film musical, *Zatoichi* celebrates kitsch, exploiting the wholesome myth of integration the genre has itself developed. *Zatoichi* borrows some "up-lift" elements from the musical genre as the myth of integration. It creates a mood of

intimacy, and seeks its spectator's bodily, affective immersion. Kitano achieves an amalgamation of comedy with kitsch elements with an equal dynamism. Through the amalgamation of comedy with kitsch, Kitano eliminates a predominating tone of cynicism found in the original *Zatoichi*. The shift from the cynicism to the comic illuminates what differentiates the new *Zatoichi* from the original.

The greatest kitsch and the comedy fireworks are undoubtedly found in the final musical sequences when a group of carpenters, in classic Broadway style, make music from their tools as they work on rebuilding the farmhouse burned down by the villains. Later, two final dance sequences take place on the outdoor stage or shrine. The shrine stage is a meta-cinematic device of the frame-within-a-film that draws attention to the conventions of kitsch. Within this textual focus, it is the kitsch that becomes the critical area of interest. Kitano reminds the audience of the textuality of kitsch, and acknowledges its status as a construct. In this sense, Kitano's hermeneutical achievement in *Zatoichi* could be best described by the great Hans Georg Gadamer, as "a transformation of texts back into speech and meaning." (Gadamer, 1989: 354f)

The first dance performed by four dancers is reminiscent of "okagura," an agricultural festival which traditionally associated human fertility with the ripeness of the harvest. Two villagers wear demon masks of "yamabushi" tengu or "mountain priest" tengu, and "karasu" or "crow" tengu, the other two wear God masks signifying fortune, those of "otafuku" and "ebisu" (two of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune), which are crucial actors at Japanese traditional festivals. They perform the ritual under beating drums. The performers initially go around in a small circle, and gradually face toward the camera in line. Drums beat wildly and a ring of other villagers chants exultantly behind these performers. By using these villagers as audiences-within-the-film, Kitano initially provides a point of identification for audiences of the film. The second dance sequence accompanied by Keiichi Suzuki's hip-hop rhythms is a contemporised and cross-cultural version of "takatsuki," a kabuki tap form, where the dancers wear Japanese wood clogs. This dance, joined by all the villagers, provides a sense of participation for the film audience. The ending of Kitano's *Zatoichi* is openly orgiastic, particularly because the film concludes with a dance featuring most of the supporting cast.

Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is a compelling study in contrast. Kurosawa famously adapted western music to his jidaigeki, but did not adapt non-Japanese dance to jidaigeki. In Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies, the dance scene is part of the narrative, and is not meant to be spectacular. In *Seven Samurai*, dance in general exists for artistic exclusion and detachment. Dance in Kurosawa's works is not intended to impress the viewer. It is located strictly beneath the primacy of the narrative and the limit of realist film. Kurosawa closes his film with the farmers sowing, accompanied by music and dance, made possible by the village's victory over the attacking bandits. Kurosawa's camera technique distances the audience from the space of the enclosure. His filmic strategy of withdrawal is done via the long take and the long shot. Kurosawa's camera refuses the audience participation or identification with the enclosed space of the dance ritual. We are outside the ritual and remote from it. In this way, the dance ritual in Kurosawa's jidaigeki comedies discourages the audience from identifying with it. The sequence of the farmers planting while the samurai are watching from the bridge signifies their exclusion, conveying that there is no longer a place for the samurai in this village. The samurai mediate the ritual scene so that the reaction of the film audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the villagers in the film. Through the lenses of samurai, Kurosawa excluded the observer from participation and directs him to remain detached.

In *Zatoichi*, Kitano's intention to elevate the dancers to heroic status is obvious in his reliance on their spectacular performance. The village's colourful and vivacious festival is interrupted by Ichi's dark fight scenes. Although Ichi's fight scenes occur as an isolated interlude to the dance sequences, they share the echo of the distant "taiko" drums of the village's festival. That is to say, villagers are shot on the higher level than Ichi. Juxtaposition of these contrasting scenes thus leads spectators to stand on the threshold between reality and fiction, life and death, comedy and irony, motion and stillness, vivacity and poise.

Furthermore, Kitano's kinaesthetic and affective designs combined with comedy prevent his audience from critical identification with Ichi. It contrasts with the final scene of *Seven Samurai*, in which Kambei, the head-samurai, states that it is the villagers who have won and not the swordsmen. In Kitano's *Zatoichi*, the victory of villagers is not expressed in words but signified in dance by their powerful percussion, which leads Ichi to stumble off on his lone way out of the village at the end. It is an interesting contrast to Ichi, who stumbles at the beginning of the original, *Zatoichi Monogatari*. The dance scenes in the new *Zatoichi*, along with the other shots in the last ten minutes of the film, are taken to endorse the playful statement that it is the villagers who won and not the swordsman. In the new *Zatoichi*, therefore, both dance and comedy are emphasised beyond the limit of the realist film, and they destroy the unity of the diegesis. Dance and comedy escape from the control of the narrative and become purely critical spectacle.

Conclusion

In his adaptation of *Zatoichi*, Kitano dramatised Japanese anxieties regarding weakening generational ties. Kitano translates both Kurosawa's classics and the myth of *Zatoichi*, so as to deal with the troubling generation incongruity with creative sensitivity. I have discussed the way Kitano deployed both the comedy inherited from Kurosawa, and the aesthetics of kitsch translated from the original *Zatoichi*. With *Zatoichi*, Kitano has developed the jidaigeiki genre for contemporary audience in historically innovative ways, moving away from both the cynicism of the original, and Kurosawa's aesthetics of detachment. Kitano's cultural challenge is the reversal of Kurosawa's: Kurosawa's jidaigeiki were made in a historical context in which authority strongly imposed ethics and morals upon an individual. Kurosawa aimed to reshape postwar Japanese society for ideals of individual autonomy and aesthetics of detachment. In contrast, Kitano's cultural challenge is the privatised lifestyle and mode of consumer culture, where society is losing not only the responsive bodies to absorb culture, but also the minds to think critically. In order to create an opposing energy against what Kitano calls "me-ism," the cult of cool, and the contemporary self-centred detachment, Kitano activates an embodied engagement and cultural absorption through kitsch, as much as evoking critical self-reflexivity through comedy. Creating a mood of intimacy, and seeking for the spectator's bodily, affective immersion, Kitano therefore uses kitsch elements for good cause. Using kitsch elements from musicals, Kitano provides a comic commentary on swordsman's lives while he affectionately mocks the jidaigeiki genre convention.

Notes

[1] Stuart Kaminsky observes that the samurai in jidaigeiki often shares with the gunman in westerns a drive for revenge. See Stuart Kaminsky (1972) *The Samurai Film and the Western*, *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 1 (4), p. 319.

[2] Kabuki is the popular traditional theatre as opposed to the more aristocratic noh theatre.

[3] "Iki" is the term born out of traditional kabuki's original subversive roots and erotic relationship refined in 'lowbrow' geisha culture in the Edo period (1603-1886). Geisha epitomised for the people of the epoch the ideal of iki, which was manifested in "ukiyo-e" prints by artists (Kuki, 1979).

[4] The eroticism of Edo connected with laughter can be found in many ukiyo-e prints. Particularly, ukiyo-e prints of sexual intercourse in whatever combination (male-female, male-male -- the threesomes being the most common) were called "waraie" (laughing pictures). The term waraie denotes sensual pictures that provoke laughter.

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