Kikujiro (菊次郎の夏, *Kikujirō no natsu*, 1999)

Jana Aresin

dir. Takeshi Kitano; prod. Masayuki Mori, Takio Yoshida; screenplay Takeshi Kitano; photography Katsumi Yanagishima; music Joe Hisaishi. 35mm, color, 121 mins. Bandai Visual and Tokyo FM, distrib. Nippon Herald Films and Office Kitano.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

In his eighth film, television personality, director, and actor Takeshi Kitano departed from his previous style of dark and violent movies to tell a sentimental adventure story of a young boy trying to find his mother. On his journey, the boy is accompanied by a gambling low-level gangster from the neighborhood (forced into this task by his wife). During a meandering summer road trip, the unlikely pair encounters a variety of eccentric characters, leading to both comic and tragic moments. The film was released in 1999, at the end of what came to be known as Japan's »lost decade,« following the burst of the so-called bubble economy of the 1980s. This decade was characterized by rising unemployment and growing economic precarity, and it coincided with two tragic events that are today still remembered as »national traumas« in Japan: the Great Hanshin (or Kobe) earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo attacks in Tokyo in 1995 (Yomota 174). The Japanese film industry, however, had been on the decline long before this period of economic stagnation. After a peak in domestic film production in the late 1950s, the growing market for television and foreign films weakened the local film industry and led to the disappearance of many studios in the 1970s (Yomota 20-21; Gibbs 120). Whereas this impeded the commercial success of the domestic film industry, the waning influence of major studios also opened up new opportunities for independent filmmakers, who often entered the film business as outsiders (Gibbs 119-20; McDonald 11-12).

Many of these filmmakers took on gloomier subjects in this social climate of uncertainty, focusing on the »fringes of service sector capitalist affluence« in response to the »›post-moral‹ […] sensibility of advanced consumer capitalism« (Standish 332-33). A common theme of these new movies was a crisis of masculinity, as the postwar

ideal of the nuclear family with a »housewife« and breadwinning »salaryman« husband became less sustainable for more and more people. This coincided with a revival of the popular genre of the *yakuza* (gangster) movie by independent filmmakers—yet one that took on bleaker, more cynical tones, depicting its characters not as driven by honor and moral codes but rather as »irreverent, unpredictable, and often melancholic ›losers‹« (Chaplin 367).

One director, who came to be primarily associated with these new *yakuza* films, particularly in the West, was Takeshi Kitano. He made his directorial debut in 1989 after over a decade as a comedian and television personality that had made him a household name in Japanese entertainment. After a string of violent and nihilistic films, Kitano directed two films at the end of the 1990s that instead marked »a tentative process of trial and error […] to show human solitude and salvation« (Yomota 184): *Hana-bi* (1997), which introduced Kitano's works to Western audiences on a larger scale, and *Kikujiro* (1999).

Whereas *Hana-bi* retained the formal setting of a crime drama, with *Kikujiro*, Kitano approached a different genre. A tragicomedy about a chaotic summer road trip, it tells the story of Masao (played by Yusuke Sekiguchi), a young boy who lives with his grandmother in Tokyo. He has never met his parents. His father died young, and his estranged mother supposedly lives far away due to her work. When Masao's classmates leave one after the other for summer vacation with their families, Masao is left behind. As he visits his friends' houses and the deserted local football club, a growing sense of loneliness and melancholia settles in, which saturates the entire film's atmosphere. When Masao accidentally comes across a photo of his mother, he decides to leave home and visit her by himself in Toyohashi, a seaside town in Central Japan. After almost being robbed by a gang of local youths, he is offered help by a woman from the neighborhood. Upon learning of Masao's plan, she orders her husband, Kikujirō (played by Kitano), whose name both Masao and the audience only learn at the end of the film, to accompany him.

The film features tropes and themes associated with the melodramatic mode, most prominently the disruption of the family unit and the attempt to reunite or »repair« it as well as the clash between social norms and expectations with those living outside of these norms or failing to conform to them. At the same time, the film complicates the more conventional narrative trajectories of these themes. For example, unlike in the *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which Kitano named as an inspiration in a 1999 interview, the journey in *Kikujiro* does not conclude with a return to, or a reaffirmed appreciation of, the traditional family.

The theme of the disrupted or alienated family is represented in the motif of the search for a distant parental figure. This search, however, is not successful and culminates in the film's central dramatic moment, when Masao and Kikujirō finally arrive in Toyohashi, only to discover that Masao's mother has remarried and lives a seemingly idyllic middle class life with a house, garden, and new family. The scene does not only mark the loss of the imagined mother figure (who is assumed to await the eventual reunification with her son) but it also denies the simplistic story arc of Kikujirō eventually serving as a substitute father figure for Masao. Right before the encounter with Masao's mother, Kikujirō jokes that she might fall for him, and he would become Masao's new father. The confrontation with reality—that Masao's mother has in fact left him behind long ago and has started a new life—does not only dismiss this unlikely scenario but also seems to highlight the improbability of a positive outcome of

the characters' journey driven by both Masao's and Kikujirō's child-like naïveté. At the same time, the scene seems to reject a simple »redemption« arc of Kikujirō's character developing from a neglectful and irresponsible gambler to a loving father figure. Masao's disappointment and sadness are not easily mended by Kikujirō's attempts to console him and are almost overshadowed by Kikujirō's own pain and helplessness following this confrontation with reality.

In fact, many critics have pointed out that the movie's emotional journey is not only about Masao's search for his mother but at least as much, or even more, about Kikujirō himself (Gerow 164, 168). This already seems to be implied in the film's title, referencing the road trip as »Kikujirō's summer« (*Kikujirō no natsu*), not that of Masao. The encounter with Masao's mother prompts Kikujirō to visit the care home where his own estranged elderly mother lives on their way back from Toyohashi. However, paralleling Masao's failed attempt to reunite with his mother, Kikujirō eventually leaves the care home without having spoken to her.

A second recurring theme of the film—that of the social outsider—seems to tap into melodrama's concern with individuals in conflict with social norms. Throughout the story, the film juxtaposes two different sides of Japanese society. On the one hand, it depicts the orderly middle class life, which had served as an ideal during the years of economic growth, and which is embodied in the nuclear families of Masao's classmates leaving for seaside holidays in their cars, as well as the suit or uniform wearing hotel managers, taxi drivers, and paramedics forced to deal with Kikujirō's outbursts and antics throughout the film. Their frustrated yet polite, sometimes horrified, reaction to Kikujirō is the source of many of the film's comedic moments. On the other hand, the film depicts a different side of Japanese society: the tired lorry drivers, traveling artists, poets, bikers, and gangsters that Masao and Kikujirō encounter during their journey, and that Kikujirō belongs to as well.

However, the film does not unequivocally represent these characters' diversion from social norms as marked by conflict and suffering. The initial motivation for Masao and Kikujirō's journey and the absence of traditional forms of parental love and care—both characters' inabilities to connect to their mothers as well as Kikujirō's failure in functioning as a parental figure—produce emotions of disappointment, loneliness, and sadness. Yet, the two protagonists also encounter kindness and support from various »unconventional« characters they meet on the road: culminating in Masao and Kikujirō camping with an aspiring writer travelling the country who gives them a lift to Toyohashi, in addition to the two bikers from whom Kikujirō earlier in the film had stolen an angel-shaped bell in an attempt to console Masao. This drawn-out episode in the second half of the film seems to serve as the character's defiant attempt to construct their own makeshift version of the classic »family summer vacation« that Masao set out to find. He may be »motherless,« but he is not uncared for. In a series of typical summer activities and games turned on their head (dressing up as fish while fishing in a fishless pond; stealing watermelon from a nearby field), the film seems to both parody and ironically mimic standardized notions of family life, yet also offer the hopeful promise that companionship and affection can be found outside of this narrowly defined social institution.

The film makes use of a melodramatic mode of framing two central conflicts—the alienated family and the failure to conform to social norms—in a sentimental way aimed at eliciting sympathy and compassion. It does not fully resolve these tensions.

The film does not conclude with the reunification of the family, and Kikujirō does not undergo fundamental transformation from good-for-nothing outsider to responsible father figure. But neither does the film end in complete tragedy. Rather, it alternates between sad, melancholic moments and humorous, consoling, and hopeful ones—and refuses simple narrative closure to the very end.

References

Chaplin, Elayne. 2018. »Death and Duty: The On-Screen Yakuza.« In *A Companion to the Gangster Film*, edited by George S. Larke-Walsh, 355-76. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell.

Gerow, Aaron. 2007. *Kitano Takeshi: World Directors Series.* London: BFI.

Gibbs, Michael H. 2012. *Film and Political Culture in Postwar Japan.* New York: Peter Lang.

McDonald, Keiko. 2005. *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Standish, Isolde. 2005. *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film.* New York: Continuum.

Yomota, Inuhiko. 2019. *What Is Japanese Cinema? A History.* Translated by Philip Kaffen. New York: Columbia University Press.