

Article

Innovation as Conservation: Reflexivity, National Cinema, and Male Hegemony in Takeshi Kitano's *Hana-bi*

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Abstract: The article aims to illuminate the intersections of reflexivity, national cinema, and male hegemony in Takeshi Kitano's award-winning film *Hana-bi* (1997). *Hana-bi* marks a transition to a discourse espousing Japaneseness, particularly the dominant male versions of national identity in Kitano's filmmaking. The article assesses the impact of reflexivity that plays a crucial role in the discourse. To demonstrate these ideas, this article is separated into two sections. The first section discusses the problematic concepts of national cinema, analyzes the cultural and industrial contexts that informed *Hana-bi*, and illustrates the way in which the film reinforces the Japanese national essence and gender norms. The second section highlights the functions of reflexivity used in the film, drawing from the critical concept developed by film and television scholar Jane Feuer (1982).

Keywords: national cinema; *Hana-bi*; Takeshi Kitano; reflexivity; nationalism; gender; Orientalism

1. Introduction

"Beat" Takeshi Kitano, the internationally famous Japanese filmmaker, actor, and television personality appears in the 2017 live-action Hollywood remake of *Ghost in the Shell*, a well-known Japanese anime. Although all the other main characters speak in English, Kitano delivers his lines only in Japanese. Relegated to the supporting and stereotypical role, the token Japanese actor provides an air of Japanese cultural authenticity and consequently distances the Orient.

Kitano has gained a dominant influence in Japan through his television and other media appearances. This influence has been solidified by the success of *Hana-bi* (1997) at the Venice Film Festival. *Hana-bi* departs from Kitano's earlier work in manifold ways. First, as several scholars have highlighted (Gerow 1998; Davis 2001), the film includes the postcard imagery of iconic national landscapes, such as Mt Fuji, the raked sand gardens (*karesansui*), a Buddhist temple, cherry blossoms, and a traditional Japanese inn (*ryokan*). Second, the male protagonist is portrayed positively for the first time, depicted as a protector or a savior, of which Kitano himself plays the role. *Hana-bi* is Kitano's first film to feature family, justify violence, and present a positive view of the Japanese culture and masculinity. The international success of the film has exposed the issue of the aspects that constitute film festivals as sites of power, where nationality, ethnicity, and gender are negotiated.

This work explores reflexivity, national cinema, and male hegemony as interconnected in Kitano's award-winning film *Hana-bi* (1997). Situating *Hana-bi* within other works is significant, because the change in Kitano's style reflects upon a variety of cultural, historical, and global industrial factors, as well as the national socio-political contexts in the mid-1990s. After careful analysis, this work contends that *Hana-bi* embodies a defiant nationalist shift in his filmmaking, and that the reflexive devices fulfill an indispensable function. To illustrate these points, this article is divided into two sections. The first section introduces the problematic concepts of national cinema, and offers an analysis

of *Hana-bi* in relation to global industrial factors and national contexts. With a focus on discussing reflexivity in line with the terminology used by film and television scholar Jane Feuer (1982), the second section explores the engagement of *Hana-bi* with the construction of Japan, and its national cinema.

2. National Cinema, Gender, and Orientalism in *Hana-bi*

The concept of national cinema has increasingly been subjected to critical scrutiny since the 1980s after our realization of the construction of the nation and the crucial role the cinema plays in the formation of national identity. National cinemas are inseparable from the national legitimation or myth-making that marginalizes otherness (Crofts 2002, p. 387). Naturally, this concern has raised uncertainties regarding the paradigm of Japanese cinema, which has extensively presupposed essentialism. Following the postwar discovery of Japanese films in the West, the scholarship has regarded Japanese cinema as a mirror of Hollywood cinema and as a reflection of the national character that is correlated to its aesthetic and philosophical tradition (Yoshimoto 2000).

Japanese cinema must be discussed in the context of cultural globalization, because it has had a transnational dimension since the beginnings of the film industry in the 1890s. It has been constantly influenced by European and American cinemas, particularly Hollywood cinema. Tezuka mentions that postwar reconstruction “renewed and inscribed in Japan its own otherness against the West on one hand and its superiority complex in relation to its Asian neighbors on the other” (Tezuka 2012, p. 5). Since the war, many Japanese filmmakers have actively participated in self-Orientalism and reinforced national stereotypes. Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism (Said 1978) refers to Western discourse of non-Western cultures, which legitimizes the cultural hegemony of the West. Overlooking self-Orientalizing strategies applied by Japanese filmmakers, the scholarship of Japanese cinema has also become complicit in perpetuating a postcolonial situation, thus inadvertently participating in the postwar process of Western othering toward Japan and the Japanese self-othering construction of a national identity (Yoshimoto 1993; Singer 2014).

A related critical perspective that surfaces in recent scholarship is the issue on the privilege of Eurocentric tourist gaze of international film festivals. Major European international film festivals continue to maintain their dominance. European international film festivals, such as Venice, Cannes, and Berlin, validate national films through theatrical screening, awards, media coverage, and international distribution deals (Dorman 2016, pp. 136–37). The achievement of success in capturing the distinguished film award overseas requires many directors and actors from non-Western countries to display a facet of distinction to the Western gaze (Tezuka 2012; Dorman 2016). Asian directors have been exploiting Orientalism to gain recognition from major European film festivals. Wong (2011), a film festival scholar, states that the dominant Western festivals have constantly been fascinated with films derived from “oppressive regimes” and characterized by “overtones of Orientalism” (p. 88). Through Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, the Japanese cinema initially gained international recognition in 1951. Kurosawa won the Golden Lion Prize at the Venice International Film Festival. *Rashomon* rested on its period setting with kimono-clad characters evolving into a model of Japanese cinema, which could compete internationally. A mutually beneficial relationship has been formed between the European film festivals and Japanese cinema. Since the 1950s to the present, Japanese filmmakers and producers have been tactfully selling exoticism through iconography, reflexivity, stylization, and anti-realism to cater to foreign tastes and receive acclaim.

Over the years, Takeshi Kitano is a director who has enjoyed an association with major European film festivals, primarily those of Venice, Cannes, and Berlin. Scholars have argued that Kitano’s films contain embedded Orientalism to entice the audiences who attend international film festivals (Davis 2001; Redmond 2013; Dorman 2016). The Venice Film Festival is certainly persistent in its reverence of Kitano, because this affiliation is beneficial for both parties; that is, Kitano maintains an international status as a film artist, and the Venice Film Festival retains authority to decide the elements of a “good” film. It goes without saying, Kitano’s films are not the products of an individual artist and are certainly influenced by his company Office Kitano and funding agencies. For example,

it is Masayuki Mori, Office Kitano's president, and the producer who came up with the film titles, such as *Minna Yatteruka!* (*Getting Any?*, 1995), *Hana-bi*, *Akiresu to Kame* (*Achilles and The Tortoise*, 2008), and *Outrage* (2010) (Kitano 2012, p. 94). Mori influenced Kitano's filmmaking process and film content, particularly from *Kids Return* (1996), by working with Kitano to create films that were distinctive Japanese products differentiated from Hollywood blockbusters and with a particular appeal to foreign viewers as his marketing scheme (Mori 2007, pp. 100–4). This is a collaborative endeavor of the company Office Kitano, establishing Kitano as an auteur, a globally acknowledged Japanese filmmaker.

Kitano has consistently been Japan's representative at international film festivals, and his status as filmmaker has crystalized transnationally. Television (TV) game shows, such as "Takeshi's Castle" (Tokyo Broadcasting System, 1986–1989), were exported overseas. This TV show was first introduced to British audiences and then aired in the United States as the "most extreme elimination challenge". Kitano's early films characterized by dark humor, gore, and stylized violence, have become cult favorites in Europe, especially in the United Kingdom and North America. Kitano's films have attracted Western audiences as the brand label "Asia Extreme" put out by the British DVD company Tartan, which thrived in the 1990s. Redmond (2013, p. 84) states that torture, self-harm, rape, abuse, *seppuku*, and suicide littered in Kitano's films, such as *Violent Cop* (1989), *Sonatine* (1993), *Hana-bi*, *Brother* (2000), and *Dolls* (2002), have reinforced the Western fantasy of the Orient as a "savage" land of "mystique" and "danger".

With *Hana-bi*, Kitano acquired international auteur status, and he was elevated from an Asia Extreme director to an art-house filmmaker. *Hana-bi* represents a change in Kitano's style because he re-inscribes the dominant male versions of national identity. As discussed later, Kitano's style prior to the change lacks masculine legitimacy, collectivism, and loyalty glorified in Japanese mainstream *yakuza* or action films. The narrative of *Hana-bi* centers on family and homosocial bonds to reinforce patriarchal ideals. Nishi is a police detective, and his wife Miyuki is suffering from a terminal illness. Their young daughter had died earlier. During a police stakeout, Nishi leaves his partner and best friend Horibe to visit his wife in the hospital. Unaccompanied, Horibe is shot by a suspect killer and becomes paralyzed. Later, another fellow detective Tanaka is also killed in action. After the incident, Nishi decides to retire from his police work and borrows money from the *yakuza* to compensate for his guilty feelings. Horibe is confined to a wheelchair, and his wife and family have abandoned him. Horibe develops suicidal thoughts, thereby prompting Nishi to provide Horibe with painting equipment to distract him. Horibe begins painting to have a sense of purpose in life. Meanwhile, Nishi embarks on a plan to gain money and pay off his loan by robbing a bank. After paying off his loan, he takes his wife on a final trip around Japan. The *yakuza* pursue Nishi for repaying the interest, but he outsmarts and kills most of the *yakuza* men. At the end of the film, Nishi commits suicide with his wife Miyuki on a beach.

The change in Kitano's style in *Hana-bi* must be considered in relation to various cultural, historical, and global industrial factors that influence representation. Although the major Japanese film studios, such as Shochiku, Toho, and Toei, declined as production giants in the 1970s, they still controlled distribution and exhibition of films through block-booking contracts in the mid-1990s, which put independent films, such as Kitano's, at a great disadvantage (Gerow 2007, p. 61). For this reason, Japanese independent producers used a major European film festival circuit to achieve artistic recognition, publicity, and commercial success. Kitano's films before *Hana-bi*, including *Sonatine* (1993) and *Kids Return* (1996), earned critical acclaim at Cannes, but received no major awards. *Hana-bi* was thus strategically targeted to the Venice Film Festival (Yamada and Yamashita 2006, p. 65), and the film was screened at Venice before it was screened in Japan. In order to establish Kitano's auteur status inside and outside Japan, Kitano, along with producer Mori, sought awards from the international film festivals by promoting "honmonono" or "authentic" Japanese contents (Mori 2007, pp. 103–6).

The change in Kitano's style in *Hana-bi* also reflects upon the national socio-political context and a resurgence of nationalism in Japan in the mid-1990s. Japan was the second largest economy throughout the 1980s, and a majority of the population had prospered. Owing to the burst of the

economic bubble in the early 1990s, which consequently led to a recession, Japan has experienced a national identity crisis (Iida 2001). Iwabuchi (2015) notes that the mid-1990s saw the emergence of nationalistic discourses in numerous forms:

Many attempts have been made to (re)discover the merit and virtue of Japan: nostalgia for past glory, reactive discourses that aim to revise history textbooks to counter the “self-tormenting” view of Japan’s modern history of imperialism and colonialism in Asia, and the state’s emphasis on teaching Japanese children more about their traditions and instilling patriotic sentiments (p. 51).

Furthermore, the timing of *Hana-bi* coincides with an anti-feminist backlash that began around 1996 with the agenda to reinstate traditional patriarchal ideals. As Wada and Inoue (2011) point out, the issues of World War II comfort women descriptions in school history textbooks, and the bills to permit *fufu bessei* (different surnames between spouses) have aroused a conservative sentiment in Japan, and prompted a backlash against gender equality. The socio-political climate of the mid-1990s, along with the changing gender roles and family relations, have destabilized the patriarchal authority with the rapid increase in divorce rate. The emergence of modern women who were unwilling to accept the traditional obedience expected of them in the past has threatened patriarchal privileges. In this sense, *Hana-bi* is suffused with a sense of Japanese masculinity in crisis. As indicated below, it is with *Hana-bi* that Kitano started to show a marked tendency to show male protagonists, or the side characters played by Kitano, as easily relatable.

The male protagonists in pre-*Hana-bi* films kill innocent people and rape women and are far from heroic. The protagonists, including Azuma in *Violent Cop* (1989), Uehara in *Boiling Point* (1990), and Murakawa in *Sonatine* (1993), lack the fixed and definite attributes as protector-savior, collectivism, and loyalty central to the heroes in Japanese mainstream *yakuza* or action films. These earlier films lack the representation of violence to glorify victory and masculinity and thus undermine the exhilaration of audiences. The narrative and characterization of these films force audiences to question the exhilaration indulged in mainstream action films. Although Kitano’s early films from *Violent Cop* (1989) to *Kids Return* (1996) were filled with misogynistic attitudes toward women, the unrelatable male protagonists in these films have deconstructed the dominant male versions of national identity.

The protagonist Nishi in *Hana-bi* is less inscrutable and notably a more relatable character than the protagonists in pre-*Hana-bi* films. *Hana-bi* portrays male fantasies of control by reinforcing the stereotypical gender role of man as protector or guardian. Nishi looks after his co-worker, protects his sick wife, and recompenses the widow for Tanaka’s death. Nishi purchases paint and art materials for Horibe by borrowing money from the *yakuza*, with which he also helps and supports Tanaka’s widow. He then plans a final trip with his terminally ill wife to make the optimal use of their remaining time together. Violence is justified in the narrative, and Kitano indulges in his narcissism by playing the lead role.

The national symbols and landscapes, such as Mt Fuji, the raked sand gardens (*karesansui*), a Buddhist temple, cherry blossoms, and a traditional Japanese inn (*ryokan*), have become critical areas of interest since *Hana-bi* was released in 1997. The film is an obscure and complex work because the national symbols and landscapes are self-consciously and overtly included and are at times treated comically or in caricature. Many national iconographies are symbols recognized by national and international audiences. Ambivalence and contradiction in the film are derived from its entangled relationship with nationalism and Orientalism. Thus, examining the way in which comedy, violence, and parody function within the narrative as a whole is necessary.

Several discussions have occurred in terms of the national iconographies exhibited in *Hana-bi*. The film is generally agreed upon as implicitly nationalist because it aestheticizes Japan (Gerow 1998, p. 45; Ko 2009, p. 49). *Hana-bi* is different from Kitano’s previous work with its added color, and the film explicitly and self-consciously uses Japanese cultural iconographies, whereby foreign viewers can perceive the film as a national product (Dorman 2016). As Abe points out, the scenery of mainland

Japan remained “stubbornly nonspecific” in Kitano’s films before *Hana-bi*, and *Hana-bi* is Kitano’s first film to display identifiable national landmarks (Abe 2005, p. 237). However, when it comes to the meaning of these national iconographies, our understanding has been limited by a lack of nuanced critical analysis. Davis argues that the national references provide the film a “right-wing taint”, on the basis of the reason that they are “not burlesqued”, and “they are meant to be taken straight” (Davis 2001, p. 73). This view is shared by Dorman who states:

Kitano does not draw attention to Japanese iconography in order to lampoon it or to distort geographical placement. Instead, the inclusion of nature, and cherry blossoms in particular, situates the viewer firmly within a Japanese context (Dorman 2016, p. 152).

One might wonder whether the film is tainted with nationalism only when national references “are meant to be taken straight”. Although the assessments of Davis and Dorman have a certain measure of validity, these assessments must be treated with caution for three reasons. First, not all the national iconographies in *Hana-bi* are free of parody and satire. Davis and Dorman make a snap judgment with no adequate discussion of a few of the actual film’s absurd scenes in question. Second, Davis and Dorman fail to notice that certain burlesques can serve conservative functions. Third, their analysis assumes the filmmaker’s passivity and assimilation in the face of dominant Western power and gaze and thus overlooks the internal dynamics of resistance, opposition, and negotiation.

At different points in time, Kitano expressed resistance to Orientalist stereotypes and disparaged Japanese artists who exploit them. Kitano presents a commentary to suggest a rejection of exoticism in several of his publications (Kitano 1983, 2007), where he argued that Western critics tended to view Japanese films through an Orientalist lens and seek exotic elements, whereas Japanese filmmakers tended to accept them blindly and sell the stereotypes of the mysterious East. For example, Kitano criticized the New Wave filmmakers of the 1960s, such as Nagisa Oshima, Shohei Imamura, and Masahiro Shinoda, for their primitive and exotic representation of Japan. Although these directors were highly acclaimed in the West, Kitano contends that the things celebrated by Western critics were nothing but exoticism or the unknown Eastern mystique (Kitano 1983, pp. 46–49).

After receiving the Golden Bear award for *Hana-bi* in 1997, Kitano made the following statement in an interview:

In overseas, I am often asked by critics about my deadpan acting style. I play a trick on them, saying “Do you know something about *noh* play?” The Japanese film directors interviewed overseas often bring up *bushido*, *zen*, and *noh* play to mystify themselves. That’s cheating (Ishizuka et al. 1999, p. 77).

In terms of the film’s prominent images of Japanese iconographies in another interview, Kitano stressed that “this film is not the so called *Japanesque* film, but it presents anachronistic Japan as the subjects of gags” (Suzuki 1997, p. 78). In these comments, regarding *Hana-bi* as merely promoting exoticism would be too simplistic and hasty. The question of whether the film is completely uncritical of the Western gaze is a matter of dispute.

In an earlier part of the same interview, Kitano bafflingly offers comments espousing the essentialized notion of collective death and expressing nationalistic lament for a lost Japaneseness.

Nishi has broken the law and has committed crimes; thus, he is a criminal. However, in my viewpoint, you can forgive one’s wrongdoings if he is prepared to kill himself. A similar romanticism runs in a Japanese soldier who died under the name of the emperor. Such a death is dangerous to glorify. However, we cannot dismiss it as absurd and nonsense. Such a romantic blood flows through the Japanese people, and we must face it (Ibid., p. 74).

Kitano explains that Nishi’s action might be incomprehensible within the Western notions of rationality (Ibid., p. 78). These statements imply that Kitano’s ideas are entrenched in nationalist essentialism, wherein he celebrates the spiritual Japan over the rational West. Accordingly, Kitano

celebrates Nishi's wife, who tacitly "follows her husband with the same spirit" (Ibid., p. 74). Few dialogues purposely exist in the film, where Nishi communicates with his wife using a non-verbal high-context style or a connected understanding. This notion of Japaneseness is illustrated by Nishi's insistence on silence or refusal to "talk to" his ailing wife, contrary to her doctor's advice. The relationship between Nishi and Miyuki is depicted as the embodiment of Japanese expressions, such as *ishindenshin* and *aun no kokyū*, meaning perfect synchronicity or being perfectly in unison.

The indulgence in the nostalgia for Japaneseness, the narrative of *Hana-bi* can be read as a cultural resistance to the West, that is, reactionary; it seeks to return Japan to the ideologies of an earlier era. Kitano states that he intended to make "an old type of film", such as *Hana-bi*, because "*nihontekina koto*" or Japaneseness has been increasingly neglected (Kitano 2008, p. 77). Kitano seeks to preserve the integrity and coherence of Japanese cultural traditions, which include the imagined notion of Japanese machismo and wifehood. In this sense, Kitano's appropriation of Orientalism crosses over with nationhood and gender. Resisting "foreign" stereotypes of Japan, and the Eurocentric tourist gaze, Kitano's position can be characterized by reverse Orientalism, a discourse of resistance, borrowing of Orientalist categories adopted by the West, and then turning of the tables. The feminist sociologist Ueno points out that Japanese Reverse Orientalism "serves politically conservative purposes" to preserve the status quo of the traditional gender roles (Ueno 1997, p. 297). *Hana-bi* can be read as a discursive act of devaluing Western hegemony and revaluing the Japanese national essence and the privilege of masculinist hegemony.

3. Conservative Reflexivity, Cultural Resistance, Nationalism, and Male Hegemony in *Hana-bi*

Reflexivity refers to various stylistic and textual devices that interrupt the continuity in time and space; moreover, it ruptures a diegetic illusion to unravel the mechanisms involved in producing or consuming film and foregrounds the nature of cinema as an artifice (Feuer 1982; Stam 1992). Feuer (1982) illustrates that reflexivity, as more commonly associated with art cinema, is also used in mainstream cinema and can be either transgressive or conservative. In terms of the Hollywood musicals, such as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), reflexivity emphasizes spectacle and artifice and draws attention to cinema as an institution, but ultimately serves conservative ends to glorify American entertainment and its national heritage of musicals (Feuer 1982). Feuer succinctly calls the function of conservative reflexivity as "innovation as conservation" (Ibid., p. 91), and her theoretical framework can elucidate the role of reflexivity in national cinemas. The functions and purposes of reflexivity deployed in national cinemas must naturally vary; reflexivity can be used for a critical or subversive purpose to challenge national myth, institution, hegemony, stereotypes, or the notion of national cinema; however, reflexivity can be used for a conservative reason to perpetuate them. Drawing upon the concept of reflexivity illuminated by Feuer (1982), the section analyzes the engagement of *Hana-bi* with the construction of Japan and its national cinema.

Hana-bi uses reflexive techniques, which foreground cinema as an artifice. These techniques include self-referentiality, temporal ambiguity, discontinuity, and fragmentation. *Hana-bi* is filled with comic references to the filmmaking process itself, where the national iconographies play an important part. Since several of the national iconographies appear absurdly and unnaturally outside the context of Japanese cinema, they can be read as parodic or satirical. The full scope of the film can only be appreciated by becoming aware of the resonances created by such reflexivity. As demonstrated in detail, the reflexive devices serve a conservative purpose, undermining stereotypes of Japan constructed in the West, and inviting the audience to participate in the nostalgia for "authentic" Japaneseness. I will demonstrate how Kitano reinforces the notion of national cinema as a satire or parody of the "foreign" stereotypes.

Some reflexive devices in *Hana-bi* demonstrate the operation of the global film industry and drawing attention to Western hegemony and the conventional grammar of national cinema that caters to international film festivals. This is best exemplified in the journey scene by the lake, where Nishi grills a tiny fish on a stick, hands it to his wife Miyuki, and calls it "an Italian delicacy". This passing

gag insinuates the Venice Film Festival in Italy to present the process of marketing this film as a festival piece. Another example concerns the stakeout sequence, where Nishi fakes a throw to the nameless sushi chef playing catch. This absurd scene, where Nishi pretends to release the ball to the sushi chef but actually throws in a different direction, can be read as transgressing or deviating from the Western hegemony and Orientalism. This reflexive device involving the chef of sushi, Japanese culinary iconography, can be read as contestation and is used as a means to resist “foreign” stereotypes of Japan, and the Eurocentric tourist gaze. Moreover, the two Orientalist kitsch paintings which appear as a background in the *yakuza* office that Nishi visits, can be interpreted as a display of “The Orient strikes back”. These paintings of a large dragon, and a Sharaku print of a *kabuki* actor symbolize the images of Japan commodified in the West, functions to undermine the codes of Orientalism.

The abovementioned reflexive devices challenge stereotypes created in the West, and address the Western cultural domination, while other reflexive devices in *Hana-bi* focus on paying homage to Kitano’s authorship and enacting and reinforcing the notion of the Japanese national cinema. *Hana-bi* is an autobiographical work, because Horibe, who is paralyzed in his wheelchair, resonates with Kitano’s 1994 injuries, which he suffered in a motorbike accident and rehabilitation in real life. The self-referentiality is evident in the representation of Nishi as the director-within-the-film. Nishi plays the role of not only the character in the film but also the surrogate director. Gerow (2007) points out that Nishi prompts Horibe to paint, thereby making Nishi a proactive character, “less a narrator foreshadowing events than a director, preparing his own script, props and costume” (Gerow 2007, p. 142). The integral link between Horibe and Nishi can be identified in numerous ways, particularly in the crosscutting between Nishi putting on a fireworks display for his wife and Horibe’s family paintings, thus illuminating Horibe’s role as the nostalgic narrator and Nishi’s role as a performer. Through parallel montage, Kitano alternates between Horibe’s and Nishi’s stories.

Audience identification with Nishi and Horibe is enhanced using flashbacks, point-of-view shots, and parallel montages. In the romanticized hegemonic male-centered narrative, the traditional hierarchy is maintained. All the junior male detectives respect their seniors Nishi and Horibe as role models. The film glorifies the male bonding and celebrates the ways in which men look out for each other as evident in the scene where Horibe and Nakamura admirably talk of Nishi’s hard-boiled toughness and prowess. The discourse of nationalism and manhood for the purpose of nostalgic enforcement is evident in a homosocial dialogue between Horibe and the junior detective Nagai.

Nagai: Mr. Horibe, were you and Nishi classmates in junior high?

Horibe: In senior high, too.

Nagai: And your wives are friends, too?

Horibe: That’s right. Do you remember, Mr. Nishi? At the amusement park. We picked them up, didn’t we? Mr. Nishi got the pretty one, and I got the dog.

Nagai: (laughs)

Horibe: What are you laughing at?

In this dialogue, Horibe tells Nagai that Nishi wooed the pretty Miyuki, and Horibe was left with the ugly woman. The two female characters in the film are categorized in accord with the traditional male-oriented norms. The “pretty” female, such as Miyuki, is presented as weak, childlike, demure, and silent. Miyuki, who requires male protection, is depicted positively, whereas the “ugly” female character, such as Horibe’s wife, is described negatively as a selfish woman. Although Horibe’s wife does not actually appear on screen, the male detectives’ dialogues show that she deserted him, following a gun shooting that has left Horibe crippled. Thus, the film reinforces the binary oppositions of good or bad female behaviors categorized by a male perspective and clusters them together with aesthetic features, such as pretty/positive versus ugly/negative. The representation of females on- and off-screen in *Hana-bi* exposes many of the underlying masculine anxieties in the late 1990s and the associated nostalgic urge to adhere to traditional gender roles.

Among the marginalized female figures in Kitano's cinema, Miyuki in *Hana-bi* is arguably the most silent, asexual, and dependent female character. Nishi acts, and she reacts to his actions with smiles, giggles, and laughs. Kitano's cinema reflects upon the patriarchal society's narrowly conceived perception of women in Japan. This perception is associated with maternal virtues or women as sexualized spectacles. Kitano's early films, such as *Violent Cop*, *Boiling Point*, and *Sonatine*, particularly expose the female body to sexual objectification by representing female characters with large breasts as non-threatening, dumb, unintelligent, or mentally handicapped. Female characters continue to play maternal or nurturing roles in Kitano's cinema as exemplified in the hostess boss or *mama-san* in *Ryuzo and the Seven Henchmen* (2015). In *Hana-bi*, Miyuki is depicted as helpless, sexless, and childlike. Her childlikeness is exaggerated during the journey; she wears an *anorak* and a cap and appears and acts like a boy. In the Buddhist temple bell scene, Miyuki sits with *taisou zuwari*, a half squatting sitting position on the floor, similar to the sitting position taught to the children at school in Japan. Portraying Miyuki as asexual, the film echoes the conservative expectations of women to be chaste, submissive, and domestic-oriented. By emphasizing and exaggerating her weakness and asexual childlikeness, *Hana-bi* resolves its gender tensions in favor of its male protagonist.

The conservative use of reflexivity manifests clearly with substantial coherence in the couple's journey sequences. This phenomenon is manifested in several comic disruption scenes, which occur in the temple: First, the scene where a small van drives between the camera and the couple, who are posing for a photograph; second, the scene where Nishi reaches out for the camera lens cover and steps on the raked sand gardens; finally, the scene where Nishi rings the temple bell off schedule. Lamprooning Japanese landmarks, rules, and rituals, these reflexive scenes subvert stereotypes of Japan constructed in the West. These scenes fulfill a conservative function in that all of these mischievous actions of Nishi in these Japanese landmarks are all followed by the reactions of Miyuki laughing at his actions. The reflexive scenes celebrate the perfect synchronicity of Nishi and Miyuki.

The discourse on nationalism and conservative reflexivity are particularly evident in the aestheticized depiction of death in the film. Significantly, the suicide in *Hana-bi* is aestheticized and anachronistically presented in association with Japanese war memory and masculinity. The film visualizes a close analogy between Nishi's suicide and a Japanese soldier from World War II (WWII). Horibe's painting of a Japanese soldier from WWII in which soldiers sit to commit suicide under the cherry blossom trees is an obvious example. Other references to the nation's war memory that can be found in Horibe's other painting in the earlier scene, which foreshadows Nishi's suicide, shows a multitude of small snowflakes and flickering lights shaped in the Japanese characters for "snow" and "light", respectively. At the base of the picture, characters for *jiketsu* or suicide are boldly etched in red. *Jiketsu* is an anachronistic term that refers to suicides committed by warriors, *yakuzas*, and the Imperial Army. The film nostalgically venerates the beauty of voluntary death associated with masculinity by using the outmoded term for suicide.

Less obvious, but not less important, is in the shot of an out-of-season firefly in the snow outside the inn. Such image can be a playful, but nationalistic, reference to the Japanese popular song titled *Hotaru No Hikari* (The Glow of Fireflies), whose lyrics start with *hotaru no hikari, mado no yuki* (Light of fireflies, snow by the window). Adapted from the Scottish folk song *Auld Lang Syne*, the song was originally a farewell war song to soldiers sent to WWII (Shimoyama 2001, p. 173). The shot of the out-of-season firefly in *Hana-bi* affirms the filmmaker's ownership of the tradition and provides the people in the know or the people who knew the song, a knowing wink. These reflexive scenes appear without a considerable concern for coherence in the film, but they are a far cry from doubting the dominant male version of Japanese hegemony. The scenes that evoke nostalgia for a lost past assert the eternal quality of Japanese machismo.

The final scene represents a seascape as a space on which Japanese masculinity is embodied and performed by Nishi played by Kitano. The coastline is presented as the highly conservative site of a narcissistic mirror. The final suicide scene begins with a close-up shot of a completed puzzle and then cuts to a point-of-view shot of Nishi watching Miyuki on an isolated beach through the front window

inside the car. The completed puzzle symbolizes the “unified” or “authentic” national culture and the celebration of the recovery of such. Nishi inserts two bullets into the gun. When the detectives arrive at the beach, Nishi asks the detectives to allow them to be alone for a few minutes. While sitting on the beach, Nishi and Miyuki watch a curiously outdated figure of a nameless girl running around with a kite. When Nishi holds her kite, she runs on hoping it will rise to the sky. However, Nishi does not release the kite and consequently tearing it.

Conservative reflexivity is also evident in this kite scene. The traditional *yakko-dako* or a kite in the shape of a samurai of the lowest-rank and the kite-flying as an old-fashioned boys’ amusement, provide this scene a sense of incongruity and anachronism. This scene is reflexive because it presents a kite, a Japanese iconography out of its culturally specific context; in addition, the nameless figure of the ghost-like girl running around on the beach adds a surreal element to this final scene. The reflexivity in the kite scene can be interpreted in two ways, both of which serve as a conservative function, devaluing the West to revalue Japaneseness. First of all, the anachronicity of kite can be regarded as a reminder of a clichéd image and a stereotype of Japan created in the West. The action of Nishi destroying the kite and ripping the wings may suggest a playful gesture of challenging them. Second, the girl’s act of kite-flying, a traditional boys’ affair can be read as an act of female transgression into male territory. The action of Nishi destroying the kite and ripping the wings symbolizes the punishment of the girls and women who do masculine things, and transgress against the Japanese gender norms.

Furthermore, this disruptive act of Nishi breaking the kite is comfortably tied back to the diegesis by Miyuki’s reaction shot. When Nishi rips the kite, Miyuki smiles. Similar to the earlier temple scene, the reaction shot of Miyuki smiling at Nishi’s mischief arouses the spectator’s emotional identification with the couple. The girl is actually Kitano’s real daughter, and including the girl allows Nishi and Miyuki to see a surrogate “daughter” they lost. Before their death at the end of *Hana-bi*, Miyuki says to Nishi “Arigato... gomenne,” which means “Thank you... I’m sorry”. Then, Nishi pulls her toward him. “Arigato... gomenne” is the only utterance she makes in the film, and this line insinuates that the double suicide is consensual.

The kite girl becomes the witness of the double suicide in the closing scene. After Nishi rips the kite, the girl continues to fly the wingless kite. The latter only hovers low at this point. The camera pans away from the beach to the sea at the end. Subsequently, two gunshots are heard, suggesting that Nishi kills his wife and himself. The film ends with a reaction shot of the kite girl, who plays the spectator within the film. Through the amalgamation of the innocent girl with a consensual double suicide, the final scene creates a masculine tone of nationalist essentialism that is unobjectionable and palpable for international audiences.

4. Conclusions

As a tentative conclusion, the release of *Hana-bi* in 1997 marks a change in Kitano’s filmmaking by reinforcing the notion of Japanese national cinema. This work has demonstrated that the discourse of nationalism in *Hana-bi* intersects with the discourses of gender and Orientalism to attain a melancholic enforcement. This work has illustrated that the transition in Kitano’s style in *Hana-bi* mirrors a variety of cultural, historical, and global industrial factors, as well as the national socio-political contexts in the mid-1990s. *Hana-bi* is ultimately a conservative text, which revolves around the binary between challenging stereotypes and clichés of Japan and affirming the “essence” of the native culture and “authentic” Japaneseness. The film unveils the manner at which Asian directors have been exploiting Orientalism for recognition by major Western international film festivals. The film caricatures the Eurocentric tourist gaze, thus addressing the West-centered political and aesthetic conventions of filmmaking for international film festivals. The film critically contains Western Orientalism in a reflexive way to promote a narrative of Japaneseness.

Needless to say, limitations of time and space in this study did not permit a full contextualization of *Hana-bi* within the body of Kitano’s other works, particularly with regard to the question of how the components of reflexivity, nation and masculinity preceded and succeeded *Hana-bi*. Interestingly,

Kitano's films after *Hana-bi*, including *Kikujiro* (1998), *Brother* (2000), and *Zatoichi* (2003) suggest a continuing tendency to depict male protagonists as savior-protectors or guardians. In March 2018, Kitano left his talent agency and production company Office Kitano, which he had co-founded with Mori in 1988, to form a new company T.N Gon Incorporated. A viewer is left to wonder whether this event causes changes in his future films or not.

The conditions within which *Hana-bi* was made and screened served to illustrate the complicity between national cinema and Orientalism in the global film market. Directors of national cinema can strategically use the various modes of reflexivity and stylization to establish a global profile as an auteur and a representative of the nation. The conservative reappropriation and re-emergence of national cinema developed by Kitano is ironically promoted by international film festivals, because the film explicitly displays a national specificity that is valuable as an otherness to the Western gaze. In the name of arts or cultural relativism, international film festivals can inadvertently reward an oppressive foreign discourse that reproduces national stereotypes and justifies the status quo of gender hierarchy.

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