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BLUE KITANO:

The Motif of the sea in the cinema of

Takeshi Kitano

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes to explore the ways in which Takeshi Kitano, a Japanese director and actor revealed in the 1990s with a golden lion for "Hana-bi" in 1998, employs the motif of the sea as a poetic space in his cinema. The collapse of the Japanese studio system has led to the emergence of new kinds of authors, individuals with different, unconventional formation, such as Kitano Takeshi. Born in an impoverished district of Tokyo, Kitano was the son of a house painter and a housewife. Successively, Kitano became a lift-boy, a standup comedian, an actor, a man of television, and then moved on to directing in 1989 with *Violent Cop*. Although his films develop personal themes, aesthetics and a sense of editing, the author nevertheless inscribes himself in the continuity of Japanese cinema. The sea, as a foundational element of Japanese culture - Japanese mythologies make the sea the birthplace of its humankind - asserts itself as both the theatre and the acting subject of his stories. By exploring the relationships he weaves between his cinema and extra-film elements (biographical elements, cultural paratexts), this thesis intends to demonstrate that the sea, far from being a simple decor for the plot, participates in a poetics of space specific to its author. By blending burlesque and drama, under the influence of the sea and the powers of his daydreams, Kitano exposes the vanity, inadaptability and loneliness of a man cut off from his origins, from his childhood. Obsessive element of his plots, this relentless escape from the city to the sea gives the Kitanian hero an Sisyphian air. By blurring the boundaries between burlesque and drama, filmic and extra-filmic elements, Kitano interweaves this quest for origins with a return to childhood. This thesis intends to demonstrate that by acting in this way, Kitano weaves a continuous mesh that binds the subject to his environment, the artist to his land, the man in the sea. The importance of the milieu, of geography participates in the poetics of the artist and contributes to his formation.

Cílem této práce je prozkoumat způsoby, kterými Takeši Kitano, japonský režisér, herec a držitel Zlatého lva za film *Hana-bi* (1998), díky němuž byl poprvé rozpoznán, využívá motiv moře k vytvoření poetického prostoru ve svých filmech.

Kolaps Japonského studiového systému vedl k touze po nových typech autorů, jedinců s odlišným, nekonvenčním vývojem - přesně takovým, jako prožil Kitano Takeši. Narodil se v chudinské části Tokya jako syn malíře pokojů a ženy v domácnosti. Postupně se od obsluhování výtahů dostal ke komedii, herectví, práci v televizi a poté v roce 1989 filmem *Ten chlap je magor!* až k režii. Ačkoli jeho filmy rozvíjejí osobní témata, estetiku a smysl pro střih, autor přesto navazuje na kontinuitu kinematografie své země. V japonské mytologii je moře místem zrodu lidstva, a proto je jako esenciální element národní kultury předním podnětem pro Takešihovo příběhy a práci s herectvím. Zkoumáním vztahů

mezi kinematografickými a mimofilmovými prvky (biografické zážitky, kulturní paratexty), má tato práce ukázat, že moře není zdaleka pouze jednoduchou dekorací zápletky, ale účastní se poetiky prostoru specifického pro jeho autora. Kombinací burlesky a dramatu, pod vlivem moře a sil svého snění, Kitano odhaluje marnost, nepřizpůsobivost a osamělost člověka odříznutého od jeho původu, od jeho dětství. Obsesivní prvek jeho zápletek, tento neúprosný únik z města do moře, propůjčuje hrdinovi Sisyfovskou esenci. Stíráním hranic mezi burleskou a dramatem, filmovými a mimofilmovými prvky, Kitano prolíná tuto otázku původu s návratem do dětských let. Tento text má v úmyslu prokázat, že autor splétá souvislou síť, která váže subjekt k jeho prostředí, umělce k jeho zemi a člověka k moři. Význam prostředí a geografie se podílí na poetice umělce a zcela přispívá k jeho formování.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I like to film the characters facing the ocean. I am touched by this image. I am told that it has become a habit, a trademark. Some critics have even written that a Kitano film without seeing the sea is impossible.

— Takeshi Kitano, in *Kitano par Kitano*¹

The sea is an essential figure in the filmography of Takeshi Kitano, a major Japanese filmmaker of the 90s, who was internationally acclaimed with a Golden Lion in Venice in 1998 for his film *Hana-bi*.

Since 1989, he directed more than 18 films in which he elaborated his style and developed his thematics: the return to childhood, margins, crippled love and the unavoidable struggle between tradition and modernity which reflects also an essential stake of the Japanese society. Soon, he elaborates a unique film language, a surprising patchwork that meshes burlesque with lyricism, mute characters with loud violence. His hybrid *mise en scène* evokes times to times the comedies of Jacques Tati, the slapsticks of Buster Keaton, but also the explosive violence of the *yakuza eiga* (gangsters movies in Japan), and the contemplative poetic of Ozu's cinema.

The sea resurfaces in almost every single one of his films, like an obsession. In *Sonatine* (1993), a group of *yakuza* on the run, betrayed by their clan, take shelter on the beach in Okinawa. In *A Scene at the Sea* (1991), a young deaf man finds his passion in surfing. In *Kikujiro no natsu* (1999, where Kikujiro, a thug in his fifties, helps a little boy to find his

¹ Kitano, T. & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris : GRASSET, 2001

mother on the Japanese shore. In the 18 films he has directed, the beach is never far away. To a certain extent, the gentle repetition and regularity of its plots is reminiscent of the sack and the surf. Of course, there are many ways to explore the depth of his work.

Simultaneously actor and director of his plots, the theme of the double in his cinema worths to be explored. We observe several dualities within the director. Simultaneously a man of cinema and television, actor and director, comic and melancholic, he exhibits a remarkable taste for contrasts. It was even the central plot element of *Tashekis'* (2005). Furthermore, Kitano signs his performances as an actor with Beat Takeshi, a pseudonym that he used when he made his debut in the *manzai*, a traditional Japanese comedy duo.² He is Beat Takeshi in front of the camera, and Kitano behind it. The care he takes to delineate the actor from the director is worth exploring and has already been the subject of researches³. The violence in his films is also noteworthy. It comes as a contrast to the dance and gunfights of Hollywood and Hong Kong films of that era. The violence in Kitano's films is brief, biting, like a cut in a montage. It bleeds, it kills. There is no playfulness in the violence he depicts. There is no representation of violence in his films, but instead the violence of representation.⁴

² A naive and comic-satirical genre, the most widespread and popular in Japan, *manzai* features actors presenting, standing up, a short sketch, through a quick and sharp dialogue. This art in the form of verbal jousting, which is always based on the same comic formula - one character plays the *tsukkomi*, serious and rational, while the other, plays the boxer, distracted and often ridiculous - would have been popular in the popular theaters of Kyoto, Nara and especially Osaka, between the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries.

³ Miyao, Daisuke (2004) "Telephilia vs. Cinephilia = Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano?," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*: Vol. 45 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

⁴ See appendix 4

Death is also a major theme in his stories. It is the disease that condemns Inspector Nishi's wife in the very near term. It is the disease that the warring yakuza slyly inflict on one another. It is the voluntary death of its characters, the voluntary departure of protagonists who, having reached the end of the journey, of their journey, decide to end their lives. I could go on and on with the list of rich themes that compose his work. Then, why choosing the sea as a prism for understanding the particularities of his filmic language? Why is the strange pervasiveness of the sea in his stories a key to understanding Kitano's work?

To try to answer these questions, we must plunge into the bibliographical elements of the director. Born in Adachi in 1947 in a poor district of Tokyo, still devastated by the American bombs, he is the youngest of a family of four children. His father, a construction painter, struggled to provide for the family. His meagre pay was often dilapidated in alcohol and gambling. He spent a miserable childhood in the slums of the Japanese capital. With his brothers and sisters, he was often compelled to go and help his father with his work. Hunger was a constant companion: "At that age I had strange dreams, inaccessible of course, childhood dreams. I dreamed, for example, of being able to sit at a sushi counter and order whatever I wanted, without limits. I was always hungry, so I dreamed of being able to pig out.⁵

In particular, an episode struck him. When he was six years old, his father decided to take him to see the sea with some colleagues from work. They took the train to Enoshima, a small island about fifty kilometres

⁵ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris : GRASSET, 2001, p 25

south of Kyoto: "The sea, which I was discovering for the first time, impressed me a lot. I didn't know how to swim, the water was icy, the waves glistening, the ebb and flow, the foam, the horizon as far as the eye could see... the experience was terrifying. As for my father, trying to impress me by swimming that day, he almost drowned! Since this episode, he formed particular anxiety for the sea." ⁶ This anecdote most probably inspired a sequence in *Kikujiro no natsu*, that we will analyse in a later chapter dedicated to childhood⁷.

Often asked about the remarkable role of the sea in his films, the director is not short of childhood anecdotes on this subject. Sometimes he mentions the time he almost drowned in a pond.⁸ In another interview he talks about the sea as an author of his films, who always makes a *cameo* in his stories, just as Hitchcock used to do in his⁹. One might wonders then how a pure Tokyoite city dweller entertains such an obsession with it.

The sea inspired the work of many historians since antiquity. The abyss, the Latin abysses (from the Greek abysses meaning "bottomless") is likened to the Hebrew *tehom*, to the chaos of the Greeks, both a gaping abyss and a confused mass of elements: the abyss, i.e. the depth,

⁶ Ibid. p31

⁷ *Kikujiro no natsu*, 1999, min 38:55. See Appendix 1

⁸ *Kitano Takeshi, l'imprévisible*, dir, Limousin Jean-Pierre, France : AMIP, INA, La Sept-Arte, 1999

⁹ "Like Hitchcock who appears in all his films, I put the sea in all of mine." Thomas, B. *Takeshi Kitano : Outremarge*. Paris: Aléas, 2007, p23

designates this confused mass not yet distinct as it will later be from the elements. This confusion that some philosophers and poets call "chaos".¹⁰

Thus primordial water, the matrix envelope of the world in its beginnings, became in the 12th century synonymous with chaos = that appalling state of things, known as chaos or formlessness".¹¹

The fact is that in Japanese culture, the sea holds a predominant place. Just as Chinese mythology holds the sky as the origin of the nation, Shinto genesis explains that Japanese mankind originated from the ocean. According to Japanese Shinto Mythology, at the beginning of time heaven and the earth were mixed together in a great cloud :

"Slowly the clearer, lighter parts of the cloud rose up and became heaven. The heavier part of the cloud fell down and became an ocean of muddy water. Between the heavens and the earth, a pale green sprout began to grow. It grew swiftly and was extremely strong. When the plant's flower burst open, the First God emerged. This First God then created Izanagi, the god of all that is light and heavenly. Izanagi whose name means "the male who invites", and his wife and sister Izanami, whose name means "the female who invites", are given the task of finishing the creation of the world. Standing on a rainbow called the floating bridge of the heavens, they plugged a jewel crested spear into the ocean. When they pulled it free, the water that dripped from the spear coagulated and formed the first island of the Japanese archipelago. Izanagi and Izanami

¹⁰ Corbin, A., Richard, H., Buchet, C., Cabantous, A., Compère, D., Deluz, C., Hartog, F., Jeanneney, J. N., Laubier, L., Péron, F., Pétillon, P. Y., Petiter, P., Vanney, J. R., & Villain-Gandossi, C. (2011). *La mer*. Bibliothèque nationale de France. P22

¹¹ Ibid. P23

went down to his island and settled down on it. Together, on this island, they made the island of Japan.¹²”

We must also recall that the archipelago is alternately torn by typhoons but sometimes also saved from the waters. In the 13th century, the sea engulfed a Mongolian fleet that had come to invade the country :”The enormous army (there is mention of more than a hundred thousand men, Mongols, Chinese and Koreans) was destroyed by a typhoon, which was all the more deadly because, to avoid Japanese harassment, orders had been given to tie the boats together for the night. The deliverance was therefore attributed to the divine wind, *shinpû* 神風 or *kamikaze*, which could be taken as the response of the deities.¹³” Exemples abound to demonstrate the importance of the sea in Japanese culture, as its influence was so considerable on a population of islanders who have been able to live cut off from the world for centuries. The ocean thus protected them for a long time from invasions and Western colonisers, until Commodore Perry's cannonade in 1854 forced Japan to leave its autarchy.¹⁴.

Consequently, the sea also appears in the arts, as evidenced by the *Ukyo-e* paintings and Mishima's novels, or again in the logo of the *Tohei*,

¹² *Izanagi and Izanami | Shintō deity*. (2020). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Izanagi>

¹³ Hérail, Francine, *Histoire du Japon des origines à la fin de le Meiji*. Paris : Publications Orientalistes de France, 2008, p 215

¹⁴ Ibid. p371

the famous Japanese production company.¹⁵ This clearly illustrates the special bond the Japanese maintain with Nature.

Therefore the sea is a constant element in Kitano Takeshi's work. Yet, if he is following a certain cultural continuity in Japan, Takeshi remains a hapax in Japanese cinema. In such extend, so that some theoreticians of the Japanese cinema have concluded that there will be a before and after Kitano, as Aaron Gerow mentions in his work dedicated to the film director : "The Japanese intellectual journal Eureka (Yuriika) did a special issue on Japanese cinema in October 1997 that was subtitled "After Kitano", defining Kitano as the cornerstone of a new era. The film-makers covered in that issue — Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Aoyama Shinji, Stukamoto Shinya, Zeze Takashiha, Miike Takashi, Kawase Naomi, Nakata Hideo, Koreeda Hirokazu — are now the familiar faces of 1990"¹⁶. It is precisely because Kitano is a hapax that it is interesting to study his cinema to try to glimpse the characteristics of an artist's formation. Unlike his peers, such as Kyoshi Kurosawa, Kore Eda, Hideo Nakata or Naomi Kawase, he is not a film buff, nor did he receive conventional training in a specialized school. "It may seem strange to some people, but I don't know anything about cinema. I neither know its history nor its directors. I never studied cinema in a school or even in books. I never received a classical, formal training to become a filmmaker. I am a self-taught artist, someone who learned on-the-job. I often say that I first make films for myself, to please myself. It's

¹⁵ Hokusai. (1830). 神奈川沖浪裏, *kanagawa-oki nami-ura* [Painting]. Tōkyō kokuritsu hakubutsukan, Tōkyō, Japan. See appendix 9.

¹⁶ Gerow, A. (2007). *Kitano Takeshi (World Directors)* (2007th ed.). British Film Institute. p.39

true, I make films for myself, I am my best audience. ... The truth is that on the big screen, far from the academic conventions, I believe I have found my own style.¹⁷"

Kitano turned director by chance. A conflicting schedule, pushes Kinji Fukasaku, a big name of the yakuza cinema, to abandon the directing of *Violent Cop* (1989). It was then that he proposed to the production company that the film be directed by Kitano, who was originally intended to play the leading role. When he filmed his first movie, he barely knew anything about filmmaking. "At the moment of the first take, the first assistant tests you. He asked me: "do a shot list". But I didn't know what a shot list was."¹⁸ He willingly confesses it during various interviews: "I came to the cinema a bit like one comes to the life. By accident. At the age of forty three. I can't say that cinema is a passion"¹⁹. We can guess a certain pride in having experienced cinema as an autodidact, because little or nothing destined him to go behind the camera. One could also argue that it is precisely due to the freedom from a referential cinema that he was able to elaborate new narratives and a new editing style, unprecedented in the Japanese audiovisual production thus far. I would even state that it is exactly because he does not belong to the bourgeoisie that he brings such a fresh gaze on the cinema and the society in which he is evolving. The political scope of his work will be discussed in a later chapter.

¹⁷ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. (2010). *Kitano par Kitano* (Documents Français) (GRASSET ET FASQUELLE éd.). GRASSET.p193

¹⁸ Kitano, T. (2003). *Rencontres du septième art*. Paris: ARLEA.

¹⁹ Ibid. p124

It is important to keep in mind that long before he went behind the camera, Takeshi Kitano was known in Japan as a comic, as a stand-up comedian. The Japanese loved his mordant humor so much that he was quickly noticed and got a few roles on television, and then finally his first role in Nagisa Oshima's film, *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (1983), in which he played by the side of Ryuchi Sakamoto and David Bowie. It should be understood that for the Japanese public, Takeshi Kitano is a clown, a public entertainer. When he started directing in 1989 with *Violent Cop*, the public was dismayed, disappointed even. The raucous humor that made him known gave room to a poetic, muted, dreamlike cinema. The uninterrupted flow of caustic and vulgar lines that constitute the manzai has made place for a burlesque humor whose poetic absurdness is underlined by long silences. Thus, the artist shows a different side of his character that we did not suspect. As a result, his films were more successful internationally than domestically, until he won the Golden Lion in Venice for *Hana-bi*. This consecration finally gave him the credit he was missing as a filmmaker in his own country.

This unending return to the sea, the core of Kitano plots, help us to understand what it means to be an adult in the modern Japanese society, what are the sociological implications it trigger. We can also develop the idea that the particularities of Japanese geography and climate has a tremendous influence on the artist formation. Moreover, the guiding idea for this thesis occurred to me on reading a book by Madame de Staël. A writer from the beginning of the 19th century, contemporary and fierce opponent of the Emperor Napoleon, she was deeply enamoured of German

literature. She dedicated an essay to the country and its culture which she entitled "*De l'Allemagne*". In this essay she develops the following intuition: if the German nation and its literature are so superior (to French literature) it is due to the fact that the Germanic climate and geography have a particular influence on its inhabitants which endows them with certain virtues.

Germaine de Staël reveals herself as a fierce determinist. She is not alone, and in Japan many writers have contributed to the building of a rich bibliography of so-called *Nippology* studies: these are deterministic studies that intend to highlight the irreducibility of Japanese culture to Western models. The dangers of such a doctrine can already be glimpsed, as they form a perfect fertile soil for the most aggressive forms of nationalism. But if the ethical and political conceptions that result from this position are undoubtedly questionable, one can also try to discern observable aesthetic consequences.

There have been countless essays linking the doctrine of the four material elements to the four organic temperaments. Thus the ancient author Lessius writes in *The Art of Long Life* : " Thus, some who are choleric, are chiefly affected in their Sleep with the imaginary Appearances of either Fire or Burnings, War or Slaughters : Others, of more melancholy Dispositions, are often disturbed with the dismal prospect of either Funerals, or Sepulchres, or some dark and doleful Apparitions: The Phlegmatic dream more frequently of Rains, lake, Rivers, Inundations, Drownings, Shipwrecks: and the Sanguine abound in different Kinds of Pleasantries, such as Flying, Courses Banquets, Songs and amorous

Sports." Consequently persons governed by cholera, melancholy, phlegm and blood are characterised by fire, earth water and air respectively. Their dreams usually elaborate on the material element which characterises them.²⁰

In *Fudo*, Tetsuro Watsuji writes: "We can also find phenomena of milieu in all possible expressions of human life, letters, arts, religions, customs, etc."²¹ We would indeed like to follow this hypothesis, namely that Kitano cinema, with its known successes, is also a phenomenon of milieu, and, more exactly, seems to have received the influence of mesology. If Kitano was directing such stories, it would be because he was Japanese, because he was born on a typhoon-swept archipelago, where the relationship with the sea and the violence of nature had implemented in him an understanding of the impermanence of life. For anyone who appreciates Kitano's cinema - and Japanese cinema - this is an eminently romantic idea, yet an inaccurate one. The idea has evolved through my research and reading. When the artist draws his imaginative forces from various elements of his environment (the sea), he does not withdraw himself from it.

Through a restricted part of his filmography — we will dwell mainly on *A Scene at the Sea*(1991), *Sonatine*(1993), *Hana-bi*(1997), and *Kikujiro no natsu*(1999), whose plots proceed along precisely the same same journey from the city to the beach — the goal is to define the several symbols and use of the sea and explore how they serve his goals and

²⁰ Bachelard, Gaston, *Water and Dreams*. Trans. Edith R. Farrell p4

²¹ Watsuji, T. (2011). *Fûdo, le milieu humain*. Trans. Augustin Berque, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2011 (*Fûdo*, 1935)

narration. This thesis therefore intends to study the different meanings of the sea in his cinema. The structure of the latter intends both to trace the main phases of the Kitanian hero, and to illustrate how the sea provides an axis of imagination for the director, and how the artist uses it to develop a personal filmic language. I chose this structure because it has several methodological merits. Firstly, it offers to analyze a restricted selection of Takeshi Kitano's work, which counts more than 18 films in its filmography. Secondly, it provides the opportunity to discover chronologically the typical narration of a Kitanian film by confronting them with the biographical elements of the director. The first chapter discusses the exodus of the main protagonist from the city to the coast. The sea shelters the misfits in his films from the oppressing modernity of the city. This will be an opportunity for us not only to draw a portrait of the classic hero, but also to approach mesology as a theoretical tool. Here we will challenge the Cartesian dichotomy of Nature and Man, drawing on the work of philosophers Watsuji Watsuro and Augustin Berque, as well as Gaston Bachelard's essay, *Water and dreams*, which attempts to theorize a doctrine of creative imagination through the imaginative forces of matter. In a second chapter, we will talk about the maternal sea. Once reaching the shore, the characters of his films fall back into childhood. They indulge in games, mockeries. They are killing time. The plot is suspended, and the melodrama turns into a sweet burlesque. This chapter will provide the opportunity to address the notion of family in Japan, which is significantly different from the Western concept. But also the relationship to the mother, to her absence, finally and symbolically found on the shores. Finally, in a last chapter, we will discourse about death. The

willful death. A major theme of his work, it is also a central component of the Japanese culture. Death hangs over the plots of his films. We will try to understand how and why the sea irremediably invites Kitano's characters to death.

II. THE SHELTERING SEA

This chapter will first draw a portrait of the Kitanian hero, then explore the reasons, the forces that drive him to the coastline. In his imagery, Kitano Takeshi highlights the complexity and greyness of the city to further emphasize the contrast that exists with the pureness of the ocean and its shoreline.

A. PICTURING MARGINS

At the moment of my birth, the capital was still wracked by war, and partially devastated. And as in most of the country's cities, for many years after the end of the war, the urban landscape was a painful sight. Children played among districts destroyed by firebombs, in no-man's lands where wild grass was sprouting.

— Kitano Takeshi, *Kitano par Kitano* p19

Before addressing the city/sea, city/nature dichotomy in Kitano's cinema, we need to outline the characteristics of the typical hero of his cinema. It will be useful to understand the implications of the *littoral exodus*, depicted in his stories.

1. The Tramps

The heroes of his stories are marginals. Whether it is Shigeru, the deaf and mute hero of *A Scene at the Sea*, who works as a garbage collector in a seaside town, or the mobs of *Sonatine*, or Kikujiro, the loser of *Kikujiro no natsu*, who is about to help the little Masao to find his mother who abandoned him to his grandparents in Tokyo, to start a new life with another man, another family in another town by the sea. As Benjamin Thomas observes in his essay *Outremarge*, his typical characters are characterized by a profound unsuitability. A maladjustment that tells us how difficult it is, according to Kitano, to live in contemporary

Japan with a structuring identity.²² We find very little characters from the bourgeoisie in his films. And if we happen to encounter few of them, they only feature a very brief appearance. In a certain way, they are the discreet antagonists of the story, as evidenced by the clean-cut yakuza boss of *Jugatsu*. Thus, the protagonists of his films are more "losers" than proletarians. In this it is enlightening to underline the proximity that Kitano has with one of his contemporaries, the Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki. In an interview collected for the French documentary series *Cinéma cinémas*, Kaurismaki describes his heroes as losers, characters who are one step below the proletariat because they have no class consciousness.²³ The comparison between Kaurismaki's losers and Kitano's anti-heroes is not made innocently, since both filmmakers share, in addition to their inclination to narrate the story of underdogs, a certain aesthetic, centered on fixed shots and a taste for the absurd. This comparison will be developed further in a next chapter, by confronting two of their *maritime films*, *Le Havre* and *Kikujiro no natsu*, in which the main character explores the question of fatherhood.

As a matter of fact, Takeshi Kitano writes exclusively characters that are on the margins of society. This shot that opens his entire filmography is revelatory of this penchant. As a child, he himself was excluded - he was subjected to a great deal of bullying because of the poverty in which he grew up: "In high school, I experienced what is called in Japan, the

²²Thomas, B. *Takeshi Kitano : Outremarge*. Paris: Aléas, 2007, p10

²³ *Aki Kaurismaki - Interview 1990, (October 2008) [online Video]*. YouTube. Available on : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9tp8rAaTsE>

ijime.²⁴ I was called a "painter's kid", and that made me sad. Some schoolchildren mocked the family environment in which I was raised, the poverty of my parents, my father's job as a house painter and carpenter".²⁵ Because he is issued from an underprivileged background, and because he has suffered rejection because of those circumstances, Kitano depicts in his films characters that resemble him. He evolved in a society that nurtured his inner feeling of inferiority to such an extent that even today, despite his successes and his international fame, he still feels like an illegitimate artist, whether in painting or in filmmaking. In an interview for the catalog of his painting exhibition in Paris, he confesses: "When the Fondation Cartier proposed me to imagine this exhibition, the first thing I said was: 'I am not an artist. I'm not even sure I can be considered a filmmaker. I'm just a television man but I don't have much merit because I'm just one person among many. I'm just someone who does funny things and maybe I'm not even good at it.'"²⁶ Because Kitano himself belonged to the margins, he exclusively composes characters who belong to the world of the excluded.

Observing this recurrent figure of errand marginals within the dark and burlesque universe of the director evokes unmistakably the tramp of Chaplin. Besides, Kitano talks about Chaplin when it comes to his inspiration: "The first silent movies of Chaplin, from far the best, had always impressed and moved me. *The Kid* is a masterpiece... Chaplin had

²⁴ *Vexations and bullying of a psychological or even physical nature.*

²⁵ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris :GRASSET, 2010 p123

²⁶ Takeshi, B., Cartier, F., & Fondation Cartier. *Gosse de peintre*. Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2010, p43

a natural talent to depict the pain of the weaker and the no-good. He did it with a lot of naivety. He played and directed with a childish joy which seems magic. There is something supernatural in his work that is beyond our understanding".²⁷ And the comparison does not end there, since Chaplin and Kitano also starring and directing their own films.

This brings up the question of the double. Indeed, either Kitano uses his characters as alter egos - in the manner of Federico Fellini, when he uses Marcello Mastroiani in *La Dolce Vita* or *Otto e Mezzo*, or François Truffaut and Jean Eustache use Jean Pierre Léaud in the series of Antoine Doinel and in *La Maman et la Putain* - or he himself incarnates the protagonists of these stories. Through cinema, Kitano becomes both director and actor. In the same way that the sea (temporarily) solves the identity crisis of the characters, it allows Kitano to question his own. In his early days as an artist, he was known as a comedian. He did stand-up comedy and hosted absurd game shows, he designed video games. However, in his transition to film as a director, he reveals a darker side of his character, more melancholic, deeper. The theme of the double is so deeply rooted in his cinema that it becomes the subject of his film 'Takeshi's', in which he plays both himself, the successful director, and a failed actor who resembles him. What if he had never been successful? What would his life be like? He is so keen to separate the actor from the director that he signs his films with his real name, and his performances with his acting name: Beat Takeshi. Everything happens as if the cinema splits him in two. Just as the sea splits his characters. It reveals

²⁷ Ibid. p195

something in them, like a mirror. "Thus water, by means of its reflections, doubles the world, doubles things. It also doubles the dreamer, not simply as a vain image but through his involvement in a new generic experience²⁸.

Even in Kitano's film, there is something of Chaplin's burlesque, with his quiet characters and their misfortunes evoking the comedy of silent films. Both Kitano and Chaplin portray maladjusted characters, rejected by society, but who come out on top through their facetiousness and fighting spirit. We could also compare him to another director/actor in the person of Jacques Tati. And rightly so, since his emblematic character of Monsieur Hulot, in *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, is also an outsider who faces the sea. Yet he does not share the same kind of marginality as Kitano. Monsieur Hulot is a beach-goer, a bourgeois among others, but whose naivety and clumsiness will lay the foundations of a poetic comic style quite similar to that of the Japanese director. Namely the use of long static shots, the use of silences to support the ending of a joke.

"During the shooting, the technicians would move the camera around more, I didn't want to do that. I was keen on my static frames. I think that a fixed shot brings a certain mystery, a raw rendition that I appreciate. I believe that each of my shots is the result of a psychological equation.²⁹"

Nevertheless, in Tati film, the sea is a leisure location, populated by infrastructure and a large community, which allows him to draw up different archetypes of the French bourgeoisie to mock and criticize them.

²⁸ Ibid. p48

²⁹ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris :GRASSET, 2010 p93

The seaside of Kitano is empty, cleaned, free from any resort and exploitations. One can imagine the uniqueness of this corner of the beach, sheltered from rampant modernity. Kitano's abandoned beach appears unrealistic: Japan is a littoral country whose urbanism has developed massively on its coasts. Here Kitano sweeps away the realism and proposes the seashore as a poetic space, like a magic shelter that welcomes his marginal characters. This rapprochement between the two other directors consists of underlining and politicizing the attachment of Kitano for marginals. The burlesque in Kitano's work has the same function as that of Chaplin or Tati. It offers a formidable tool to question the functioning of a society that excludes and stigmatizes the weakest.

Since these characters have little or no anchoring, it is only natural that they should leave everything behind and hit the road, thus migrating to a more welcoming elsewhere: the shore.

2. The Wounded

"I like to film the characters facing the ocean. I am touched by this image. I am told that it has become a habit, a trademark. Some critics have even written that a Kitano film without seeing the sea is impossible. Many times I have said that one of my dreams would be to film the sea as a deaf person sees it. How does he see it? I believe that people with sensory disabilities experience the world and people differently. They have always interested me a lot because they experience the things around us in manners that we would never understand."³⁰

Lastly, Kitano also deals with the portrayal of characters suffering from a disability. Deafness in *A Scene at the Sea*, which depicts, among other things, the love story of a young deaf and mute couple. Blindness in

³⁰ *Kitano Takeshi, l'imprévisible*, dir, Limousin Jean-Pierre, France : AMIP, INA, La Sept-Arte, 1999, min

Zatoïchi, which tells the story of an extraordinary blind swordsman who fights "by ear". Meanwhile, *Hana-bi* also describes the fate of Inspector Horibe, who loses the use of his legs after a gunfight. One could think that the primary suffering of these characters comes a priori from their handicap. But in reality, it is the rejection and the contempt with which they are being addressed that constitutes their veritable wound. After his accident, inspector Horibe is abandoned by his family. Shigeru the deaf and mute garbage man is mocked for his budding passion for surfing. And *Zatoïchi* is always despised and underestimated by his opponents: most of them will pay for this mistake with their lives. Making the disabled the heroes of his films is also a way for him to counteract the negative perception of them in the real world. Shigeru, the deaf surfer will overcome the other competitors in the contest. The blind samurai of *Zatoïchi* remains undefeated. And Horibe, inspector Nishi partner in *Hana-bi*, caged in his body after severe injuries caused by a gunfight, will experience a curious epiphany looking longingly at flowers set out on a florist's terrace. He will express in painting a new path to survive and exist. This epiphany echoes the one of Kitano himself, when, after a near-death motorbike accident, he started to paint³¹. Although he did not lose the use of his legs, half his face remains paralysed. To Abe Kasho, *Hana-bi* overlain with cases of paralysis and physical weakness, from Horibe's legs to Nishi's (Takeshi's) face.³²

³¹ See appendix 3

³² Gerow, Aaron. *Kitano Takeshi*. London : British Film Institute, 2007, p150

Kitano has made the disabled the only fully positive characters in his films. They are dignified in the face of their adversity and the cruelty of their surroundings. Kitano foresees hidden powers in them. It is as if their disability would give them the keys of a new world: "Many times, I've said that one of my dreams would be to shoot the sea as a deaf person would see it. How does he perceive it? I think that the sensory handicapped individuals feel the world and people in a different way. They always interested me because they feel what surround us with modalities that remain unknown to us."

In Kitano's work, the character who suffers from a handicap sees his misfortune balanced by a gift, a talent. In *Hana-bi*, the loss of mobility turns the policeman into a painter and sharpens his view of the world. In *Zatoichi*, the blindness of the swordsman gives him a perception of the world that verges on the supernatural. Kitano states : "In Japan, handicapped people are discriminated. If they weren't so conscious of their handicap, they might do whatever they'd wish. But, as they are, they must do what every one else does and respect the social rules. On the other hand, if they want to surf, they aren't allowed to. What I mean is that handicapped people, who really are like everyone else, are not accepted in Japan. My film raises this issue. We should treat the like ourselves, without making any distinction. Forbidding a deaf person to surf, I find this really discriminating. It's not normal. They even do more than they should. Like other young people, they cold do silly things. But they have to be well behaved to be accepted into society. I find this totally

illogical.³³ It is thus by political conviction that he places a point of honour to the marginal in the very heart of his stories. As we have observed, the Kitanian hero is thus a marginal, a vagabond. An individual who struggles to find his place in a hostile society. And this pressure which is exerted on him will bring him to exile, to take the way of the sea.

3. A Sisyphean Pariah

We will conclude this section by evoking an eminently eloquent image of Kitano's cinema. It is the very first image that inaugurates Kitano's filmography. A close-up: the portrait of an old man, a homeless man, with a dazed smile, in a dark and windy night, all for long seconds. The wind is blowing. His broken glasses are patched with tape. He is also missing a whole row of teeth. Kitano cuts to the axis and reveals him sitting on his belongings and plastic bags, which are set up near a low wall. A few seconds more, and he suddenly starts taking spoonfuls from his metal bowl. All without losing his unsettling smile.³⁴ It is remarkable that the character who opens the filmography of the filmmaker is the very symbol of the individual on the margins of society: the tramp.

Kitano gives us a highly intriguing way to start his story. A face that smiles unrealistically. Then comes to life. You can almost hear the director calling for action to start the performance. There is something that verges on madness in this character's attitude. On the street, in the night and in the cold, having lunch on his bundle, he smiles incessantly. *One must imagine him happy.* From the firsts frame of his filmography, we can

³³ *Kitano Takeshi, l'imprévisible*, dir, Limousin Jean-Pierre, France : AMIP, INA, La Sept-Arte, 1999, min 50:12

³⁴ See appendix 2

already foresee something Camusian in Kitano's cinema. Like Albert Camus' Sisyphus³⁵ who is sentenced to push his rock to the top of the mountain until the end of time, one must imagine Kitano's characters happy. For by being aware that he is always doing the same task, he can choose to despise his tragedy, and to remember his joy. Happy with this repeated exodus, from the city to the beach, from the beach to death

B. CITY VS NATURE

“When you live in a city like Tokyo, where nature is totally absent and the only identity left is the one of money, it becomes imperative to get away from it to breathe artistically. This is why I am so attracted to the sea, to me it represents a danger, but has a mysterious presence, perhaps linked to the Japanese legends that our people were born from the ocean. When I am near the sea, I feel a latent violence, a terrible tension that fascinates me as a man and as a filmmaker, and that frightens me as well. It would never occur to me to go in, I never swim.”³⁶

As Deleuze has seen, a certain trend in Japanese cinema, whose founder is Yasujirô Ozu, has developed a more contemplative form of cinema, which opens the cinematographic narrative to the environment. Secondly, as Deleuze also mentioned, this contemplative form of cinema is inseparable from a ballad form³⁷. As if dialogues and psychological explanations were replaced by a journey, a path, a process.

Between the dereliction and the burdensome solitude, or the cynicism and hypocrisy offered respectively by the individualist pole and the clan pole, Kitano's heroes tend towards an elsewhere, neither on the fringe nor

³⁵ Camus, Albert, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942

³⁶ Quote by Jean Pierre Dionet for the introduction of *Violent Cop* in DVD, Canal + Vidéo

³⁷Deleuze, Giles, *Sur Ozu « Vérité et temps »* class 53, 24 January 1984. Available on http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=324

within the clan. An elsewhere that is both geographical and symbolic: the sea.

Outcasted mobs in *Jugatsu*, *Sonatine*, and "Aniki," the protagonists depicted are pariahs struggling in a suffocating society. They process the same journey, from the tight framed flat, office and bars, to the immensity of the clear seaside. The philosopher Augustin Berque specifies: "it must be said that nature, oddly enough is an idea conceived in the city, and not in the nature itself. It's from the perspective of the city that the contrast became clear, and resulted in the concept of nature."³⁸ The notion of wilderness stemmed from the point of view of the countryside, and thereafter, from the urban point of view, defining it in the opposition to the city and in this non-urban space. It is worth noting the curious inversion that has taken place in the relationship between humans and nature. Humanity, which at the time shielded itself from nature by taking refuge in the city, now tends to flee the city to find nature, which is considered the last shelter.

It is the oppression of the city, of the city itself, that pushes the Kitanian hero to embark on his journey to the sea. As we saw in the previous section, the heroes of his cinema are marginal people, misfits, who are driven to the same exodus by various scripted circumstances. Kitano expresses this opposition between city and nature, city and coast, in different stylistic ways. One of them is color.

The grey inhospitality of the cities opposes itself to the peaceful azure of the sea. Daisuke Miyao argues that in all Kitano's film, blue appears to

³⁸Augustin Berque. *Livre 4. La mésologie, une éco-phénoménologie, et la subjectivité.* (2020, September 11).

be the ruling color. Partly because in most of his films, Kitano shows the sea. As a result, critics call the blue color that Kitano uses in his films "Blue Kitano"³⁹. Takeshi Kitano stories exploit this pattern: the film opens in an urban environment where the meaningless and joyless routine of the characters is set during the opening sequence, using the principle of "A Day in a life" to set the mood and the problematics faced by the protagonists. Then, they will start an journey at the seaside in which they reveal their true self. At sea, Kitanesque heroes progress, impervious to the world surrounding them. The sea functions as a haven, as a retreat for the dismissed. This assertion is borne out especially for two movies: *A Scene at the Sea* and *Sonatine*.

In *Sonatine*, the transition to this elsewhere is all the more striking as the characters leave the interiors of Tokyo nights to open onto a wide shot of the sea where they are about to stay.⁴⁰

Concerning his use of color in films, Kitano says " I do use blue as my base color but I try to use it adventurously. I really can't shoot the city, though. I hate shooting Chinatown at night or something. Too many colours"⁴¹ Even Kitano admits his disinterest in making urban films. We then realise that it is not so much his characters who flee the city, but the director himself. It is as if the chromatic chaos of the city inhibits his inspiration.

³⁹ Miyao, D. (1998). Blue vs. Red: Takeshi Kitano's Color Scheme. *Post Script: Essays in Film and Humanities* 18.1. Published p3

⁴⁰ See Appendix 3

⁴¹ Miyao, D. (1998). Blue vs. Red: Takeshi Kitano's Color Scheme. *Post Script: Essays in Film and Humanities* 18.1. Published. P3

In Kitano films, color appears as a subject in its own right. Though color is consistently connected to the narrative, the former escapes from the latter in many occasions. In the world of Kitano, Blue often implies the boring ordinary life, and the opposite color tends to be associated with violence, danger and death. Even so color in Kitano's films easily escape from the control of digests and turn into a spectacle for their own sakes. Even to those who abhor direct violence in films, Kitano's graphical and rhetorical use of contrastive cloys can provide a visual pleasure.⁴² The contrast between the grey of the city and the blue of the sea is striking. The chromatic chaos of the metropolis is contrasted with the harmony of the beach. Thanks to this new colour palette, the Kitanian hero finally finds his place. He is no longer effaced, camouflaged in the urban environment; on the contrary, he stands out from the landscape. He regains his individuality, his position in the world. In *Sonatine*, this effect is all the more noticeable when the yakuza, upon reaching the shores of Okinawa, abandon their dark, desaturated suits and wear colourful Hawaiian shirts. By exchanging their workman's suit for a more estival outfit, symbolically free themselves from the system that alienates them.

"When you have a dark blue next to a light blue, it doesn't stand out in anyway to make a color pop out you have to bring a completely opposite color next to it. That's why I wanted the base color to be blue and then use other colours to punctuate the look of the film, give the film an edge."⁴³ If the blue provides an outline for his films, we can infer that

⁴² Miyao, D. (1998). Blue vs. Red: Takeshi Kitano's Color Scheme. *Post Script: Essays in Film and Humanities* 18.1. Published. P 8

⁴³Miyao, D. (1998). Blue vs. Red: Takeshi Kitano's Color Scheme. *Post Script: Essays in Film and Humanities* 18.1. Published. P6

the sea works in the same way for his narrative. The blue of the sea envelops the characters and protects them. In the same way that they re-enchant the environment in which they evolve.

His third film, *A Scene at the Sea*, compiles the elements we presented earlier. A young deaf garbageman who evolves silent and friendless in his greyish routine till the day he discovers a broken surfboard during his shift. On this board is written: "sink or swim." This slogan operates as a gag: it reflects a doctrine of the Japanese society or any capitalist society where performances and efficiency are and a certain tendency of sport that shares this same values based on competition and records at the expense of gesture and art. However, at the same time, the absurdity and the ridicule of this slogan, this injunctive order, is exacerbated by being printed on a broken board, left among other bulky trashes. Shigeru's work consists of collecting the leftovers of the consumerist society, items he couldn't even afford with his wage. As a matter of fact, a part of the plot will consist on gathering the money required to buy a new surfing board. From the day Shigeru brings the board home, he will practice surfing under the loving gaze of his girlfriend Takako, and the mocking one of the locals. Shigeru glances often at sea, hypnotised by this beauty he cannot embrace fully, because half of the shoreline's poetry lays in its music. But Shigeru's sea is not the one seen by the other characters. He perceives it differently because of his disability. Therefore, the imagery of the sea he experiences is unique, intimate. Kitano hides Shigeru's experience from us. We never see the sea through the eyes of the main character. In *A Scene at the Sea*, Kitano

never chooses to shoot from the character's point of view. On one hand, because we know the respect and admiration he has for people who suffer a disability, but above all so as not to deflate the intimate mystery of his relationship with the sea, with his refuge. "There will always be more in a closed box than in an open one. The verification makes the images die. Always, imagining will be greater than living."⁴⁴ This reflection on the imagination, formulated by the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, is applied in many ways in Kitano's filmic language, through his taste for ellipses and off-screen.

Shigeru contemplates the sea as if his entire life in contact with rubbish has awakened in him an even stronger awareness than in any other Kitano character, that in the ocean lies purity, the means to escape a decaying modern society. However, Shigeru is mocked and harassed by his comrades because of his handicap, his difference, just like his girlfriend. Their silent love and disability cut them from the rest of the world, like two characters from a silent movie trapped into a loud melodrama. Kitano's heroes evolve impervious to the world surrounding them. The seaside connects them. Shigeru surfing on the blue sea, and Takako glancing at him from the yellow sea line. The seen and the seer. The fact that the main characters are united in their silent love and disability cut them from the rest of the world, like two misfits from a silent movie trapped into a loud melodrama. The sea connects them. The sea tends to become a lyrical retreat, heaven for underdogs, a site for the most significant rites and a new beginning. It is also the place of childish

⁴⁴ Bachelard Gaston. *La Poétique de l'espace*, Paris, PUF, coll. « Bibliothèque de Philosophie contemporaine », 1957, p37

plays and silent abstract contemplation. It is a retreat and a nostalgic return to an imagined lost paradise and, above all, a childhood that was arrested in some ways. In the film of Kitano, the sea and the shoreline are often the most important sites of last rites and new beginnings. It is the place of childish play and silent contemplation. Picturing these uprooted characters who have nothing to lose despite life allows him to show this journey from the close, tightly framed settings of yakuza headquarter, bars, and restaurants, the urban environments of concrete and grey blocks to the blue line of the water edge. This sharp contrast of colour and space allows him to articulate a political critique of society. Indeed this criticism remains discreet and resembles more as a thematic backdrop, but this backdrop serves to set up the image of the sea as a shelter in his filmography.

III. THE MATERNAL SEA

"For me the sea is the universal matrix. All beings are born from the sea.
So I wanted my characters to face the sea."

— Kitano Takeshi, *Kitano par Kitano*

In the previous chapter, we have therefore analysed the various ways in which the filmmaker presents the sea as a refuge. On the beach, one leaves behind the violence of the city, the hostility of one's peers, almost animal-like. Instead of marking the end of the journey, it marks the beginning of another story. As mentioned in the introduction, the sea in Japanese mythology is held to be the origin of the Japanese people. It is the origin.

In order to explain the link between the sea and Kitano's characters, we will refer to the work of a Japanese philosopher. Tetsurô Watsuji (1889-1960) is a Japanese philosopher who, following a trip to the West and his reading of Heidegger, developed the concept of *Fûdo*, in a work titled *Fûdo*⁴⁵, *le milieu humain*. Translated and discussed by Augustin Berque, this text opened up the field of 'mesology', which is developing in a back and forth between France and Japan in particular. Mesology comes from the Greek "mesos" (environment or medium), and logos (discourse, study). Mesology aims to be a science of environments, which studies in an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary manner the relationship of living beings in general, or human beings in particular, with their living environment.⁴⁶ The concept of *Fudo* or *milieu* essentially allows Watsuji

⁴⁵ Watsuji, T. (2011). *Fûdo, le milieu humain*. Trans. Augustin Berque, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2011 (*Fûdo*, 1935) p31

⁴⁶ Berque, Augustin, *La mésologie, pourquoi et pour quoi faire ?* Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris-Ouest, 2014

to criticise individualism, with humans and their environment determining each other through mutual exchange. It is a question of breaking with Western dualism, as it found its most radical formulation with Descartes, which would place objective space on one side and the subject on the other, geography on one side and ontology on the other. In Western cinema, the director does what is called "directing actors". The individual is his starting material, a closed and well identified entity, defined by his desires, his wills, his quest. However, we could make the hypothesis that the Japanese filmmaker functions differently: that instead of starting from the actor's closed individuality, he would always intrinsically link him to his environment, to his relational mesh, to his place in the human milieu (*Fudo*). More precisely, we will make the hypothesis that the recent successes of Kitano cinema is due to another conception of the human being based on *Fudo* and that by this very fact it would propose a strong alternative to Western action, theatrical and psychological cinema.

There is a continuous mesh that binds together the subject and his environment. The most telling comparison would undoubtedly be that of the specific environment of the pond - each organism living in the pond is the product of what the pond offers as resources, while at the same time and reciprocally it contributes, through its own way of life, to the specificities of the environment of the pond. This conception makes the subject the product of his environment and the environment the product of the activity of its inhabitants. It no longer isolates the subject from its

environment and, on the contrary, it releases spatial/human phenomena.⁴⁷

Therefore the sea appears as a maternal figure. But this is also the case in many cultures: it is commonplace for psychoanalysts to identify the quest for the source with that of nourishing, matrix water, associated with archaic memory. Let us just note that according to anthropologists, the words for water are in many cultures related to the name of the mother or her functions⁴⁸ As a matter of fact, in Kitano's work the sea has a maternal, permissive, mild role. In her analysis of Edgard Allan Poe's work, Madame Bonaparte points out that the sea is " an immensely enlarged, eternal mother, projected in to infinity". Emotionally, nature is a projection of the mother. Particularly adds Madame Bonaparte :*"The sea is for all men one of the greatest and most constant maternal symbols."*⁴⁹. So, in Kitano's films, in contact with the sea, the characters evolve. Or rather, they regress. They fall back into childhood.

⁴⁷Zernik, C. Z. *Penser le cinéma, faire le cinéma* (1st ed., Vol. 1).Paris : PUF, 2019

⁴⁸ Durand G, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris: Dunod 1969

⁴⁹ Bonaparte, M. (1980). *Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe : A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1st Edition). Prometheus Books. P 367

A. RETURN TO CHILDHOOD

It has been suggested here and there that Kitano's characters stop at the seashore because they cannot go any further. On quite the contrary, in Kitano's work, the sea is often the embodiment par excellence of a matricial field to which we return precisely to rediscover the conscience of the bond, however futile that may be. No, in Kitano's work the sea is not an obstacle, but the end and the goal of the journey.

— Outremarges, Benjamin Thomas, p12

The plot of *Sonatine* begins like a classic Yakuza film. The head of the Kitajima gang orders Murakawa (Beat Takeshi), a skilled but world-weary yakuza, to Okinawa to help settle a war involving the friendly Nikamatsu family, but the situation smells fishy from the start. Fighting had mostly stopped, so the arrival of Murakawa's troops only incites the rival anon gang into more attacks. Murakawa's troops only incites the rival Anan gang into more attacks. Murakawa, Katagiri, Ken, Uechi and Ryoji hide out at a beach house and bide their time with games in the sand as Murakawa makes friend with woman named Miyuki. When they reach the shore, the plot is suspended. For more than half an hour, almost nothing happens to develop the main plot: how Murakawa (played by Takeshi Kitano) will find a conclusion to the betrayal they have suffered. Instead, they ditch their yakuza suits for Hawaiian shirts and kill time by engaging in a variety of childish games. Murakawa tricks his men into digging holes in the beach. They play Frisbee. Similar scenes can be found in *Jugatsu*, where the characters play baseball on the beach, and in *Aniki*, frisbee.

This return to childhood is enabled by the suspension of the plot that accompanies the arrival on the beach. What is remarkable about *Sonatine* is that the narrative elements displayed at the opening of the film are deliberately set aside. This suspension of the plot gives the film such a

distinctive structure that even Japanese critics have difficulty classifying it as a genre. In his essay on Kitano, Aaron Gerow states that label the film became an issue as it was placed in such categories as "gangster film", "art cinema", or even "student film". Even the press-book seemed at a loss, stating in language largely unthinkable for a major studio.⁵⁰ He disappoints the critics' expectations so much that his film is even described as a school film. It is as if the director, like his characters, was also trapped by the childish power of the sea. Thus, he abandons not only the plot but also the film genre, of which he dispels all the conventions. While the opening sequence of the film leads us to expect a traditional gangster movie, two thirds of the story will show the yakuza getting bored. It almost becomes a comic element. In the same way that Murakawa traps his men on the beach, making them fall into holes he has dug and hidden in the sand, Kitano tricks his audience into believing he is making a gangster film, which turns out to be a rather long poetic digression.

In *Sonatine*, the characters are altering children's games. They modify them to suit their inordinate boredom. At night they organise firework battles. They form two groups, entrenched behind makeshift barricades made of wood washed up on the beach. But Murakawa (Kitano) is a sore loser, and in order to scare his troops, he takes his gun and starts shooting at them. This scene is reminiscent of Tati's fireworks in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, where Monsieur Hulot (also played by director Jacques Tati) unintentionally sets fire to the fireworks stash in a

⁵⁰Gerow, Aaron. *Kitano Takeshi*. London : British Film Institute, 2007, p105

shed near the hotel. This triggers a general panic, and Hulot tries to stop the fire as best he can. As Tati begins his story at the sea, we cannot be certain that Monsieur Hulot in the city is not the big blundering child he is at the beach. In his case, the sea is only the theatre of his story. As for Kitano, he shows us that the characters transform their behaviour when they are on the beach. A sweet madness animates them. The sea is an actress in his film. It is the welcoming matrix that drives the characters to madness, and the creator to transform his film noir into a *blue film*, a film where playfulness and poetry impose themselves in defiance of the plot. The film noir turns into a comedy through the numerous gags we analysed earlier. Kitano's comedy is symptomatic of this return to childhood. It is by ridiculing the yakuza, supposedly serious and dangerous characters, that the comedy operates. Kitano dresses them in Hawaiian costumes, makes them wait for the rain to deal with the shower, and turns off the water while the gangsters are still full of foam. In his essay on laughter Bergson sheds light on the nature of comedy:

"But, on the other hand, just because laughter aims at correcting, it is expedient that the correction should reach as great a number of persons as possible. This is the reason comic observation instinctively proceeds to what is general. It chooses such peculiarities as admit of being reproduced and consequently are not indissolubly bound up with the individuality of a single person—a possibly common sort of uncommonness, so to say,—peculiarities that are held in common. By transferring them to the stage, it creates works which doubtless belong to art in that their only visible aim is to please, but which will be found to contrast with other works of art by reason of their generality and also of their scarcely confessed or scarcely conscious intention to correct and instruct. So we were probably right in saying that comedy lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organising laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural

*environment, it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature.*⁵¹

In this way, we can support the observation that the comedy that is triggered by the encounter with the sea is a return to nature, a return to origins, a return to childhood.

When another Japanese critic talking about *Sonatine* states that : "In this film there is no plot resembling a plot? There is no dialogue and almost no dramatic drama."⁵² I couldn't disagree with him more. In my opinion, he has misses the film. Because the real plot of *Sonatine* is precisely this impossible return to childhood. This quest for a link with the sea, with the origins.

There is a remarkable scene to illustrate this matter. In the shade of a shed, two men of Murakawa have fabricated a game. They have made up two wrestlers with pieces of paper and drawn a circle on a wooden table. The idea is to represent the arena of sumo wrestlers, the famous Japanese wrestlers. By hitting the edges of the table with the flat of their hands, the vibrations produced start the paper sumos moving and they look like they are struggling to push themselves out of the ring. Two grown men are playing a schoolboy game. In the following sequence, Murakawa and his men are on the beach. They have drawn a circle in the sand and are about to play the same game, but this time in a life-size ring. But surprisingly, they pretend to be pieces of paper. And in the manner of the Canadian director McLaren's *Neighbors*, Kitano moves his

⁵¹ Bergson, H., Brereton, C., & Rothwell, F. (2014). *Laughter: An Essay On The Meaning Of The Comic*. Martino Fine Books p.12

⁵² Ibid. p107

actors with the use of stop motion. Thanks to this process the actors come to life as the paper sumo wrestlers did in the previous scene. By breaking the language of film Kitano creates a moment of pure poetry where 40 year old kids entertain themselves by reproducing a life-size board game. At the same time, Kitano breaks the representational dimension of his film. For this cinematographic process contrasts in the most unexpected way with the filmic language used until now. As it "helps" his characters. For it is the director who makes his actors move through an editing effect, and not the characters. It is the director's reverie that is put at the disposal of the characters. In this way, the sea is both a playground for the characters and for the director.

In contact with the sea, the yakuza of *Sonatine* fall back into childhood. In this perspective, it is interesting to compare them with a classic of "maritime" literature. Unlike the children in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, who are left to their own devices on a deserted island, they gradually lose their humanity and commit the irreparable act of killing one of their own. *Sonatine's* yakuzas seem to do the opposite. On the contrary, they leave the savagery of the city, where they intimidate, torture and kill, to start playing cards, dancing and singing. In Kitano's film, the loss of maturity that accompanies this involuntary hermitage is eminently positive. Murakawa, who was supposed to be an anti-hero - in the first sequences of the film, he tortures with his troops a man in debt to his clan - saves a woman from her violent husband on the beach. Murakawa becomes an old child of 40 years. This childishness is also underlined by his lack of sexual drive. In another scene, the monsoon

rains down on the beach, and Miyuki and Murakawa take shelter on the edge of a forest. Finally alone, Miyuki takes off her shirt and reveals her chest to Murakawa. He smiles at her and says: "You are so beautiful that it's indecent". Kitano simply stops the scene here. Two shots: a shot and a reverse shot. Never are they in the same frame. Of course, one would be inclined to guess that, away from the group, the two characters have had a carnal relationship. But nothing shows it, nothing says it. The eroticism does not develop further. Through this staging, Kitano intends to preserve the innocence of the characters.

The sea is an invitation not only to rediscover a lost childhood, but also to make a family. Indeed, in *Sonatine*, the power relations between Murakawa and his troops fade away. They live as a community, like a brotherhood. It should be noted that in Japan the notion of family is broader than in Western culture, as Louis Frédéric explains in his book on Japanese customs in the 19th century: "The notion of family in Japan has a much broader meaning than it had in China or in Europe, where only the ties of kinship uniting children, grandparents and collaterals constitute what is known as the family. Although these blood relations had always existed in Japan, they were not the only ones that constituted the Japanese concept of family. Adoption was very common in Japan. It was used not only to prevent the extinction of families and thus the interruption of ancestor worship, but also to control family size. Thus a man who had too many children could give one or more to a friend or to someone who had none. Adopting someone was also the easiest way to leave them an inheritance, as it was not customary to name strangers as

heirs. Thanks to this custom of adoption, parents could have a very large number of children who bore their name although they belonged to very different families by blood ties. This considerably complicated relations between individuals but welded them into groups conscious of having common "parents" to whom they owed loyalty and respect.⁵³ Adoption, even if symbolic, is still a common practice in Japan. This is illustrated by the example of Kitano, who forms bonds with his disciples that could be described as familial. By his own admission, his affection for them is sometimes greater than that for his real family, his blood family: "One day I dared to say 'I have two children, my son and my daughter, whom I love, but sometimes I feel that I love the Gundans⁵⁴ more than my own children.'" It was a way of saying that it is also thanks to their existence that my family can eat. My own people also owe them a lot. If I was asked to choose between my family and my disciples, I might choose the Gundans!"⁵⁵

One can then easily recognise the parallels between Takeshi Kitano's Gundan, and Murakawa's troupe in *Sonatine*, as Kitano does not hesitate to implement aspects or episodes from his life to shape his stories. This is also evident in the story of Kikujiro, which we are about to analyse.

⁵³ Frédéric, L. F. (1984). *La Vie quotidienne au Japon au début de l'ère moderne (1868–1912)*. Hachette littérature. p151

⁵⁴ Les *Gundans* désignent les disciples de Kitano en Japonais. Il s'agit de ses collaborateurs.

⁵⁵ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris :GRASSET, 2010, p79

B. MAKE FAMILY

Kikujiro no natsu is, according to Kitano, a walking road movie.⁵⁶ Before going any further, it should be noted that Kitano is directing this film after *Hana-bi*, which won a Golden Lion at Venice in 1998. The expectations surrounding his next film are considerable. As usual, Kitano defuses expectations. He is known for his films noirs, his violent and melancholic gangster films, and now he is directing a childish film. Kitano returns to childhood in this film, which shares this theme with *Sonatine*. With this regard Kitano actually discussed *Kikujiro* in interviews after *Hana-bi* :

Kitano : the next film is amazing. I'll get rid of the violence... and myself something like Toara-san, something really normal like Yamada Yoji would shoot.

Interviewer : You've gotta be kidding.

Kitano: No, it's true! I want to try making it a bit different depending on how I arrange it. I've got the title Angel Bell and the story is just about a boy who lives with his grand mother, discovers hi mother is living and goes to visit her.

Interviewer : Hey that's not bad. A road movie!

Kitano : Well there's this yakuza guy who accompanies the boy and hey visit the mother toheger but the mother has married someone else... A lot happens and the boy realises that the most valuable person is his grandmother and the film ends with him running back to her place. It'll have tears and emotion. That's what it'll aim for, but there's something that asks this is all fake.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ "I wanted *Kikujiro no natsu* to be a road movie on foot because when you walk, time passes differently." Read in Kitano, T. *Rencontres du septième art*. Trans. Sylvain Chupin. Paris: ARLEA, 2003 p67

⁵⁷ Kitano, Takeshi ga Takeshi o korosu riyu, p179-80

Kikujiro no natsu tells the story of Masao, a little boy of about ten years old, who lives alone in Tokyo with his grandmother. When summer arrives, his friends leave for holiday and Masao is left to his own devices as his grandmother works all day. While rummaging through the house, he finds a photo of his mother, whom he has never met, and her address in another city near the sea.

Without thinking, he packs his bag and sets off. A group of idle teenagers who were trying to shake him down are prevented from doing so by the arrival of a friend of his grandmother and her partner: Kikujiro, a fifty-year-old thug, played by Kitano. The young woman convinces Kikujiro to accompany Masao on his quest. But Kikujiro may not be the ideal travel companion: an unrepentant schemer with a foul mouth, he doesn't seem to be dealing with this mission seriously.

The first stage of their journey is an hippodrome, where he believes Masao will bring him luck. If this is the case for a while, it soon turns into a disaster and they are even more destitute. To leave Tokyo, they deal with a taxi that Kikujiro steals at the first stop. As he doesn't know how to drive, they don't get very far. They end up in an unknown city.

Kikujiro goes alone to a restaurant, leaving Masao at the door. When he comes out, the boy has disappeared. Kikujiro finds him in a park with a pedophile who tries to abuse him. Kikujiro beats the man. They go back on the road and end up in a luxury hotel. Kikujiro, who can't swim, almost drowns in the pool. The bill having cost them their last yen, they are forced to hitchhike. Here again, their problems are numerous and few people are willing to deal with them. At a stop where they are waiting for

a hypothetical bus, Kikujiro discovers that he and Masao never knew their mother. This realization brings them closer together. A traveller who dreams of writing a novel drops them off in Masao's mother's village. But at the address given, Kikujiro understands that she has rebuilt her life and started another family. To console Masao, he tries to make him believe that she has gone somewhere else by leaving him a souvenir: a small glass bell in the shape of an angel that he has just taken from two bikers. To change his mind, he takes Masao to a funfair: but his misbehaviour leads to him being beaten by yakuza. Masao treats him. The apprentice novelist joins them while they are stealing corn and suggests they spend a few days together. They settle down at the edge of a river where the two bikers in turn find them. The four adults invent games and fantasies to entertain Masao. One day, Kikujiro goes to a nearby hospice to see his mother and returns upset. When the holidays come to an end, the little group splits up. Kikujiro and Masao return to Tokyo, with the adult promising the child to return with him in search of his mother. At the moment of their separation, the child asks the man what his name is and finally, in a burst of laughter, receives this inheritance, this ultimate gift - the name of the father: "Kikujiro"!

It is also the name of the director's father: "This film, it seems to me, is a tribute to my father, who was a man of many flaws."⁵⁸ Traditionally, a cinematographic fiction based on a man and a child more or less holds a beautiful discourse on the transmission of a knowledge and a vision of the world, from the top to the bottom. Except that here the hierarchy is

⁵⁸ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris :GRASSET, 2010 p 153

turned upside down: how could the man transmit something to the child, who received nothing when he was a child? The man can't swim, he can't drive, he can't juggle, etc. No one has taught him, nothing has been taught to him. No one has shown him, nothing has been told to him. So the journey is for this self-taught man, as much as for the boy, an opportunity to catch up. Kikujiro's childishness is underlined by his total lack of autonomy. In the end, this journey will be more beneficial for Kikujiro than for Masao. The shift toward looking up is accompanied by a change in their relationship, as Masao stops calling Kikujiro "Ojisan" (a child polite appellation for an adult man) and starts saying "ojichan" (a less polite and more affectionate term) Then, after returning to Tokyo he finally asks his travelling partner's name. The answer is of course Kikujiro, which is also the name of Kitano's father? On an abstract level, what Masao has found on his trip is not the mother, but the father which is why Yamane Sadao says the film is not 'hahamono('mother film — a long standing Japanese ilm genre about mothers sacrificing for their children), but 'chichi mono (father film)⁵⁹

As Kitano decribed, in many ways Kikujiro is about lonely adults who use a boy to engage in childish play.⁶⁰ Some called it an adult movie made by people who never grew up, or sensed in the film's simple and relaxed structure 'the feel of an improved holiday? As many noted including the director himself, most of the characters intros playful world are either childish or at least desire a temporary return to childhood. The most

⁵⁹ Yamane Sadao, "*takakura ken to Kitano Takeshi*"; kinema junto no. 1292(1 September 1999) , p155

⁶⁰ Kitano, T., & Temman, M. *Kitano par Kitano*, Paris :GRASSET, 2010 p164

prominent is Kikujiro, an overgrown adolescent bully whose weaknesses are largely related to his immaturity.

He can't drive, he's penniless. It is also underlined by the title of the film: *Kikujiro no natsu*, i.e. "Kikujiro's summer". It is not so much the summer of Masao, the child, but that of the fifty-year-old. It is his coming out age.

The film adopts an episodic structure. To underline this childlike character. The sequences are chaptered and titled like an album of memories, a holiday notebook, annotated by the hand of a child: that of Masao. *Kikujiro* is a film strongly structured by a child's perspective. The picture diary structure evinces this the most, not only construction the events as Masao's recollections, but also effecting the same kind of temporal stagnation we witness in the space of play.

Water is an omnipresent element in the film. Masao and Kikujiro meet on a bridge. They stop at a hotel, where Kikujiro, not wanting to admit to the child that he cannot swim, almost drowns in the hotel pool. Last but not least, their destination is the sea, where Masao's mother is. The attachment to the boy becomes even more obvious when Masao falls asleep after showing him a photo of the mother he never knew. Kikujiro, who has gone through the same hardship, can finally feel close to another human being, through the analogy of painful feelings. His relationship with the boy has totally evolved to the point that a while later, awkwardly, in his own way, he can't help but let his desire to play the role of a real father to Masao surface. As in *Sonatine*, it is again an opportunity to play childish games, to forget the drama and the horrible revelation. The film,

like Kikujiro, will attempt to dilute the immense sadness of the story. Since they have achieved their narrative goal, what is left to do but overcome the grief? This is now Kikujiro's mission, which he deals with more seriously than the initial objective. The sea, the water, invites them to idleness, to make a family. In this respect, it is interesting to compare *Kikujiro no Natsu* with Aki Kaurismaki's film *Le Havre*. In the Finnish director's film, Marcel, a bohemian writer, meets a little boy, an illegal immigrant from Africa, who wants to reach the United Kingdom to join his mother. Marcel will help him to organise his crossing, despite the surveillance of the police and the maliciousness of informers. As in *Kikujiro no natsu*, where Masao and Kitano meet on a bridge, Marcel and the child meet on another watering hole: the quays of a port. The little boy hides from the police patrols by staying in the brackish water of the harbour. Marcel rescues him from the water, and helps him cross the Channel to his parents. In Kaurismaki's work, the sea functions as a border, as an obstacle to be crossed. In Kitano's film, it is not the end of the journey, it is a path. So there are two uses of the sea. Kaurismaki's sea is geographical, narrative, whereas Kitano uses it as a material.

Kikujiro says goodbye to each other on the bridge where they met. It is as if they had followed the course of the water to the mouth of the sea and then back upstream to finish the story. One might think that these characters are, like Shigeru in *A Scene at the Scene*, aquatic creatures. This is surely why they seem unsuited to the urban world in which they live.

What is original in Kitano's work is the need, in response to the loss of the maternal bond, with all that this implies in terms of the disintegration of the community, to recreate one. Disembodied but very real, experienceable as a place: the sea.

The story ends where it began. Kitano particularly likes this ouroboros narrative structure. We find it in *Jugatsu* which starts and closes on the main character in the toilet before a baseball game. But also in "Kids Return" where the two protagonists, two on the same bike, ride in circles in the school yard.⁶¹ But also in "Takeshis", which begins with a pastiche of an American war film, where the soldiers enter a bunker. Kitano plays dead. At the end of the film, the American notices him. Cut to black, and gunshots. It is consubstantial with his cinema, with his doctrine. When they don't die, the characters return to their starting point. It is a defeat, a false happy ending. An ending even sadder than death, as we will expose in the next chapter.

⁶¹ see appendix 6

IV. THE SEA AS A DEATH WISH

A la montagne je fais de beaux rêves et je dors bien. A la mer je rêve de suicide. Je rêve que je rentre dans la mer en marchant pour y mourir. La nature enveloppante c'est à la montagne. La mer c'est terrible, c'est le retour à l'origine. A la fin, dans le sens du retour à l'origine.

Kitano par Kitano,

If, as we discovered in the first chapter, the sea offers a refuge to Kitano's characters, to protect them from the deleterious and meaningless urban world, if the sea invites them to reconnect with their childhood, to find the inner child as we described in the previous chapter, it is now time to study how the sea invites them to die. This is the end of the journey. The last half hour of the film. This is where Kitano's hero can either go home, back to his starting point (*Kids Return, Kikujiro no natsu*), or he gives himself up.

A. THE VOLUNTARY DEATH IN JAPAN

This brings us to the major theme of Kitano's films. It is perhaps the most intimate of his themes. It is about death. And not just any death: voluntary death. In 1994, Kitano was the victim of a motorbike accident. Drunk, he was driving his motorbike in the streets of Tokyo and lost control of his vehicle, crashing into a wall. He almost dies, but escapes. The only remaining consequence of this traumatic experience is the paralysis of half of his face. When he recalls this episode, he says he

remembers almost nothing, but does not exclude that he wanted to end his life that night.⁶² It develops an intimate experience with death.

Of course, one might be tempted to explain the special place of voluntary death in Japanese culture. In the past, defeated samurai were invited to kill themselves by seppuku. The warrior plants a "tanto" in his stomach, after which his executioner immediately alleviates his suffering by cutting off his head. For example, this is the death that the writer Yukio Mishima chose to give himself in 1970. On 25 November 1970, he went to the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence and tried to get the soldiers to support traditional Japan and its emperor. Faced with their hostility, he committed suicide by "harakiri" (a traditional Japanese Samurai suicide also known as "seppuku"), by cutting open his stomach with a sword. Then, one of his companions continues the killing ceremony by proceeding, after several attempts, to decapitate him. His death, as spectacular as it was shocking, resounded around the world and in literary circles, bringing the practice of "seppuku", known in the West as "Harakiri", to the attention of the general public. In his book, the writer deplores the fact that modernity evacuates the subject of death: "Modern society constantly avoids the meaning of death. No, it does not forget it, it avoids it. Maria Reiner Milke said that the death of man had become smaller. A man who dies is no more than an individual dying on a hard hospital bed, an object to be disposed of as quickly as possible. And all around us the traffic war is in full swing, which is said to be killing more people than the Sino-Japanese war. And human life is as fragile as ever.

⁶² *Kitano Takeshi, l'imprévisible*, dir, Limousin Jean-Pierre, France : AMIP, INA, La Sept-Arte, 1999, min 40:12

But we don't like to talk about death. We don't like to try to take the good things out of death and put them to work for us, we try to keep our eyes on the bright, forward-looking landmark of life, and we do our best not to mention the power that makes death consume our lives bit by bit⁶³"

Mishima laments the fact that people look away from such an important subject. He sees it as a weakness of modern society and a subservience to the American enemy. We can also mention the Kamikazes who, during the Second World War, made Japanese airmen sadly famous, who didn't hesitate to crash into the American fleet to reverse the outcome of a battle. In *La Mort Volontaire au Japon* (Voluntary Death in Japan), Maurice Pinget evokes this Japanese particularity in his essay: "America was working on the Manhattan project, Hitler was launching his V1s, his V2s The Japanese army also flattered itself by discovering in 1944 the absolute weapon, the terror of the enemy: voluntary death, an immaterial weapon, the spiritual secret of the Yamato race, a recipe for incivility that would not be demanded from new tricks of the scientists, but from the deep past, from distant traditions, from the supposedly unchanging identity of the nation and from the purity of youthful self-denial. To win, it would be enough to really want it, and therefore to want it to the death, and to organise the proper use of the sacrifice made. For the first time it was a matter of choosing an absolutely certain death with a clear head, a few days or weeks in advance. Pure goodwill was called upon to pronounce itself freely without any illusion or emotion. The warrior's ethic succeeded. A rigour worthy of Kant, and as Kant never goes

⁶³ **Mishima Yukio** , *Le Japon moderne et l'éthique du samouraï* (Gallimard)

without Sade, the result of this good choice would be the sacrificial annihilation of an innocent life, the brutal dispersion of a young body rendered into a fragment of nature, into the silence of the ocean.⁶⁴"

The voluntary death in Kitano's film is not the one of the defeated samurai who, to save their honour, have their heads cut off. Nor is it the one of the Japanese airmen who crush their zeros on the American ships to save the battle. Such glorification of death, of suicide, does not exist in Kitano cinema. Nor is there any such glorification of violence. "You know, the Japanese, unlike Westerners, have never thought of suicide as a negative act, i.e. a fault. This is the case, especially within the mafia. This extremism reminds me of the fundamentalism of Muslim fundamentalists... Anyway, I don't think that the person who commits suicide is a brave person. She is not motivated by politics, or by war. It is less altruistic than selfish. It is an intimate journey. We will see how Kitano materializes this death drive with the sea. The voluntary death in Kitano's film is not the one of the defeated samurai who, to save their honour, have their heads cut off. Nor is it the one of the Japanese airmen who crush their zeros on the American ships to save the battle. Such glorification of death, of suicide, does not exist in Kitano cinema. Nor is there any such glorification of violence. "You know, the Japanese, unlike Westerners, have never thought of suicide as a negative act, i.e. a fault. This is the case, especially within the mafia. This extremism reminds me of the fundamentalism of Muslim fundamentalists... Anyway, I don't think that the person who commits suicide is a brave". Death is neither

⁶⁴ Pinguet, M. (1984). *La mort volontaire au Japon*. Paris: Gallimard. p252

motivated by politics, nor by honour. It is less altruistic than selfish. It is an intimate journey. We will see how Kitano materialises this death drive with the sea.

B. DEATH AND DREAMS

Water, the substance of life, is also the substance of death for ambivalent reverie.

— *Gaston Bachelard, Water and dreams*

In the case of *Sonatine*, which we mentioned earlier, Murakawa's suicidal temptations are a leitmotif of the film. He is a character worn out by the senseless gangster life he leads. He almost never smiles. Except during a scene that inaugurates the arrival of Murakawa and his troops at the beach. Two of his men are playing a silly and extremely dangerous game. One balances a soda can on his head, while the other aims his revolver at it and starts shooting. The extreme absurdity and the way these characters put themselves in danger borders on comedy. Of course nothing happens to them. From afar Murakawa (Kitano) watches them. An ellipse - and he joins them, suggesting they play another game: the Russian roulette. The Russian roulette game. He loads the gun with a bullet, and they draw lots to see who should receive the eventual shot. His cronies are scared at first. And the game continues until they get to the last chamber of the bullet, this time intended for Kitano. They try to dissuade him from shooting himself, but without success. With the barrel of the revolver pointed at his head, Kitano smiles at them, full of malice. The bullet did not go off. They realise that their boss has tricked them into believing that there is a bullet left in the chamber. In another sequence,

Kitano replays the same scene. Murakawa threatens to pull the trigger while his two sidekicks scream and try to dissuade him. This time the gun fires. Kitano remains standing and a long stream of blood drips down his white shirt. This sequence is a dream⁶⁵. Kitano suggests the dream through a few cinematographic tricks: the use of slow motion, which freezes this decisive moment, but also gives a grotesque aspect to the agitated supplications of his comrades. But also by the sound. We hear neither the screams nor the sea. Only the gunshot that goes off, which gives way to a long silence during which Kitano remains standing. The blood flows, and he has lost his smile. Thanks to the silence and the slow motion, I want to suggest that Kitano doesn't just want to give the sequence a dreamlike effect, but a more aqueous character. Everything happens as if the action was taking place underwater, with the head underwater. Movements are slowed down and cries are muffled. The death dream is a liquid dream. As the philosopher Gaston Bachelard points out in his essay on the reveries of water: "water is an invitation to die; it is an invitation to a special death that allows us to return to one of the elementary material refuges."⁶⁶

What this sequence reveals is that death, the sea and dreams are intimately intertwined in Kitano's imagination. The intuition that death and dreams are intimately linked in the director's imagination is partly confirmed in an interview recorded in the catalogue devoted to the exhibition of his paintings by the Cartier Foundation in France : "*My brain*

⁶⁵ See Appendix 6

⁶⁶Bachelard, G., & Farrell, E. R. (1999). *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Bachelard Translation Series) (3rd ed.). Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture. P 125

causes me some disturbing and disturbing emotions. Not all the time, but very often I still feel like I'm having that series of dreams I had in the hospital bed after the accident. I even have the impression that maybe everything around me is a dream. I mean that everything I do on TV, on the big screen, and now with this exhibition at the Fondation Cartier, is perhaps the continuation of this series of dreams. Maybe one day I'll wake up and suddenly say to myself: "So it was all a dream?"⁶⁷

Another detail that reveals the aquosity of death : the real shot and the dreamed shot of Kitano pulling the trigger, differ in their background. In the real shot, we see a sandy beach in the background. In the dream shot, Kitano's back is turned to the sea. The background is often used in cinema to magnify the emotion of a character. The example of Ran where the lord Hidetora Ichimonji, played by Tatsuya Nakadai, kneels with his back to his castle consumed by flames. The anger, the despair of the character is amplified by the wall of flames that arise behind him. In the same way, the image of Kitano turning his back to the sea conveys his immersion with death, and his indifference in leaving the terrestrial world (the beach), for the watery world of death.

Bachelard, who analyses the poetic qualities of matter, devotes a chapter to water as the carrier of a death wish: "*Closed - in water takes death into its bosom. Water makes death elemental. Water dies with the dead in its substance. Water is then a substantial nothingness. No one can*

⁶⁷ Takeshi, B., Cartier, F., & Fondation Cartier. *Gosse de peintre*. Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2010 P54

go further into despair than this. For certain souls, water is the matter of despair."⁶⁸

Murakawa finally embraces death by looking at the sea one last time, from the seat of his car, a blue car. It is easy to guess that the blue of the car refers to the blue of the sea⁶⁹. The element of water surrounds him, and as the adventure comes to an end, all that remains is for him to give himself a shot, a real one this time. Everything happens as if the sea offered an irresistible invitation to die. We have just seen this in *Sonatine*, but also in *A Scene at the Sea*, where Shigeru will meet an end similar to the one of Murakawa. This is an opportunity for us to observe in more detail the deadly influence of the sea on the Kitanian hero.

C. CAMUSIAN SUN, KITANIAN SEA.

"Six to seven miles represent for the man dreaming before the sea, the range of the infinite"⁷⁰

Sea in death has so far appeared to us as an accepted element. Now I am going to group together those images in which water in death appears as a desired element. Gaston Bachelard examines the problem of suicide in literature as a "decisive one of the judgment of dramatic values. Despite our literary stratagems, crime displays its inner workings poorly. It is too obviously a result of external circumstances. It breaks out like an event not always in character with the killer. Suicide in literature, on the other hand is planned like a long inner destiny. Of literary deaths it is the

⁶⁸ Bachelard, G., & Farrell, E. R. (1999). *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Bachelard Translation Series) (3rd ed.). Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture. P 92

⁶⁹ See Appendix 7

⁷⁰ Beaudelaire, *Journaux intimes*,; Paris p 79

most prearranged the best prepared and the most complete. With a little encouragement the novelist would have the entire Universe participate in the suicide of his hero. Literary suicide, then, is especially suited for giving us the *imagination of death*.⁷¹ "Thus, the influence of the elements on the actions of characters is a common motif in the arts. In order to highlight the forces of the sea that affect the Kitanian characters, we will contrast them with the sun of a classic of twentieth-century literature, namely Camus's *The Stranger*. In French colonial Algeria, Meursault, the hero of the novel, goes to kill an Arab on the beach. A stranger, with whom he has no personal conflict. The sequence of events that leads to this tragic act is explained by the influence of the sun. The story of the unbearable heat continues. Meursault repeatedly refers to the heat brought on by the sun. "The overheated sand seemed red to me now."⁷² "The heat was such that it was also painful for me to stand still in the blinding rain that fell from the sky."⁷³ "I could feel my forehead swelling in the sun. All this heat was pressing down on me and opposing my advance.»⁷⁴ "It seemed to me that the sky was opening up to rain fire»⁷⁵. The overwhelming presence of the sun weighs on the character. It is as if the sun determines the character's fate. The same is true in *A Scene at the Sea*, where we can guess that Shigeru, every time he goes to the beach, is feeding his desire

⁷¹ Bachelard, G., & Farrell, E. R. (1999). *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Bachelard Translation Series) (3rd ed.). Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture. P 81

⁷² Camus, A.. *Etranger*. Paris : Gallimard, 1942 p57

⁷³ Ibid. p.60

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p62

to die. Kitano sums up his plot as follows: "I wondered if it couldn't just be a story of a guy who hated humanity dying at the sea..."⁷⁶ In a way, "*A Scene at the Sea*" can be understood as the story of the hero's slow and deadly symbiosis with the sea. Shigeru is a young deaf man, who works as a garbage collector in a harbour town. While collecting rubbish, he finds a broken surfboard. From then on, he develops an obsessive passion for surfing. But far from giving meaning to his life, contact with the sea makes him fall back into melancholy. So much so that at the end of the film, only his surfboard is left on the shore. We assume that he has drowned. It is important to note in passing this new inversion that attributes a human action to material element. Water is no longer a substance that is drunk; it is a substance which drinks. It swallows the shadow like a black syrup. This is not an exceptional image. It could be easily found in fantasies about thirst.⁷⁷

Apart from *A Scene at the Sea*, Kitano's characters rarely venture in the water. Water is a frightening and deadly element for Kitano. The "Swim or sink" slogan printed on Shigeru's surfboard reinforces this idea with humor. In a literal and metaphoric sense, when his male characters go to the beach or end up at the water's edge, they die and reborn again. The sea and the shorelines are both the beginning and the end of things enclosing the creation scene and the death scene. Gaston Bachelard qui étudie l'imagination matérielle de l'eau, parle de l'eau comme un élément de la mort désiré: "To disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a

⁷⁶ Bito Takeshi, *Manzai bōto* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1993) p148

⁷⁷ Bachelard, G. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Trans. Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: Inst Humanities & Culture, 1999 p54

far horizon, to become part of the depth of infinity, such is the destiny of man that finds its image in the destiny of water. Water, exceptionally limpid or stagnant ponds, invites us to die. A pool contains a universe, and water is a universal home. Water is the substance that drinks, swallowing your shadow like a black syrup; absorbing all shadows, water offers a daily tomb to everything that dies within us every day. Water is the colour of universal suffering and infinite pain, and it absorbs it all. Only water can sleep, and all the while keeps its beauty; only water can die, be still, and yet keep its reflections. Water imparts melancholy; dissolving our unhappiness; it is a substantial nothingness that helps us die completely.

⁷⁸ This passage is particularly insightful in understanding the symbolism of Shigeru's death. As a deaf-mute and a proletarian, Shigeru is placed on the margins of society. He does not fit in. But the fate that put this surfboard on his path will push him to find an other realm where he feels he belongs. Moreover, the characters who used to bully him will start to show some compassion, then admiration for his surfing skills. When he is finally accepted by the group, melancholy reappears. It never really left him. The contact with the sea invites him to become one with it. As Sean Redmond suggests, "such death and suicides appear less than nihilistic, however, and more a form of purification and transformative release from the woes of liquid modernity, gender normatively and faulty capitalist progress."⁷⁹ It is worth noting that, while there are a number of elements in Kitano's filmography that contribute to a critique of the capitalist turn in

⁷⁸Bachelard, G. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Trans. Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: Inst Humanities & Culture, 1999, p59

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Japanese society - as we saw in the first chapter, for example - Sean Redmond seems to be mistaken about the gender critique that might be found in the director's films. These American studies are likely to be trying to stamp their ideological vision on his work. Gender studies can hardly be transferred to the work of the director, who gives female characters only minor and mute roles. Kitano's work is eminently patriarchal.

In conclusion, Shigeru's death should not be understood as exclusively tragic. The character's suicide, his drowning, is not shown on screen. The surfboard washed up on the beach functions as a metonymy, a detail for a whole. Kitano's stylistic approach attempts to defuse the sadness of the ending. Moreover, after the discovery of the board by his girlfriend, the film continues. The character of his girlfriend shows no sadness. She just observes. Kitano's cinema works a lot with the Koulechov effect. He portrays neutral faces, which he intersects with the subject he is looking at. The subject they are looking at gives the colour of their feeling. Thus the neutral face of his girlfriend does not force the feelings of the spectator, on the contrary, it allows them to exist. With Kitano, the Koulechov effect makes the viewer an active reader of his films. Shigeru's ending should not be read as a sad ending. Here again, we must imagine Shigeru happy, as this interview with Kitano shows *"He became a fish. I find death cruel but romantic. That's how we see it in Japan. I wanted this scene subtitled to explain that Shigeru had become a fish. It's like... going back to one's roots. The human species comes from the sea. Going out of the water, man evolved. In my movie, he goes back into the sea. So this scene signifies going back to the origins. We could*

*simplify that and say he died. But that's not it. Going back into the sea, It's like ascending to heaven, or becoming a god. It's a return to the origins that gets me in the dumps. The film ends well. The ending is tragic, but I wanted the audience to think it was a good happy ending.*⁸⁰

Kitano characters can leave their body behind and grasp the pure possibility of becoming something different. They face death, see it coming, and welcome it, in fact, with a sincere resignation.

⁸⁰ Gerow, A. (2007). *Kitano Takeshi (World Directors)* (2007th ed.). British Film Institute.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the various symbols of the sea used in the films of Takeshi Kitano, director and icon of Japanese cinema. Through the analysis of his directing choices, and the themes he conveys, we have tried to outline the various stages that structure the narrative of his films. Firstly, we have drawn up a portrait of the Kitanian hero, which reflects the director's personality and his view of the world. We then explained the city/nature, city/sea dichotomy that he highlights in his films, to define what the sea represents in the filmmaker's imagination. Namely, a refuge, an intimate hideout, which welcomes the marginalized, the excluded. The sea is a bubble outside of time and the constraints of life, sometimes even a refuge for the filmmaker, to escape the expected film genre, to flee the conventions of a cinema he resents. In the second chapter, we focused on how the sea invites us to return to childhood. At the sea, it is the carefree nature of life that prevails, the impermanence of life. We then looked at the implications of such a regression. Returning to childhood implies to team up, in a word to "make family". Finally, we dealt with the deadly prevalence of the sea in his cinema. It anchors death to his plots, and has an irresistible appeal. Its melancholy, its strangeness awakens the suicidal impulses of the character, impulses that are not foreign to the filmmaker.

In general, the choice of films for analysis was guided by two principles: the presence of the sea as a theatre and active actress in the narrative, and the effects it has on the filmmaker's creative forces and his influence on his characters.

We can now conclude that the sea as a material element provides a major imaginative axis in Takeshi Kitano's films: it is a character, a force that shapes his filmic language and allows him to express intimate mysteries.

The sea offers them a magic playground like in *Sonatine*, *Jugatsu* or again "Aniki." A stage where the story leads to his final and most of the time fatal conclusion; the double suicide out of frame in "*Hana-bi*" provides the purest example. Also, a shelter for marginals. The Yakuza of *Sonatine* escaping their death sentence in the near countryside, and the hero of "*A Scene at the Sea*" a hearing-impaired boy who finds the joy he lacks so much from his passion of surfing.

Kitano creates heroes who resemble him in order to be able to play them more freely in front of the camera. Coming from an underprivileged family, he draws on elements of his life to create characters with authentic flaws and problematics. Influenced by a childhood image, the first time he sees the sea with his father, this scene will become the signature of his cinema. It is a dreamlike experience before it is a conscious performance.⁸¹.

Like a peculiar obsession, the motif of the sea is present within the whole cinema of Takeshi Kitano. No matter the genre he adopts, it is often the main stage and the core of his stories. It is the privileged space where he develops his characters and suspends time and plot for them. Then the sea becomes a poetic space, a shelter where they are facing their inner

⁸¹ Bachelard, G., & Farrell, E. R. (1999). *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Bachelard Translation Series) (3rd ed.). Dallas Inst Humanities & Culture. P 11

struggle through temporary boredom. It is the main stage of "*A Scene at the Sea*" and *Sonatine* and a vital plot element. It is also the final stage of *Hana-bi*, where the main character and his wife are caught into a silent and slow epiphany. They are finally brought back together to embrace their past and their destiny.

In a way, Kitano can be understood as a classical Japanese director even if he doesn't really reflect on it and denies having any substantial knowledge about the history of cinema in his country, just as the former masters of Japanese cinema, his tendency for contemplation, the art of ellipses, clever use of motion and framing shows his participation to a broader art movement. However, as a multiform artist, Kitano develops an authentic style and another vision of cinema, of his country and that even if he always defended himself to be a cinephile: "If I succeed to start a second career in the cinema industry, it is mainly, I believe because I'm born in Japan, a very particular country. Actually, unlike occidental countries, where you logically need to watch any films and study cinema in art or cinema school to become a cineast, in Japan, you can succeed without studies, and no matter the talent.⁸² Examples of maritime films are not lacking in cinema. But Kitano's sea is not Truffaut's in "*400 Blows*", nor Jacques Tati's *Monsieur Hulot*, nor the one of Wim Wenders in the "*American Friend*". Kitano's cinema is not a referential cinema. And that is why it is fascinating to study his cinema. Being free of cultural references allows him to develop a filmic language that is free of all

⁸² Kitano, T., & Temman, M. (2010). *Kitano par Kitano* (Documents Français) (GRASSET ET FASQUELLE éd.). GRASSET. p 41

classicism, as evidenced by his narrative structures that border on the experimental.

At the beginning of this research I wanted to show that if Kitano had developed a style and themes, which earned him his international recognition, it was to some extent because he was born within a climate, a geography and a singular history. My intuition was that his connection to the sea was eminently Japanese: tradition versus modernity, silence versus noise, the sea versus the city. In contrast, I discovered that the imagination and reveries he brings to the screen are at least equally cultural and intimate. As a self-taught artist it was interesting to see his cinematic language shaped by his obsession with the sea. The question was less about how the natural environment governs artistic creation than about elucidating the sea as a structural basis for his artistic development.

It was through directing that Kitano developed a cinematic language and themes that went deeper than those known to the Japanese public. The sea is a constituent of the depth and freedom of his cinema. Kitano, the artist, is not the accumulation of his general impressions, but rather the sum of his singular impressions: in this way, he creates familiar mysteries that designate themselves in rare symbols. *"It is not the knowledge of reality that makes us love reality passionately. It is feeling the first and fundamental value."*⁸³

⁸³ Ibid. p 115

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VIII. APPENDICES

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min 00:56



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