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### "Beat Takeshi Vs. Takeshi Kitano" By C. Abe, Translated By William O. Gardner And T. Hori

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*translator's afterword*

*by william o. gardner*

Actor-directors are hardly a novel phenomenon, but it is rare for the split across two different personae—and two different media—to be as radical as that of Beat Takeshi and Takeshi Kitano. Long before he established an international reputation as a film director, Takeshi Kitano had achieved a ubiquitous presence as a television personality under the name Beat Takeshi. Thus it undoubtedly came as a surprise to many Japanese television viewers when Kitano garnered the prestigious Golden Lion award at the 1997 Venice Film Festival for his film *Fireworks* and was soon being compared with Japanese film masters Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Kurosawa. While American television actors such as Ron Howard and Penny Marshall have gone on to work in film, the extremity of Kitano's transformation from TV comedian to film auteur seems more akin to Jesse Ventura's metamorphosis from pro wrestler to Minnesota governor. And while Ventura has set aside his feather boa, director Kitano continues to work not only as a film actor, but also as a TV comedian. The nature of Beat Takeshi's TV work, it should be noted, entails appearing on the most banal quiz and variety shows and performing gleefully low-brow gags in a wide array of vaudevillian costumes and makeup. Thus the title and organizing principle of Casio Abe's book, which sets the actor and directorial personae against each other, represents

an attempt to grapple with a enigmatic reality, rather than a merely literary conceit.

Nevertheless, many fans of Kitano's films outside of Japan are likely to be unfamiliar with Beat Takeshi's television work, or the idiosyncratic world of Japanese television in general. Such conversance with only one side of the Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano formula marks a potential point of difficulty in accessing Abe's fascinating study, and this difference of audience perspective is one of the first challenges for a translator of Abe's work. Moreover, international distributors have been woefully slow in promoting the remarkable products of the 1990s Japanese independent film renaissance (especially to the American market), thereby obstructing access to part of the cinematic context of both Kitano's work and Abe's criticism. Even the historical products of Japanese cinema have only circulated outside the country in a limited fashion, centering on famous names like Ozu and Kurosawa, with such important Kitano precedents as Kinji Fukasaku's 1973 *Battle Without Honor* (Jingi naki tatakai) yakuza series remaining largely out of distribution.<sup>1</sup>

Such differences in background, however, give those of us outside Japan all the more reason to welcome a study that brings critical insight to both Kitano's film projects and his television persona. Abe's *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* ranges freely across Japanese and Western film and television history to explore the resonances of Kitano's work in a thoroughly imaginative and original way. Abe's critical method is also original and eclectic, combining formal analysis with a concern for social and existential questions and referencing a range of sources from German critics Walter Benjamin and Wolf Lepenies to Japanese thinkers Shuzo Kuki and Shinobu Orikuchi. Such critical eclecticism may be disorienting to readers who prefer to pigeonhole film commentators into well-defined camps. But in suggesting new critical approaches, Abe's work presents a provocative

alternative to Anglo-American film writing, as well as a valuable addition to the short shelf of translations of Japanese criticism into Western languages.

Seldom resting content with received categories, Abe creates his own neologisms, and has developed a critical vocabulary custom-fitted to explicate Kitano's work. Rendering this improvised, but internally consistent, vocabulary into English is another of the difficulties facing the translator of Abe's critical writing. Many of these neologisms and key critical terms are placed within quotational brackets in Abe's manuscript, and have generally been rendered inside quotation marks in this translation. While there is no space to explicate each of Abe's terms, I will briefly outline below what I see as Abe's most important critical contributions, and suggest ways in which future Kitano critics may want to engage his work.

The first of Abe's key critical contributions is the assertion that the director Takeshi Kitano treats the actor Beat Takeshi as a "body." Abe traces the progression of this body through Kitano's early films, as it transforms—in Abe's terms—from the decisive, persistent, and explosive physical presence in *Violent Cop*, to the dispersed, "tentacular" presence in *Boiling Point*, to the fatigued, death-haunted, yet strangely rapturous body of *Sonatine*. Abe highlights the extreme physical control that Beat Takeshi brings to these performances, as well as Takeshi Kitano's skill in realizing these performances in the cinematic medium. As he writes in Chapter 6, it is "as if the actor Takeshi has a voltage switch imbedded in his body, and can vary the proportion of 'strength' and 'weakness' or 'positivity' and 'negativity' [of his actions] with infinite precision." Moreover, Abe asserts that Kitano's "thought"—from his verbal responses to interviews to his expressions as a film director—is always grounded in the "rhetoric of the body." Thus, although Kitano repeatedly kills off or "suicides" his alter egos in his films, he suggests in an interview that the relative

strength or adaptiveness of his body over his spirit has prevented him from actually taking his own life.

This unremitting attention to the body as a basis for Kitano's artistic vision must have seemed like an interesting if somewhat eccentric critical perspective when Abe first published *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* in 1994. However, the true prescience of Abe's approach was dramatically confirmed after the actor-director's motorcycle crash the following year, which left Kitano's face partially paralyzed. Thus Abe was in a special position to follow up on his analysis of Beat Takeshi= Takeshi Kitano's physical presence as the basis for his film aesthetic, and to demonstrate how Kitano extrapolates "paralysis" into the central theme of his masterful *Fireworks*. In addition, he was able to employ the terms of his earlier critique to observe how Beat Takeshi's television screen presence shifted after his accident, moving away from the center of TV's narcissistic "interiority" to an awkward (but no less ubiquitous) position on its "margins."

Another key point of Abe's work, but one that is seldom brought to the foreground, is the observation that slapstick comedy forms a essential basis for Kitano's film grammar. In Chapter 5, for example, Abe discusses the scene in *Sonatine* where Murakawa entices the other men to fall into pits he has dug in the beach. This scene, Abe writes, has already "given up on being a gag." In other words, Kitano jettisons the overtly comical, but uses the structure of physical comedy to organize his film and to realize its theme of "discontinuity." Kitano's ability to use the gag as a structural principle reappears most prominently as true slapstick in *Getting Any?* and again as melodrama—or deadpan comedy—in the whimsical *Kikujiro*. Such thorough comprehension of physical comedy as a basis for the grammar of film connects Kitano with that other master of deadpan, Buster Keaton.

Finally, the most suggestive part of Abe's critique may not be the contrast between the actor Beat Takeshi and the director Takeshi

Kitano, but between the two media of television and film. Abe's analysis is centered, of course, on the specific contexts in which Takeshi has worked as a TV performer and film director. But his insights into television as an all-pervasive social presence, which has usurped the right to define itself as "contemporary life," and to remake contemporary life in its own image, are provocative to consider in televisual contexts outside of Beat Takeshi's Japan. Given the current trend towards "reality" television in the United States, for instance, are we able to deny Abe's description of TV as a net formed by the warp and woof of the viewers' own narcissism (Chapter 6)? And when media outlets are increasingly formed into large conglomerates that propagate this televisionesque reality even further, when companies such as CNN-AOL Time Warner continue to extend their reach across the globe, do we not have all the more reason to fear the logic of questioner=answerer (Chapter 1)? Perhaps, extending Abe's line of argument, we can conjecture that the success of Kitano's films abroad has been partly due to an unconscious recognition of the anti-televisionistic "otherness" of Beat Takeshi's performances, as realized by director Takeshi Kitano.

While Abe's arguments in *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* are extremely suggestive, there are a number of issues raised by Kitano's work that he does not extensively address. Abe gives us a provocative analysis of Kitano's violent treatment of the body in the context of contemporary social "pathologies," but the question of the violence of Kitano's work, and its connection to escalating violence in Japanese and American media cultures, will doubtless remain a troubling one for many viewers. A related question is the influence of Hong Kong cinema on both the conception and the reception of Kitano's "hard-boiled" films. The misogyny that often accompanies the masculinist violence of these films is another issue deserving further scrutiny. Conversely, the homosocial and homosexual elements

of Kitano's films also form an intriguing nexus for further critical exploration. A gender-based analysis of Kitano's work might elucidate the ways in which the actor-director refashions the *tateyaku* heroes and male-centered "hard school" ethos of earlier Japanese film into a new, contemporary sensibility.<sup>2</sup> Since Abe's strategy is to read Kitano's film work against the culture of television, however, the question of Beat Takeshi = Takeshi Kitano's position in a genealogy of Japanese film heroism remains outside the purview of his study.

One distinctive trend in Kitano's recent films is their tendency towards a rhetoric of national or ethnic identity. The shift towards a stronger delineation of "national character" is evident in the films from *Fireworks* onwards, but becomes most conspicuous—even self-consciously excessive—in *Brother*. While suicide has been a recurring theme in Kitano's films, *Brother* rewrites the act of suicide in explicitly national and ethnic terms. The implications of this nationalist reinscription will doubtless be a topic of further discussion among Kitano watchers.<sup>3</sup>

No matter what direction future discussions of Kitano's work may take, however, it is clear that such discussions will owe a major debt to Casio Abe's pathbreaking work. It is truly a welcome event, then, to see this work appear in the English language. We can hope that it stimulates further critical exchange between the Japanese and English-speaking film communities, and that the vigor of this discussion is exceeded only by the continuing inventiveness of Takeshi Kitano's creative work.