

## **Dual-layered Rehabilitative Cocoon: Reconciling Position and Critical Reception of Kitano's *Kids Return***

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## Abstract

This article predetermines Kitano's so-he-called second project as a phase that reinforces his identity and recognition as a director. The principal aim of this article is to unearth the position and critical reception of Kitano's sixth film *Kids Return*. In so doing, this article follows the certain analytical process: configuring the place of film in historical contexts and examining the critical reception to locate the analytical framework to the film's text. With respect to his directorial authorship, this article is hopefully to unearth the represented figure and culture in Japanese cinema in 1990s.

Key Words: film studies, authorship theory, reception studies, criticism, close analysis

*Kids Return* is the sixth film of Kitano's oeuvre and at the same time, the overture of his so-called second project. With respect to its position vis-à-vis Kitano's second project, it is important to note that *Kids Return* preceded *Hana-Bi*, which is regarded as his monumental work not only in the second project but amongst all his works. If *Hana-Bi* is considered to be the most successful film made by Kitano and the point where Kitano's directorial career culminated, *Kids Return* can be regarded as a curtain raiser of the culmination. While Kitano preferred to provide original scripts for his works, engraving his strong authorial footprints as a scriptwriter on each piece of work, *Kids Return* is Kitano's first directorial trial of an adaptation of a book.<sup>(1)</sup> However, the author of the original book is none other than Kitano himself. In other words, *Kids Return* is a film based on Kitano's own book with the same title. Including Kitano's first attempt at an adaptation of a book and his tie-in marketing of his book with his film, in many respects, both on and off-screen, and in and outside text, *Kids Return* manifests itself as the first in terms of directorial challenge, stylistic transformation, manner of cinematic embodiment, poignant Kitanoesque illumination, and so on. Most of these manifestations extend over the second project. In a way, *Kids Return* is literally the threshold of the second project.

Remarkably, *Kids Return* became Kitano's most successful film as well as the fairly lucrative film in Japan at the time of its release.<sup>(2)</sup> At the time of the film's release, due to the

stagnant domestic box office revenues with respect to all of Kitano's works after his second film *Boiling Point*, the domestic theatrical exhibition market for Kitano cinema was reduced and limited to a smaller-scale arthouse-related minor cinema circuit release, which is well known as a '*tankan*' release in Japan, and not a nation-wide release. Nevertheless, Kitano first presented to the world the commercial potential of his film; moreover, he constantly enjoyed the prestige that he received at European international film festivals. Kitano also frequented the prestigious European and American arthouse cinema circuits. While his works had become less profitable with each film since *Violent cop*, which was his first film, *Kids Return* not only reverses the unprofitable spate with regard to his cinema but also, as a result, lured the Japanese critics to make note of the commercial revival and extraordinariness of Kitano cinema. One of the finest examples of this can be found in a book written by the well-known Japanese film journalist Hiroo Otaka's, which is an insightful study of contemporary Japanese cinema from arthouse minority cinema to blockbuster films during the 1990s, in which Kitano cinema has been focused on, particularly the rational success in terms of number of admissions and the net/gross profit of *Kids Return*, making it a potent historical event.(3) The film's favourable reception is, however, not a surprising; rather, it is a logical consequence if one were to carefully consider the situation at the time when the film was released as well as both before and after production.

From an international perspective, *Kids Return* was screened at the 28th Director's Fortnight (Quinzaine des Realisateurs) at the 49th Cannes Film Festival in 1996. Cannes is not unfamiliar festival for Kitano; on the contrary, it has had a strong affinity to Kitano cinema since his fourth film, *Sonatine*. Moreover, the screening of *Kids Return* at the 28th Director's Fortnight confirmed an advancement of his directorial career after two consecutive screenings of *Sonatine* and *Getting Any?* in the sidebar series Un Certain Regard.(4) In addition, Cannes' official selection of his film for screening at Director's Fortnight bestowed additional prestige on the film, which was later utilized at the time of the film's release in Japan as an effective promotional strategy. Internationally, on the one hand, the screening of the film at the Cannes secured foreign film markets and suggested that Kitano had made a comeback with a critically bearable film. Domestically, on the other hand, this ensured unusual media exposure for the film despite its minor chain release and hence, worked as one of the unique factors that resulted in the mass appeal of the film.(5)

When considering the film, another important aspect which is almost impossible to ignore is that the film was made immediately after Kitano's suicidal accidents both on and off screen. On screen, in the sense that the catastrophic failure to appeal masses and the harsh critical reception of the previous work, *Getting Any?* indicated that Kitano's directorial

position and reputation was at the very edge of the ring, to use a boxing metaphor. The off screen accident refers to Kitano's motorcycle accident, which occurred after the release of *Getting Any?* and became significant nation-wide news because it almost killed him and, as a result, compelled him to stay in the hospital. Almost inevitably, Beat Takeshi, who is a Japanese hegemonic media personality and is regarded as Kitano's inseparable alter ego, suddenly disappeared from Japanese television and newspapers. In other words, the film was most evidently branded to be viewed, criticised, and analysed as being a strong reflection of Kitano's off-screen life. In this respect, both Japanese and non-Japanese film critics and journalists have discussed Kitano's off-screen high profile in their critical discussions of the film. Thus, this makes it difficult to analyse the film as a single piece of work. In addition, as a result of Kitano's explicit acknowledgement in his interviews and books that *Kids Return* is his rehabilitation not only in the physical sense of recovery from the near-death motorcycle accident but also in that it is revival of his identity as a director, distinguishing between the cinematic and non-cinematic elements of the film becomes even more difficult.

The difficulties with regard to a pure analysis of *Kids Return* without examining Kitano's off-screen persona originate in an analytical mesh, and hence, it is important to focus on the entire film in order to elucidate the structure and new directorial manifestation. However, at the same time, it should not be simply dismissed and denied given the importance of the discussion pertinent to the reflection of Kitano's socio-political and psycho-cultural status in Japan at the time of the film's release. Kitano himself officially announced that the film is his personal rehabilitation from his cinematic and non-cinematic wounds, and that rehabilitation was one of the primary reasons for making his sixth film.(6) When elucidating what lies beneath Kitano's rehabilitative direction and intentional cinematic embodiment, which is an appropriate purpose for this scholarly single film analysis, *Kids Return* can definitely be regarded as one of the few films in which one need not trespass the blurred boundary between purely cinematic aspects and a reflection of the director's non-diegetic status. In addition, not only is this an extremely unique feature of this film but also it is the principal premise of this article.

Incidentally, an attempt to elucidate the total figure of *Kids Return* is the same as applying the concept and approach of the paratext theory in literature, which was introduced by the French scholar Gerard Genette. The basic concept of the theory is as follows.

It is an inter-relation and connection between a literary work which consists of a text and a production such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations, all of which surround the text. In order to present the text, to make it present, and to ensure its

presence in the world, the reception and consumption in the form of a literary work are also significantly considered. These accompanying productions constitute what Genette has termed in the work's paratext.

Since this is a literary theory, I prefer to place the central focus on the antithetical prefix 'para'. Owing to the fact that thematic concept and cinematic presentation of the second project comprises a double antithetical dichotomy and that the existence of Kitano himself is imbued with the symbiotic personality, in the case of *Kids Return*, to expound on the film is to identify the paratextual inter-relationship between its cinematic and non-cinematic elements. Moreover, the boundary between these elements is a more or less like a permeable membrane, resulting in one being confused with the other in that the non-cinematic elements blend into the cinematic ones and vice-versa. Nevertheless, the important thing is to clarify the boundary to as much an extent as possible and categorise the elements clearly so as to enable the identification of the film's cinematic structure and ineluctable position.

In addition to the above premise, another important identification is seemingly required. Since Kitano did not appear to define his rehabilitation precisely and was never interviewed on the subject in detail, the following questions arise: What was his rehabilitation actually about? What has he done for his rehabilitation? What the rehabilitation comprises of and how did it function? If, as he describes, the making of *Kids Return* was for his physical and directorial rehabilitation, then the question pertinent to what was restored, renovated, or rebuilt in the film arises. Unless we clearly identify this sort of a hidden agenda proposed by Kitano himself, an analysis of the film will constantly perplex our critical thinking. Hence, some critics are, in fact, reluctant to undertake a detailed analysis of the film, while others have no choice but to stray into the critical labyrinth.

When considering the film from the viewpoint of critical reception, it is fair to state that there are several examples from journalistic reviews to filmic study articles both in and outside Japan. While the probable factors are variegated, an important tendency and phenomenon can be identified. On the one hand, non-Japanese film critics and journalists tend to avoid developing a detailed analysis and seriously discussing the film; they prefer to focus on a rather shallow review of the film and the re-introduction of Kitano and his comeback with the new film after the accident. Even Tony Rayns, one of the founders of Kitano cinema abroad, is no exception.<sup>(7)</sup> On the other hand, Japanese film critics and journalists have actively discussed the film. Unfortunately, however, apart from their enthusiastic analysis and discussion, they have been unable to maintain a consistent and

coherent point of discussion and reach any analytical conclusion, thereby displaying their critical confusion with respect to the film. A critical discussion of the film by foremost film journalists and scholars in an article of *Eiga Geijyutsu* (which literally means Film Art) is an appropriate example of their confusion.(8) The article comprises various viewpoints of discussions by a number of people. Some examples of this are as follows.

On the one hand, the previous works were more understandable, demonstrating the crystallized ideas in an auteuristic manner and with auteuristic intentions; on the other hand, this film does not easily portray those ideas and intentions.(9)

We have evaluated Kitano's almost forbidden cinematic grammar and methodology, which could be easily dismissed and even jeopardize a directorial career if someone else had done the same thing. However, he seems to have come to our side of filmmaking in the same *dohyo* ring; I am unsure how to describe it.(10)

While the critics and journalists seem, in fact, eager to discuss Kitano's new experimental film and his apparent transformation with regard to direction, such as his use of logical filmic grammar and an extremely conventional narrative, at a certain places, they definitely expose their critical confusion, particularly those who had been hostile to Kitano's earlier works and dismissed them as extremely unconventional and, therefore, inappropriate to be seriously analysed. Moreover, the lack of any critically hostile comments in the reviews and criticisms is exceedingly peculiar; it appears as if they had nothing more to accuse Kitano of. With respect to the critical reception of Kitano cinema as a phenomenon, it needs to be stressed that it is strange and unusual that a film of his has not received any hostility given that a hostile reception of his works is inevitable.

Undoubtedly, Kitano's official announcement that the film is his physical and directorial rehabilitation fuelled the film's obscure image. However, the cause of the softening of the critical reaction is even more obvious. It is a certain sentimentality, which functions as a protection, forming the first layer of the conceptual cocoon around the film. As a matter of fact, almost no one, including the western film journalists and critics, have ignored or disassociated Kitano's off-screen incident with respect to the critical discussion of the film. On the contrary, they have made an effort to integrate Kitano's off-screen cachet with the filmic elements in a sentimental sense. Moreover, they have tended to focus on unearthing the synchronised facets between Kitano's off-screen situation and the main characters in the film. Further, this sentimental phenomenon is independent of East or West and Japanese or English. When focusing on the reviews and articles title with respect to the film, it is

considerably evident and unquestionable that similar to the manner in which the title of the film implicitly and suggestively lures its audience, most of the review and article titles connect the film's title with Kitano's (or Beat Takeshi's) off-screen sympathetic situation, for example, *The Harder Way* by Tony Rayns and *Beat's Bold 'Return'* and *And the Beat Goes On* by Aaron Gerow,

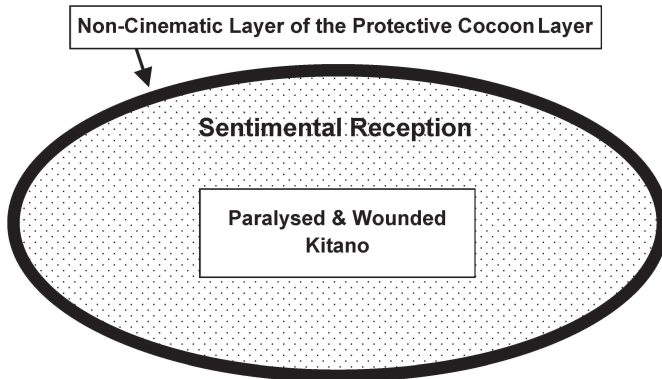
Apart from the titles, as is often the case with regard to the reception of Kitano's cinema outside Japan, Tony Rayns and Aaron Gerow, the foremost Kitano cinema journalist and the foremost non-Japanese film scholar for Japanese cinema studies, respectively, whom I refer to as 'the hegemonic two', consider *Kids Returns* in an self-reflexive manner in their writings, and as a result, as is typically the case no one attempts to question their analyses; rather, it appears that they simply follow. In his article, Rayns defines the film's persona with the following expression: 'the question they [two main characters] face is not to die, but the harder one of how to go on living'.<sup>(11)</sup> Thereafter, he continues to discuss Kitano's somber and subdued disposition at the time of filmmaking. In the interview section that follows, Rayns begins with the following question: 'how close is this film to your own adolescent experience? Is it fiction or rooted in fact?'<sup>(12)</sup> On the other hand, Gerow begins his review by addressing Kitano's near-death motorcycle accident in 1994 in the following manner.

When Beat Takeshi's motor scooter skidded into a telephone pole in 1995, leaving the popular comedian near death, the wideshows may have been concerned about the fate of the myriad of TV shows he hosted. But we in the film business wondered if this one hope of the Japanese film industry would ever return.<sup>(13)</sup>

Further, Gerow ends with the following sentimental remark: 'in *Kids Return*, Kitano Takeshi has come back from the dead to brilliantly show us the ironies of living.'<sup>(14)</sup>

In all respect to the analysis of the film's critical reception, it is considerably evident that Kitano and his sixth film are sensitively blessed with a self-defensive function. Moreover, it forms the outer layer of a cocoon in that Kitano and the film are protected by his physical and cinematic wounds. The sentiment provided by the film critics and scholars serves as a defensive layer, enveloping the film and protecting it harsh critical bullets and bayonets. While determining Kitano's intention is another issue for another discussion, his self-confession that the film is his physical and cinematic rehabilitation from serious injuries and the lack positive reviews and criticism objectively suggests that the film's place was functionally secured in advance similar to a risk hedge in the business milieu. Moreover,

with Kitano as the foremost media personality and his film being placed at the periphery of the Japanese film market, a risk hedge was certainly needed since any further wounds would have been intolerable. Owing to the public's common understanding of Kitano and the situation of his cinema, the public's curiosity and interest was enhanced as a result of the hype, and hence, the film maintained a high profile in the media. Most significantly, the atypical phenomenon blurred the critical opinion of the film journalists and scholars.



**Figure 1. The outer layer of Kitano's metaphysical cocoon.**

While it does interfere with the analytical discussion of the entire second project, in this case of *Kids Return*, Kitano definitely uncovered an interdependent association between his off-screen (Beat Takeshi's) status and the film's persona. Revealing certain interdependence by himself is in contrast to his previous works which have functioned as dualistic counterparts of his off-screen status and the film's personae. In other words, his off-screen status which is almost equal to Beat Takeshi's at the time of the film's release may have been considerably high profile, making it difficult to maintain a certain distance from the film itself. Hence, analysis of the film in terms reviews, criticism, and even scholarly articles have ineluctably reflected the off-screen elements. While several film journalists and critics, particularly in Japan, have regarded the film as one of Kitano's most self-reflexive films in his oeuvre, mainly because it is an adaptation of Kitano's own autobiographical book, I consider the film to be one of his most obscure works in that a pure analysis and study of its cinematic elements without addressing the complicated notions of persona-related issues and discussion is extremely difficult. Simultaneously, I believe that the film is Kitano's most self-defensive work in that it has been made with the intention of avoiding and dodging all the critical bullet

and bayonets and, remarkably, incorporates a set of cinematic protective elements as well.

On considering the film's unconventional position as well and the difficulty of analysis with regard to it and by identifying the film's cachet and its function in the film's reception both in and outside Japan, another layer of the cocoon which is considerably significant with respect to the primary question, what was Kitano's a rehabilitation, in the analysis of the cinematic elements is almost automatically revealed.(15) If the first layer of the cocoon functioned as a self-defence mechanism, the second layer did the same. If the outer layer of the cocoon served as a secured operation room, the inner layer of the cocoon comprises Kitano's drastic application of cinematic remedies and strategic disguise, which consequently reformed the image of his cinema and his cinemaesque. While the first or outer layer of the cocoon is non-diegetic, the inner one is diegetic and cinematic. It involves the use of a generic genre with an easily understandable narrative and its straight-forward development as well as all other cinematic elements that protect and support Kitano's 'rehabilitation'. Utilizing the conventions of a generic genre and rather simply developing the narrative, consequently guides the critics focus to the cinematic elements to focus. Moreover, at the same time, the film was reckoned as an example of Kitano's directorial maturation and metamorphosis into a more generalised director who needed to re-establish his directorial career and strong autonomy.

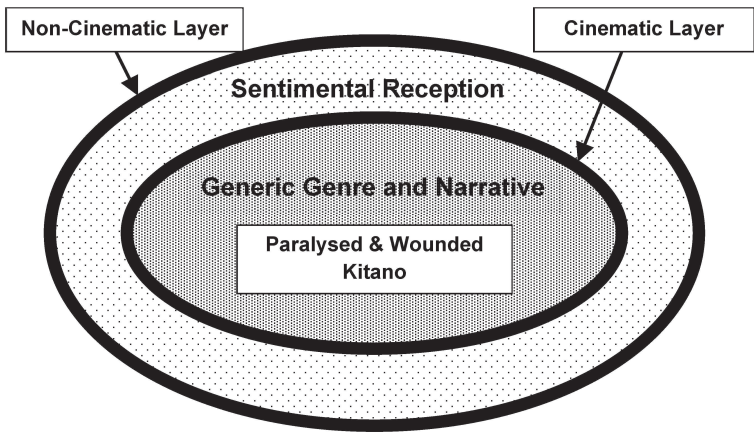


Figure 2. The cinematic and non-cinematic double layered cocoon.

(1) Beat Takeshi, *Kids Return*, transcribed by Akira Tamura (Tokyo: Oota Shuppan, 1996).

His books published by his name are always problematic in terms of the place of authorship since it is well known fact that he never actually writes but uses a transcriber instead.

- (2) Whether or not *Violent Cop* (1989), his first film, should be marginalized and isolated from his cinema when considering his directorial control and authorship is a controversial debate. After *Kids Return*, the negative image of Kitano cinema at the box-office faded due to the fair commercial success of his later works.
- (3) Hiroo Otaka, *Nihon Eiga Gyakutenno Shinario (Reversed Scenario of Japanese Cinema)* (Tokyo: Wave Press, 2000).  
Due to the hesitation of Kitano's production company, Office Kitano, in providing the box office numbers and figures of Kitano's earlier works and the absence/lack of detailed archival compilation of all the time box office figures in the Japanese cinema industry, particularly the grosses ranging from mediocre to embarrassing, Otaka's reference of the box office figures for Kitano cinema is highly valuable and rare.
- (4) Later, Kitano submitted *Kikujiro* to the Cannes which was finally invited for the competition.
- (5) According to Otaka's research, the media exposure at the article level was more than three thousand both in and outside Japan. Also, it is more than three times the amount of media exposure for 'tankan' films.
- (6) Takeshi Kitano, *Yosei (Rest of Life)* (Tokyo: Rocking On, 2001), pp. 226-230.
- (7) Tony Rayns, 'The Harder Way', *Sight and Sound*, June 1996, pp. 24-27.
- (8) Masato Inagawa and others, 'Tokushu - Kitano Takeshi "Kids Return"', *Eiga Geijyutsu*, Summer 1996, pp. 4-21.
- (9) Masato Inagawa and others, pp. 14.
- (10) Masato Inagawa and others, pp. 14.  
*Dohyo* means a ring for sumo wrestling in Japan.
- (11) Rayns, pp. 24.
- (12) Rayns, pp. 24.
- (13) Aaron Gerow, 'Beat's Bold "Return"', *The Daily Yomiuri*, 25 July 1996, pp. 11.
- (14) Gerow, pp. 11.
- (15) In this article, the enquiry and the analytical discussion of 'what is Kitano's rehabilitation' is considered from within the film and is distinguished from his self-announced 'rehabilitation' which refers to the entire second project.

