



Inviolable Attachments: Takeshi Kitano's Dolls

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Someone said that in this day and age, people won't accept a play unless it is very realistic and logically convincing, so there are many things in the old stories that people will not stand for now ... They will not accept the sort of childish antics of the past.

Chikamatsu answered: "That argument seems quite reasonable, but it fails to grasp the true method of art. Art is something that lies between the skin and the flesh [hiniku], between the make-believe [uso] and the real [jitsu] ... Art is make-believe and not make-believe; it is real and not real; entertainment lies between the two.

Hozumi Ikan, *Naniwa Miyage* (1738) [\[1\]](#)

Dolls is quite a violent film because just at the moment when the characters want to do something good, they are killed or they are close to death. We see then the intimate relationship between love and death, the former being enveloped by the veil of the latter. At the heart of love, death is never far away.

Takeshi Kitano (2003) [\[2\]](#)

Do you remember? When was it – that morning of the first snow when the early customers were arriving and you walked back with me, still in your nightclothes, through the thin snow by the great gate? The snow today is no different, but our hopes have entirely changed. You poor dear – it was because of me that you were first made to suffer, step by step the white cloth was dyed deeper, from blue to indigo.

Chikamatsu, *The Courier for Hell* (1711) [\[3\]](#)

1.

The cinema of Takeshi Kitano happens somewhere between formality and improvisation, elegy and absurdity, distance and familiarity. If continuities exist in his films, they rarely do so in stable, reliable forms: a shot can suddenly linger until it seems to belong elsewhere; matching and shot-reverse-shot conventions seldom matter; vivid, primary colours will refuse to disperse; dialogue is minimal and silence, profuse.[\[4\]](#) Shooting tends to be sequential, done to a schedule that promises few certainties – time is short and re-shoots are rare. Screenplays are scribbled and sketched out on bits of paper, 'constructed around a few central ideas that may or may not drive the plot along' (Udo, p. 27). Editing is a game, a puzzle to be solved once the film has revealed itself and not before: 'The shooting process is like moulding and colouring the plastic parts for a model ... building the model is the fun part'.[\[5\]](#) Genre conventions – particularly those associated with the Yakuza genre – are readily distorted; occasions of random and ritual violence are not simply interrupted, they often transcend their own seriousness. Actors (most notably, the 'Beat' Kitano himself) can act by not acting; characters – like the loosely woven *fabulae* they inhabit – remain enigmatic and psychologically insubstantial. A restless, impulsive imagination presides over the entire production process: responding to spontaneity rather than conforming to propriety seems to be the aesthetic keystone of Kitano's method.

In *Dolls/Dooruzu* (2002), Kitano applied his seemingly anarchic sensibility to the task of rendering the ornate, literary theatre of Bunraku puppetry into the forms and structures of a contemporary cinema. The film itself is comprised of three loosely interwoven Chikamatsu variations: two tragic lovers embarking on a journey to their death (the bound beggars); a retired Yakuza boss trying to make amends for abandoning his sweetheart years before (the remorseful 'warrior'); and a young man who blinds himself rather than see the scarred face of his idol, a reclusive former pop star who survived an accident (the infatuated servant). Each story presents characters and situations that correspond obliquely to archetypes and motifs from the Bunraku/Kabuki repertoire, and others that

correspond more exactly to those from Kitano's own film oeuvre: angels, shorelines, surfboards, flowers, bridges, fireworks, daft teenagers, and Yakuza gangsters. However, in maintaining his confidence in strategies of openness, informality, and play, Kitano's film emerges as much more than a stylish cinematic allegory of contemporary Japanese society and its fraught cultural formations. Nothing if not contradictory, Kitano's imagination carries *Dolls* in a different direction altogether, towards the possibility of reconciling theatre and cinema, artifice and truth, love and death.

2.

Kabuki and Bunraku^[6] are intimately related theatrical traditions that initially rose to prominence in Kyoto during the Edo (or Tokugawa) period (1600-1867). In the late 17th century, Osaka became the centre of Bunraku theatre, a development due in no small part to the popularity of the playwright Monzaemon Chikamatsu (1653-1724), and the unrivalled chanting skills of Gidayu Takemoto (1651-1714). Both theatres thrived throughout the 18th century, although Kabuki became more popular than Bunraku, which went into decline in the 19th century and was virtually extinct after WWII.^[7] Offering their Edo audiences a secular and more spectacular alternative to the Noh tradition – which was associated with Samurai codes and courtly society – Bunraku and Kabuki 'reflected a desire on the part of successful townsmen – merchants and artisans – to see their culture come to life on stage'.^[8] Not surprisingly, many plays from the Bunraku and Kabuki repertoires dramatize a conflict between the increasingly humanistic social values of 'merchants and artisans' and the feudalistic culture of a warrior aristocracy. There is a fortuitous parallel here between these Japanese theatres and the popular theatrical forms associated with the emergent bourgeoisie in 18th century Europe (i.e. *commedia dell'arte*). However, such comparisons should be approached with caution. Despite a 'tendency towards bourgeois realism', these Japanese theatres 'remained essentially *presentational* arts and were still significantly closer to the Noh than any Western theatrical practice between that of the Elizabethans and the modernist renewal [of the 20th century]' (Burch, p. 69).

Kabuki is an actor's theatre in which extravagant gestures and vocal styles are as integral to the spectacle as elaborately constructed sets and musical styles. Unlike Noh, Kabuki is not a pure theatre of masks, although its heavily made-up faces, expressive wigs, and highly decorative costumes prevent the audience from entering into anything akin to an 'identificatory' relationship with its characters and situations. Furthermore, the Kabuki audience is never sedate, and the general atmosphere can be informal – more akin to busy cabaret than demure *matinée*. True to the *presentational* nature of their art, Kabuki actors perform both to and *at* their audience, often moving out from the stage (amidst spontaneous shouts and outbursts of localized applause) onto the 'pathways' (*hanamichi*) that run parallel to the center of the theatre. Not surprisingly, 'the style of a Kabuki play is not necessarily tied closely to the exposition of narrative' and the actors are expected to adapt the dramatic situations to suit their own performance (Kirihara, p. 98). While the acting styles associated with the Kabuki theatre are various, they do conform to generic types. The *aragoto* style, for example, is lively and 'heroic', in a humanistic rather than epic way. The *aragoto* has its own costumes, make-up, and poses – particularly, the 'frozen' or *mie* pose which is often performed along the *hanamichi*. The *wagoto* style, on the other hand, is more restrained and graceful, as befits its Bunraku provenance; some *wagoto* poses deliberately imitate those developed in the puppet theatres. In both *aragoto* and *wagoto* styles, the distinctive rhythms of the text (whether delivered by the actors or the chanters) accentuate the pervasive musicality of the Kabuki experience, a musicality that also combines the percussive sounds of clappers with intricate shamisen variations. Like Bunraku, Kabuki performances always include archetypical scenes (for example, the journey of the doomed lovers (*michiyuki*)) and the Kabuki actors' skills are often judged by the degree of performative originality they bring to the enactment of such generic scenes. This is particularly true of the female impersonators (*onnagata*) who – to paraphrase Barthes – do not so much copy femininity as signify it and who virtually constitute a theatre-within-a-theatre.^[9]

Although Kabuki is also famous for its ingenious use of wires, doors, lifts, curtains and the revolving stage (*mawari-butai*), these mechanisms – like the texts of the plays themselves, and the various acoustic elements – are attractions that combine to subordinate plot to performance.^[10] In addition to 'superimposing' acrobatic and mime acts from the farcical interludes that were traditionally incorporated into Noh performances (*kyogen*), Kabuki, like Bunraku, also availed of important contemporary developments in the art of chanting (*jouri*) brought about by the chanters' increasing preference for shamisen – rather than lute – accompaniment. The chanter was a direct precursor of the speaker (*benshi*) who was employed throughout the silent period to narrate and comment on the plots of films as they were being screened.^[11] Given the preponderance of Bunraku plays that have been adapted for Kabuki (known as *gidayû kyôgen* or *marahon kabuki*), the chanter – or chorus of chanters – has maintained an important place in the dramaturgy of both theatres. Among the more popular of the Kabuki adaptations from Bunraku are Chikamatsu's 'domestic' tragedies of love, including *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki/Sonezaki Shinjû* (1703), *The Courier for Hell/Meido no Hikyaku* (1711), and *The Love Suicides at Amijima/Shinjû Ten no Amijima* (1721).

Like Kabuki, Bunraku plays tend to fall into one of two categories, period dramas dealing with dynastic and kinship conflicts (*jidaimono* or *jidaigeki*), and more individualistic and domestic tragedies (*sewamono*) that are configured around the resolution of a *giri-ninjo* (duty/desire) plot. Although Chikamatsu began his career in Kabuki, and wrote extensively in both *jidaimono* and *sewamono* genres, his major dramatic works have become associated

with the latter tradition.^[12] It is said that he abandoned the Kabuki theatre because he could no longer tolerate actors taking (naturalistic) liberties with his carefully crafted dramatic language. This may be true but it is also likely that he was drawn to Bunraku because its world of puppets and puppeteers accords in a fundamental way with his own deterministic outlook and belief in the ineluctable nature of fate. Just as Bunraku is 'a theatre that transcends the actor, by multiplying and displacing the sources of dramatic pathos', so too 'the relation between the operators and the puppet is not simply an efficient relation; it is the cruel mystery which is at the centre of the drama' (Sontag, pp. 132-134).

The Bunraku performance is comprised of four principal dramaturgical elements: the highly ornate puppets; the visible but inexpressive puppeteers (*kurogo*); the chanter/s (*gidayû* or *tayû*); and the samisen player and percussionists. Bunraku puppets are manipulated by an intricate system of rods, internal cords, and springs. By the middle of the 18th century, the puppets had acquired moveable eyes, mouths and hands. Given its increasing popularity and the demands for greater technical novelty, the art of the Bunraku puppeteer became more specialized and difficult to master. Even today, a puppeteer's apprenticeship is long (twenty years) and involves an arduous master/apprentice relationship. Indeed, the principal operators (*omozukai*) – like the highly skilled chanters – are often celebrated figures in Japanese popular culture, and unlike their (two) assistants, they enjoy the privilege of not having their face veiled by black silk, although like the other puppeteers they normally wear the traditional black cotton robe (*kuroko*). The principal operator manipulates the puppet's body, head and facial features with his left hand; with his right hand, he operates the puppet's right arm and hand. The first assistant (*hidarizakai*) is further away from the puppet and uses only his right hand to operate the puppet's left hand. The second assistant (*ashizakai*) operates the feet of the male puppets; the long, lavish kimonos worn by female puppets mean that any manipulation of their feet is normally unnecessary. Paradoxically, the presence of the puppeteers seems to emphasize, rather than diminish, the emotional expressiveness of the puppets. Unlike the movements of the Kabuki actor, the movements of the Bunraku puppet are synchronized precisely with the chanted words of the *gidayû*, and the samisen accompaniment. The black costumes and carefully choreographed movements of the puppeteers combine to frame the puppets, enclosing them within the confines of their own fictionality, insulating them from the intrusion of extra-theatrical spaces and objects: 'Despite the demands made on the audience to blot out mentally the presence of the human intruders in the world of the puppets, a powerful dramatic effect is obtained, and the spectators enjoy seeing their favourite operators lovingly follow the puppets around the stage' (Keene, p. 478). The little puppets are more ornamental than realistic and – like their operators – their gestures never compromise the sanctity of the Bunraku text. As Barthes puts it: 'Bunraku does not aim at "animating" an inanimate object so as to make a piece of the body, a scrap of a man, "alive", while retaining its vocation as a "part"; it is not the simulation of the body that it seeks but, so to speak, its sensuous abstraction' (Barthes, p. 60).^[13]

3.

Given its relative isolation from western artistic influences and the tradition of formal superimposition and textual appropriation within Asian performing arts generally, early Japanese cinema was receptive to various stylistic and structural features associated of the Kabuki and Bunraku theatres. In addition to the extensive involvement of *benshi* and *onnagata*, directors and producers immediately incorporated Kabuki/Bunraku plots and acting styles into the aesthetic schema of this cinema. Inevitably, there was a modern reaction to this tendency and by the mid-1920s Japanese cinema appeared to be rapidly out-growing its dependency on the antiquated codes and conventions of popular theatre. The influence of realist literary movements alongside cinematographic innovations (particularly, synchronized sound) undermined the commercial value and cultural relevance of 'canned Kabuki'. However, as is often the case, the break with the theatricalities of earlier cinematic styles was by no means absolute. While a number of Bunraku and Kabuki adaptations were made in the 1930s^[14] and during the immediate post-war period, it was really in the 1950s – with the 'rediscovery' of Chikamatsu – that the (Edo) *jidaigeki* genre returned to the fore in Japanese cinema. This development was a direct consequence of the restoration of national independence in 1951, which ended the Occupation government's ban on the 'celebration' of feudal culture. More importantly, however, the *sewamono* plays of Chikamatsu and other Kabuki/Bunraku dramatists – in being configured around conflicts between *ninji* and *giri*, emotion and obligation, the individual and society – offered potent allegories for a post-Fascist society in the process of defining its relationship with democracy and modernity.^[15]

In their cinematic treatments of Bunraku/Kabuki theatre, Japanese films from the post-Occupation period tended to issue from one of three paradigms: the *adaptational*, *intertextual*, and *meta-theatrical*. The first tendency involves the incorporation of narrative situations and characters from specific plays (and usually, their period), while eschewing the inclusion of actual theatrical elements (stagecraft, puppets, puppeteers, live audiences, etc.). The second category refers to an approach that allows for the inclusion of theatrical characters, texts, and locations (actual Kabuki actors acting in a Kabuki style, performances and references to specific plays, real theatres, playwrights, etc.) within both the narrative and *mise en scène* of the film. The *intertextual* relation between theatre and cinema in these films is however restrained and usually functions allegorically (i.e. 'theatre' does not signify itself as theatre), and such films are not adaptations of specific plays. The third category, the *meta-theatrical*, however, involves a more conscious recreation of Bunraku/Kabuki dramaturgy and stagecraft

within a more open and experimental film aesthetic.

Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Tale of the Crucified Lovers/Chikamatsu Monogatari* (1954) and *Night Drum/Yoru no Tsuzumi* (Tadashi Imai, 1958), are examples of films that conform to the *adaptational* tendency. In *The Tale of the Crucified Lovers*, Mizoguchi subverts the 'happy' ending found in Chikamatsu's *The Almanac-Maker's Tale* (1715), investing in the characters a level of existential awareness that is deliberately at odds with the metaphysical determinism of the source text. Beyond the use of some music associated with the Kabuki and Noh theatres, Mizoguchi's film dispenses with the possibility of a dynamic interaction between Bunraku theatricality and filmic forms: Chikamatsu's feudal theatre is transcended by Mizoguchi's exquisitely modern cinematic language; it is not preserved by it. A similar point can be made about *Night Drum*, a film that also takes issue with Chikamatsu's 'quietist' rendering of the tragic conflict of *ninjo* and *giri*. In Imai's film, the tale of Otane and Hikokuro does not exist solely to inspire heightened sympathy from the audience; its thoroughly cinematic treatment of a reconciliation rendered impossible by the absolute nature of Samurai codes offers new allegorical possibilities, exemplifying 'a modern director taking the straightforward conflict of classical theatre and transforming it into a complex vehicle for his own deeply held convictions about the social order' (MacDonald, p. 207). For both Mizoguchi and Imai, the process of 'revising' Chikamatsu involved restraining 'the protean sign of theatricality' (Burch, p. 338) within a lucid, modern film language, a language striving to liberate these texts – and their feudal aura – from the antiquated social and religious values that they are perceived to enshrine.

In the *intertextual* category, while theatrical performers and their performances can also be said to exist chiefly as narrative subject matter (where the presence of an acting style (*aragotto*, for example) tends to be an aspect of narrative content) the relationship to theatre is more formally intimate and politically pertinent. In *Duckweed Diary/Ukigusa Nikki* (Yamamoto, 1955), for example, an encounter between a travelling Kabuki company and a group of striking miners results in an exchange of political views in which the realistic attributes of the modern *shingeki* style of acting are set against the presentational aesthetic of the traditional Japanese theatre. Ozu's *Floating Weeds/Ukigusa* (1959) reprises this encounter between a settled community and a touring Kabuki troupe. While *Floating Weeds* does not configure the disruptive influence of Kabuki in explicitly political terms, it does directly relate the arrival of actors ('theatre') to erotic mischief and social uncertainty, creating a sensational (and uncharacteristically 'eventful') world of sexual intrigue, violence and occasional comedy.^[16] A more extreme example to this type of *intertextuality* can be found in Ôshima's *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief/Shinjuku Dorobo Nikki* (1968) where the protagonists' brief participation in a neo-primitive Kabuki performance (the only colour sequence in the film) emphasizes the gap between traditional and modern sexual attitudes. The deliberately haphazard, documentary depiction of that performance (that theatre) in this film becomes crucial to its 'investigation of sexuality', and to Ôshima's conviction that 'the assertion of the self and the importance of sexual awakening [is] a catalyst for liberated, revolutionary attitudes in the struggle against the repression of the state' (Tessier, p. 80). Rather than restraining or erasing theatricality, Ôshima endows its (supposedly anti-cinematic) artificiality with a radical, disruptive significance.

Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge/Yukinojo henge* (1963) also approaches the relationship between cinema and popular theatre in a flamboyantly *intertextual* fashion. Ichikawa's film was a 'remake' of a 1935 landmark Japanese film, directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa and based on a novel by Mikami Otokichi. The original film had been successful at the box office, consolidating Kinugasa's commercial reputation after his *Chusingura* (1932), and making a star out of a hitherto unknown Kabuki actor, Hasegawa Kazuo. (Interestingly, Kinugasa had himself been a leading female impersonator or *oyama* (the cinema's equivalent to the *onnagato*) at the Nikkatsu studio before becoming a director.) Despite the fact that most of Kinugasa's original film has been lost, it is clear from what remains that he too had been interested in doing more than simply *referring to* the Kabuki tradition. In his film, the Kabuki theatre itself is carefully filmed and its architectural features, spaces and community are invariably afforded the privilege of long tracking and crane shots. In 1959, Makino Masahiro directed a lavish remake of Kinugasa's film before Ichikawa was contracted to make a new version with Hasegawa Kazuo repeating his original role as Yukinojo, the avenging *onnagato*.

The narrative of Ichikawa's film introduces a heightened emphasis on the Yukinojo's sexual ambiguity – a man who impersonates women – by expanding the role of Ohatsu, a woman who – to all intents and purposes – impersonates men. Ichikawa's *mise en scène* is excessively artificial and no attempt is made to manipulate theatricality into the codes of cinematic realism. As Donald Richie has remarked: 'Not only is the production self-consciously stage-like, it also shows Yukinojo himself as the final incarnation of Onoe Mansunosuke, that first actor to move from stage to screen, by means of a long, stationary shot, the frontal view, and the two-dimensions of this ideal and theatre-like world' (Richie, p. 157). The presentational style of Kabuki theatre (and the basic cinematic language of earlier Japanese cinema) is radically transformed in the satirical, camp, and strangely sympathetic imagination of Ichikawa. Throughout *An Actor's Revenge*, Ichikawa unleashes contrasts of colour, space, acting styles (Kabuki/Shimpa) and music (samisen/folk/jazz), leaving the audience to decipher meaning from fragments of the old and the modern, Japan and the West, theatre and cinema.^[17] In Takeshi Kitano's cinema, there is surely a debt to the restless modernism of Kon Ichikawa, whose unreleased first film was itself a puppet version of *The Girl from the Dojo Temple/Musume Dojo-ji* (1946).

In terms of the more overt incorporation of theatrical forms into the medium of cinema, *meta-theatrical* films,

such as *The Beauty and the Dragon/Bijo to Kairyu* (Kimisaburo Yoshimura, 1955), *The Ballad of the Narayama/Narayama Bushi-ko* (Keisuke Kinoshita, 1958), and *The Mad Fox/Koi ya Koi Nasuna Koi* (Masahiro Shinoda, 1962) have a stronger affinity with *Dolls*: in *The Beauty and the Dragon*, for example, the alternative worlds of a live Kabuki performance and reality merge as the real becomes increasingly theatricalized; in *The Ballad of the Narayama* the Kabuki theatre is again intimately fused with cinematic realism (the film opens with documentary-style rendering of the opening of a live Kabuki performance (from the *Narayama*) before the curtains open to reveal the setting for the action; and throughout *The Mad Fox*, Shinoda combines theatrical sets and backdrops with vibrant colours and exaggerated choreography to foreground the film's theme of doubles and parallel destinies. While *Dolls* contains techniques and transgressions similar to those found in these films, their world is the one of fantasy and the ballad (*naniwabushi*), rather than the domestic tragedies of the *sewamono* genre, and their source is not Chikamatsu: *The Beauty and the Dragon* is a variation on the Kabuki play, *Narukami* (here adapted by Kaneto Shindo); *The Ballad of the Narayama* is based on *Men of Tohoku*, a contemporary short story by Shichiro Fukuzawa; and *The Mad Fox* is a version of a popular folktale that was adapted for the Bunraku theatre by Izumo Takeda (1734). In this respect, it is more instructive to compare *Dolls* with films from this period such as *Chikamatsu's 'Love in Osaka'/Naniwa no Koi no Monogatari* (Tomu Uchida, 1959) and *Double Suicide/Shinju Ten no Amijima* (Shinoda, 1969). Both films are based around a specific Chikamatsu's 'double suicide' puppet play – like *Dolls*, Uchida's film draws its inspiration from *The Courier for Hell* – and they place their subject matter within a framing narrative that involves the actions and choices of either the central character of Chikamatsu (Uchida) or the puppeteers themselves (Shinoda).

In *Chikamatsu's 'Love in Osaka'*, Uchida is not chiefly concerned with the task of 'opening out' *The Courier for Hell* for naturalistic cinematic representation. Instead, the play becomes enveloped by the fictionalised account of its authorship: Chikamatsu's pursuit of material for his next play, his eavesdropping and observing of the human characters of Chubei and Umegawa as they confront the hopelessness of their situation, his 'intervention' and saving of Umegawa, and finally, his presence – as an audience member – at the enactment of the play's closing scene in the theatre. In this film, Uchida adapts the dramaturgy, history, and 'business' of Bunraku to make the play (and the making of the play) available to the cinematic rendering of a reality that is a fiction (little is known about the real Chikamatsu and nothing is known about the source for his *The Courier for Hell*) and a fiction that becomes a reality (the actual performance of the play) within another fiction (*Chikamatsu's 'Love in Osaka'*). What motivated Uchida in the making of this film, and justifies his experimental approach, was not a desire to offer an allegorical perspective on the archaic moralism of the Bunraku theatre and its most celebrated poet. Instead, he subverts traditional adaptational practices by inventing a framing narrative of the play's origins that enables the film to openly address the relations between creativity and responsibility, art and life. If Uchida's *meta-theatrical* strategy culminates with the film's epilogue – a wide, lingering long take of Chikamatsu watching *his* puppets perform *The Courier for Hell* – Shinoda's *Double Suicide/Shinju Ten no Amijima* (1969) enunciates its merging of theatre and cinema in the prologue where the puppeteers are filmed assembling dolls, rehearsing the play and debating its meaning and proper outcome. Shinoda's puppeteers have an absolute control over the lives of the 'suicide lovers': we see them motivate the characters, preside over their actions, and carefully interfere to ensure that the infatuated paper merchant and the hapless courtesan cannot escape fate. Like *Chikamatsu's 'Love in Osaka'*, this film's *metatheatricality* is created by a doubling effect: inside the film's fiction is the reality of fictional puppeteers endeavouring to produce a more realistic and socially relevant version of a Bunraku play. A more abstract film than *Chikamatsu's 'Love in Osaka'*, *Double Suicide* places its protagonists in series of 'expressionistic' interior sets (a relentless black-and-white *mise-en-abyme* of imposing beams, panels, abstract *décor*, and calligraphic notations) before they go outside to make the journey to 'double suicide', accompanied by their 'invisible' puppeteers. Despite the opening discussions between the puppeteers, the film withholds explanations and justifications, and its famous final image of the dead lovers induces neither horror nor surprise but a strange serenity that may well come as close as the cinema ever can to faithfully rendering the essence of Chikamatsu's philosophy of art, religion and life.

Some awareness of these Japanese theatrical traditions and their relation to the cinema of the post-occupation and 'New Wave' periods, opens up a wider critical and cultural framework for an analysis of *Dolls*. Interestingly, the abstract visual style and narrative shape of Kitano's film probably aligns it more closely to the cinema of Ichikawa, Oshima, Uchida and Shinoda from the 1950s and 1960s than to any contemporary examples of Bunraku-inspired films. Indeed, the array of new technical possibilities and industrial circumstances that have shaped commercial film production in Japan since the 1980s have done little to encourage imaginative, genuinely artistic cinematic responses to Bunraku and Kabuki theatricality. Yasuzo Masumura's *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki/Sonezaki Shinju* (1978), for example, fails to rejuvenate 'New Wave' aesthetic experimentation (and political directness) to cinematically transform Chikamatsu's theatre. If anything, it merely imitates the *adaptational* approach that had already been successfully modernised by Imai and Mizoguchi (Masumura had himself worked as an assistant to Mizoguchi on *The Tale of the Crucified Lovers*). Although Midori Kurizaki's 1981 version of the same play might be regarded as attempting a more inventive cinematic engagement with Chikamatsu (the film incorporates *jourouri* narration, samisen music, and actual dolls), its animated sequences now seem naïve in what emerges as a film of gimmicks and surface tensions. Shohei Imamura's 1983 'remake' of Kinoshita's *The Ballad of the Narayama* is a thoroughly naturalistic adaptation that studiously avoids reproducing any of the *meta-theatrical* complexities evident in Kinoshita's film. In his 1986 version of Chikamatsu's *Gonza the*

Spearman/Yari no Gonza (1986), even Shinoda eschewed the experimentalist aesthetic that had made *The Mad Fox* and *Double Suicide* cinematically affective, agreeing instead to render *Gonza* as a televisual period piece in which alterations to narrative detail and characterisation are merely cosmetic.^[18] All of which could simply be a consequence of a general indifference to traditional art forms combined with a sense that genuine visual creativity has migrated to the *Manga*-inspired realms of *anime*, or contemporary Horror and martial arts special effects, rather than to what remains of cinematic modernism in Japan. In this sense, *Dolls* can be seen as representing a radical departure from this trend not simply because it embraces the pictorialism and peculiar morality of the Bunraku tradition but because its attempt to cinematically reconfigure these theatrical forms is faithful to a spirit – and style – of Japanese film-making that is nearly as obsolete as Bunraku itself. *Dolls* rediscovers in the puppets of the Bunraku theatre, in the dramatic poetry of Chikamatsu, not just the novelty of an old art form, but also the ingenuity of a cinema that has become increasingly characterised by formulaic realism and visual cliché.

4.

Dolls opens with a pre-title sequence comprised of a medium long shot of several inanimate puppets that then closes in on two principal figures; and a documentary sequence, filmed during a contemporary live production of Chikamatsu's *The Courier for Hell/Meido no Hikayu* at the Tokyo National Theatre. Kitano presents the performance in a lively but objective style. The stage action is framed unobtrusively (in marked contrast to the opening of Shinoda's *Double Suicide* or the concluding sequence of Uchida's *Chikamatsu's 'Love in Osaka'*) and medium and close shots of particular puppets and puppeteers, chanter and musicians, like the wide tracking shots of the audience, adhere to a (the) *presentational* style. Even a repeated shot of the stage revolving (the *mawari-butai*) followed by a revolving shot that itself opens out into the audience is more paradigmatic than dramatic. The screen then fades to black as the credit titles appear before fading again to a full shot of the two principal puppet-protagonists from *Courier for Hell* (Chubei and Umegawa), now alone (and completely 'un-manipulated') as they whisper something to one another and then indicate outwards, beyond their world into the off-screen space in front of them (our world). Their gestures and muteness are ambiguous but Kitano is almost certainly suggesting here that his film's contemporary tales of doomed love will themselves conform to archetypes derived from *The Courier for Hell*, and elsewhere in Japan's Bunraku and Kabuki repertoires. In short, *Dolls* opens (and closes) with a dramatised illustration of Chikamatsu's philosophy of art in which the boundaries between (theatrical) artifice and (documentary) truth converge: 'Art is make-believe and not make-believe; it is real and not real; entertainment lies between the two'. Throughout *Dolls* Kitano reconfigures visual motifs, gestures, and attitudes from the Bunraku and the arrangement of allusions and borrowings is crucial to the film's distinctive, 'sensuously abstract', rendering of time, space, movement, and colour.^[19]

The first of the three stories features Matsumoto and Sawako ('the bound beggars') and it constitutes the central panel in the film narrative triptych. Evoking the traditional *giri-ninjo* scenario, Matsumoto, pressurised by his upwardly mobile parents, has broken off his engagement to Sawako in order to marry the daughter of his wealthy employer. At the wedding he is visited by two uninvited friends (dressed in black) who inform him that Sawako has attempted to commit suicide and is now deranged and incapable of communicating with anyone. Immediately, Matsumoto leaves his wedding and drives to the hospital where he witnesses Sawako being physically restrained and sedated. He goes to his apartment, gathers some belongings, and borrows money from a friend before returning to the hospital where he finds Sawako sitting in a garden staring at a lifeless, bright pink, butterfly. He then takes her away with him. The two travel by car, and then by foot, until they arrive at the snow covered mountain resort where they had announced their engagement to their friends at a party the previous year. Throughout their wanderings, which combine both typical and unusual forms of the *michiyuki*, a long, thick crimson rope that first appears as a clothesline (and Matsumoto's practical solution to Sawako's aimless wanderings into danger) connects the couple. However, like the environments and seasons they pass through, and the costumes they wear, the rope itself becomes transformed into something more vividly symbolic.^[20] Its obvious metaphoric significance is further emphasised by the conspicuous presence throughout the film of other connective structures and devices (such as brightly coloured bridges, pylons, fishing lines, and pathways).

The film's second story involves the relationship between Hiro, a retired Yakuza boss, and his former sweetheart, Saitmama. As a young man, Hiro had left Saitmama to join a Yakuza clan, promising her that he would return. In the intervening years, Saitmama has waited for him on their favourite park bench, dressed in the same (striking red) clothes that she wore on the day he left and bringing a lovingly prepared lunch for them to share. Although he never returned, she has maintained a weekly vigil. Although she does not now recognise Hiro when he (re)appears before her, she eventually allows this 'stranger' to sit beside her and share lunch. Again, Hiro promises to return. Strolling back from the meeting with Saitmama – from his own future past – he is assassinated by a young gunman from a rival Yakuza gang.

In the third story, we are introduced to Nukui who spends his life queuing for autographs and glimpses of his idol, Haruna. Home and work are inconvenient interruptions in his pursuit of her affections and when not thinking about Haruna or playing the tune from her hit record on his harmonica ('Eyes Meet'), Nukui spends his time agonising over her greetings to, and meetings with, her other fans. While working one evening, Nukui finds out that Haruna has been seriously injured in a car accident. He immediately drops everything and races to the

hospital, joining the throng of reporters, photographers, and other fans. Due to a serious facial injury and the loss of an eye, Haruna decides to 'retire' from singing and becomes a recluse. Nukui calls at her house but is not permitted to see her. He returns home, slashes his eyes with a box knife and is eventually brought to meet Haruna. They converse contentedly, walking together along a shoreline (where they are passed by Matsumoto and Sawako), and then through a rose garden in full bloom. On his way home, a speeding car accidentally kills Nukui. Oblivious to his fate, Haruna, like Saitmama, is shown waiting.

Dolls does not render these stories in a chronologically continuous form, instead Kitano makes frequent use of inter-cutting and flashback techniques. The *michiyuki* of Matsumoto and Sawako begins realistically but gradually it is transformed into a symbolic journey from a present in search of a past, to a past that rediscovers the present as death. Throughout their *michiyuki*, the movements of both Hidetoshi Nishijima (Matsumoto) and Miho Kanno (Sawako) are subdued by sustained moments of stillness, delicateness, silence. If anything, both characters seem less motivated by their will than by some invisible force; their destination is only apparent to them once their journey is over and they remain throughout indifferent to the world around them, as if it is no longer their world at all. As they walk, people and places pass them by; their trance-like state articulated by extensive use of crane, tracking and extreme long shots. Frontal medium shots and close-ups only occur when one or both of them become transfixed by an object (for example, a beach hat being blown over the edge of a cliff into the sea) or, in the case of Sawako, a bright colour or neon light. Her fascination with garish, unrealistic colours and peculiar objects (porcelain angel dolls, flowers, fireworks, and toys) is not simply a symptom of her disconnection (rather than 'alienation') from the objective, natural world. It is part of the broader intrusion of theatre and artificiality into the real. Objects, lights, and their colours appear as formally contrapuntal and thematically symbolic. Like the butterfly in the garden, the beach hat swirling in the breeze, the cherry-blossoms that serenade them, the new moons, or the snow that consumes them at the end of their journey, the *michiyuki* of Matsumoto and Sawako occurs in a landscape of disappearing memories and endless transience; the graceful lifelessness of their movements and gestures – indebted to the choreographic structures of the *wagoto* style – is in harmony with the dreamlike, unreal environments that accompany them.

This sense of Matsumoto and Sawako existing in a parallel Bunraku universe is also emphasised by the various editing techniques that Kitano deploys throughout their journey. For example, in the sequence when Sawako is staring at the three angel figurines in her hotel room, the point-of-view shots clearly do not match her eye-line, instead they seem aligned to a gaze from elsewhere. Colours rather than events and points of view establish the continuities; the green of Sawako's hair-band in this sequence matches the green of the payphone that dominates the subsequent sequence, the pink of the butterfly is revived by the pink glare of the front lights of the juggernaut that transfix her in a subsequent sequence, etc. Similarly, the flashbacks to earlier experiences together – and those of their parents – that are inter-cut throughout their *michiyuki* – lack an identifiably subjective source. The perspective of these flashbacks, rather than their relative randomness, is, if anything, unreliably objective as if inserted not to provide us with additional narrative information but rather to sustain the film's alternative continuum of time and memory. Kitano makes little attempt to bridge the gap between what is being remembered and what is being imagined by his characters, instead the flashbacks are not flashbacks in the usual sense of the term; they co-exist with the present, stories-within-stories that issue from another, unidentified source.

Before the end of their journey, Sawako regains her sanity on awakening from a 'real' dream, a nightmare involving her rape during a summer festival by three masked men (Abe, p. 259). This sequence is followed by the first memory that seems to belong to one of the characters: Sawako playing a practical joke on Matsumoto by surreptitiously tying his foot to a surf-board and then watching him trip up as he dashes to catch her beach hat (the same beach hat that they had earlier stopped to watch as it was being blown towards, and then over, a cliff). At the end of their journey, when the animated puppets from *The Courier for Hell* momentarily appear and leave their robes hanging for Matsumoto and Sawako to wear, they are finally able to remember, to repossess, an event from their past together (the engagement party at the resort hut). At this moment, they suddenly embrace and weep for what might have been. The sense of a journey through an abstract world (of theatre and dream) that co-exists with another world (of reality and fact), and that can only end in their death, culminates in the film's final image of Matsumoto and Sawako hanging (puppet-like) by their red rope, from the trunk of a dead tree, over the edge (abyss) of another cliff.

As Matsumoto and Sawako embark on their *michiyuki*, the film cuts to the elderly Hiro, restlessly trying to read a paper in his large, fortified home. He has a heart condition and complains about doctors and reminiscences with his bodyguards about the old days. Two bizarrely dressed teenagers arrive at his gate, one a paraplegic in a motorised wheel chair. Hiro meets them, and then gives them some money: the paraplegic youth is the son of a dead 'brother'. As the teenagers leave Hiro's driveway, they pass by Matsumoto and Sawako. Hiro returns to the house; and prompted by a conversation with a new recruit he privately recollects a particularly horrific shooting incident from the past, followed by a memory of his last meeting with, and abandonment of Saitmama. Both of these events are relayed through flashback sequences, although unlike the flashbacks in the Matsumoto/Sawako story, they are logically motivated products of Hiro's memory and state of mind, providing narrative information about Hiro's career as a Yakuza boss, and betrayal of Saitmama. The action then cuts to the present as Hiro (and his two bodyguards) travel in his car to the park. He gets out of the car, leaves his bodyguards behind, and walks along a pathway (that is more evocative of an actual *hanamichi* than the iconic bridge between auditorium and

stage associated with Noh theatre) and then towards the figure of Saitmama, sitting, waiting. Hiro's return to his own past is rendered in a long take that cuts to a soft focus, dream-like, shot of Saitmama. At the moment when a miraculous transcendence of the past seems suddenly possible, the film cuts to Matsumoto and Sawako sitting along a river, and behind them are the two teenagers who had appeared earlier, fishing and clowning around; an extreme long shot shows Matsumoto and Sawako pass behind the two friends.

Such coincidences of time and place recur at various points throughout *Dolls*, marking the transition from one story to another, one state of mind to its opposite. Like the combination of reliable and unreliable flashback sequences, and unmatched P.O.V. shots, this pattern of diegetic superimpositions (and the film's more general framework of contrasts and oppositions) also evokes the dramatic structures and poetic rhythms of Chikamatsu's *sewamono* plays, with their short, interlocking scenes and atmosphere of uncontrollable desires and inescapable destinies. Similarly, the frequent isolation or abstraction of strong colours and hues (particularly, reds, blues, yellows, and greens) and the wide framing of iconic landscapes, and close shots of 'symbolic' objects, evokes the styles and subjects of traditional Japanese silk paintings and woodblock prints. The snowscapes, in particular, draw on a wealth of long established pictorial associations with time, desire, and death.^[21] Even the sequences featuring Nukui – from the story that tests the universality of Chikamatsu's vision to the limits – emphasize spectacularly unrealistic, luminous colours (for example, his yellow badge, blue umbrella, even the redness of his blood on the road). Like Sawako and Saitmama, Nukui's reality exists outside the world around him; only through actual blindness is he able to relate meaningfully to Hakuna (who has left the unreality of the pop star world), a condition that gives him life and then death: 'At the heart of love, death is never far away'.

Ultimately, what secures the merging of theatre with cinematic *mise en scène* in *Dolls* is not its characters and narrative situations, nor its loose poetics of adaptation or nostalgia for 'childish antics', but rather its profuse pictorialism: the abstract form of colours and motifs; the symbolic radiance of places, seasons, and costumes; the relentless intrusion of the 'not real' into the 'real'. *Dolls* is a work of cinema, a homage not to the elaborate theatricality and moral simplicity of a traditional vernacular art form but to images and what images themselves remember and discover. In the flow of impermanence, between dreams of love and fears of death, we remain the sum of our inviolable attachments, and the final respondent to our intimate responsibilities. Impossible (and unfashionable) though it is, the world of Chikamatsu is also the world of Takeshi Kitano. Maybe, this is what the little puppets from *The Courier for Hell* whisper to one another at the beginning of *Dolls*.

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Endnotes

- [1] H. Sirane (ed.), *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 350.
- [2] T. Kitano, 'Takeshi Kitano: Interview with Michel Climent and Stéphane Goudet', *Positif*, no. 506, 2003, p. 17.
- [3] *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, trans. D. Keene, Columbia University Press, New York, 1961, p. 186.
- [4] Aaron Gerow has written a particularly lucid and informed essay on Kitano's cinema of the liminal: 'The Kitano

dream is a vision we desire, offering us pleasure not only in the catharsis of violence but also in the opportunity to experience an empty liminality, to trade the boundaries between Self and Other, the domestic and the foreign, life and death, violence and comedy, motion and stillness'. 'A Scene at the Threshold: Liminality in the Films of Kitano Takeshi', *Asian Cinema*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1999, pp. 112-113. See also C. Abe, *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano*, trans. W.O. Gardner, Kaya Press, Tokyo, 2004, pp. 45-64, 253-260.

[5] Kitano, quoted in R. Hamid, 'Beat Comes to America: An interview with Takeshi Kitano', *Cineaste*, vol.26, no. 3, 2001, p. 33. See also, S. Rohdie, *Montage*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006, pp. 6-15.

[6] The term "bunraku" dates from the 19th century and was derived from the name of the owner of the only commercially successful puppet theatre of that time, Uemura Bunrakuken. Strictly speaking, "ninjo jouri" – meaning, "hand puppet and chanting" – is the correct term. See, D. Keene, *Noh and Bunraku: Two Forms of Japanese Theatre*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 135.

[7] See J.M. Law, *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death and Rebirth of the Japanese Ningyo Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.

[8] K. I. MacDonald, *Japanese Classical Theatre in Films*, Associated University Presses, Toronto, 1994, p. 18. A still useful survey of this field can be found in D. Richie's and J.L. Anderson's 'Traditional Theatre and Film in Japan', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1958, pp. 2-9.

[9] In 1629, women were banned from appearing in Kabuki plays and men then played all female parts. By the time the ban was lifted in the 1870s, the art of the *onnagata* had been perfected to such an extent that it had become completely assimilated into the aesthetic of the Kabuki theatre. The history and dramaturgy of the *onnagata* is particular to Kabuki, although it is a cultural phenomenon that was also maintained by Japanese film-makers until the 1920s.

[10] The Bunraku theatre appropriated a number of these devices, particularly the revolving stage, which so impressed European modernists such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, and Sergei Eisenstein. See Eisenstein's 'The Unexpected [1928]' in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda, Harcourt Inc., New York, 1949, pp. 18-27.

[11] According to Donald and Richie, 'Historically, the antecedents of the *benshi* have a very definite place in Japanese theatrical history. Both the Kabuki and the Bunraku, or doll-drama, have *yoruri* or *nagauta*, a form of musical accompaniment or commentary consisting of reciters and musicians who sit upon platforms at the side of the stage, explaining, interpolating, and vocally acting out the play. There is also the traditional theatrical storytellers who still exist in the *yose*, the indigenous form of vaudeville'. (D. Richie and J.L. Anderson, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982, p. 23. See also: MacDonald, op. cit., pp. 23-35; D. Kirihara, 'A Reconsideration of the Institution of the *Benshi*', *Film Reader*, no. 6, 1985, pp. 41-53; and J. A. Dym, 'Benshi and the Introduction of Motion Pictures to Japan', *Monumento Nipponica*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2000, pp. 509-536.

[12] For a concise introduction to Chikamatsu's life and writings, see D. Keene's introduction to his translations that comprise *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, op. cit, pp. 1-38.

[13] R. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982, p. 60.

[14] In addition to Mizoguchi's *The Story of the Late Chrysanthemums/Zangiku Monogatari* (1939), one might also mention here the numerous adaptations from the Chusingura legend that continued to be made throughout the 1920s and 1930s; including *Chusingura/The Loyal 47 Ronin* (Kinugasa, 1932); *Tenpo Chusingura* (Inagaki, 1934); *Chusingura* (Yamamoto, 1939); and Mizoguchi's *Genroku Chusingura/The 47 Ronin* (1941/42). The Chusingura became something of a foundational myth in post-Edo Japan and hundreds of films that have been adapted from its story. See Keene, 'Variations on a Theme: *Chusingura*' in James L. Brandon (ed.), *Chusingura: Studies in Kabuki and the Puppet Theatre*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1985, pp. 1-13; Burch, op. cit, pp. 236-237; MacDonald, op. cit, pp. 241-271. In 1997, Werner Herzog filmed a live production of Saegusa Shigeaki's and Shimada Masahiko's *Chusingura: An Opera in Three Parts*.

[15] During the post-war period, several films appeared that were apparently influenced by the Noh tradition, although, historically, this theatre has had less of an impact on Japanese cinema than its Kabuki and Bunraku counterparts. Mizoguchi's *Genroku Chusingura*, for example, includes Noh performers and its *mise en scène* is infused with the austere beauty of Noh theatricality. However, it was chiefly through the post-war films of Kurosawa that particular formal elements from this theatre were realized in cinematic terms. *Walkers on Tiger's Tail/Tora no O o Fumu Otokotachi* (1945), for example, includes a Noh chorus and was based on a 19th century Kabuki adaptation of the Noh play, *The Subscription List/Ataka: Kanjincho*. Both *The Seven Samurai/Shichinin no Samurai* (1954) and *The Hidden Fortress/Kakushi Toride no San-Akunin* (1958) deploy Noh music, and the dramatic structure of the latter is derived directly from Noh tradition. *The Throne of Blood/Macbeth: Kumonosu-Jo*

(1957) and *Ran* (1985) are interesting to consider in terms of the ways in which Kurosawa embeds Noh elements into these canonical western (Shakespearean) plays. Two other Noh adaptations worth mentioning in this context are Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964) (particularly, the 'Hoichi the Earless' episode) and Shindo's *The Iron Crown/Kanawa* (1972), which is based on a play attributed to Zeami.

[16] *Floating Weeds* was a sound (and colour) remake of his 1934 silent film of the same title. For a discussion of influence of Kabuki forms on Ozu, see K. Yamamoto, 'Ozu and Kabuki', *Iconics*, vol. 1, 1987, pp. 147-160. MacDonald also discusses this issue in a chapter on *Floating Weeds* in her *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006, pp. 93-107.

[17] See, I. Breakwell, *An Actor's Revenge*, BFI, London, 1996.

[18] See, R. Silberman, 'Gonza the Spearman', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 41, 1987/1988, pp. 55-59; two other contemporary Bunraku/Kabuki-based films worth mentioning here are *Musumedojoji/The Dojo Temple Girl* (Yukiko Takayama 2004) and *Ashura-jo no Hitomi/Ashura* (Yojiro Takita, 2005).

[19] On the expressive uses of colour in Kitano's earlier films, see D. Miyao, 'Blue Versus Red: Takeshi Kitano's Color Scheme', *Post Script*, vol. 18, no.1, 1998, pp. 112-127.

[20] 'The Japanese, like many other peoples, ascribe magical and religious powers to ropes. By delineating controlled areas, ropes, often knotted to give them further power, create spaces into which negative influences and evil spirits cannot penetrate'. M. Baird, *Symbols of Japan: Thematic Motifs in Art and Design*, Rizzoli International Publishers, New York, 2001, p.268.

[21] One of Kitano's paintings from *Hana-Bi* is a snowscape in which 'the snow is made up of thousands of copies of the Chinese pictogram for snow [with a large red symbol at the centre that means suicide]'. K. French, 'Art by Directors', *Granta*, no. 86, 2004, pp. 106-7. One might also compare the snowscapes in *Dolls* with those in Shiro Toyoda's *Snow Country/Yukiguni* (1957).

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