Document Citation

Title	**The harder way**
Author(s)	Tony Rayns
Source	*Sight and Sound*
Date	1996 Jun
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Kids return, Bito, Takeshi, 1996

THE HARDER WAY

'Beat' Takeshi on his new 'hard' film 'Kids Return'. By Tony Rayns

It doesn't feel at all grim as you watch it, but *Kids Return* is Kitano Takeshi's hardest and most confrontational film. As always, his interest centres on apparent no-hopers. In the past, his protagonists have always achieved something through sheer dint of persistence, even if it was only dying with some kind of dignity. This is true of the bruised detective Azuma played by Kitano himself in *Violent Cop* (1989), of the gas-pump attendant Masaki in *Boiling Point* (1990), of the young, deaf-mute garbage collector Shigeru in *A Scene at the Sea* (1992) and especially of the weary *yakuza* Murakawa played by Kitano in *Sonatine* (1993). But the new film is different. It centres on two high-school drop-outs, Masaru (Kaneko Ken) and his acolyte Shinji (Ando Masanobu), and shows them *failing* to cut it as gangster and boxer respectively. The question they face is not how to die, but the harder one of how to go on living.

Kids Return (the title, in English on the print, is borrowed from Kitano's first book of poems) is also different in structure from the earlier films. It's crammed with story, incident and character, and deliberately avoids any single narrative focus. The activities of the two protagonists are not only cross-cut but also counterpointed with many glimpses of other lives, other problems; there is a huge supporting cast. The setting appears to be present-day Tokyo, but the action has an indefinable retro ambience; the stories could be taking place in any decade since the 60s. The mass of material is held together by patterns of repetition and variation, which are in turn related to a set of recurring motifs. One of several frames for the action is provided by glimpses of two stand-up comics going through their routine in a small variety theatre; they are first seen as a warm-up act playing to an impassive audience of three, but have clicked with the public (and even with the stage manager) by the end.

The early scenes show Masaru and Shinji's delinquency at school and aimlessness outside school: despite going unpunished for cutting classes, they cannot resist taunting their teachers or vandalising their property. The turning point comes the day Masaru is beaten up; one of the classmates he regularly bullies turns up with an older protector who knows how to throw a punch. Suddenly motivated, Masaru joins a small boxing gym and starts training. Shinji, forever two steps behind him, inevitably joins too – and turns out to have more talent and persistence than Masaru himself. He starts winning junior bouts. Masaru quits to join the local chapter of a *yakuza* gang, where his loud-mouthed egotism is soon cut down to size. Shinji meanwhile finds a substitute 'elder brother' in Hayashi, a boxer who has never quite made the grade. Hayashi leads him into every bad habit in the book, and Shinji's once-promising talent is soon in ruins...

The last time I met Kitano in Tokyo was in the summer of 1995. He was still trying to recover from his near-fatal motorcycle accident of the year before, waiting for feeling and full muscular co-ordination to return to the right side of his face and wearing a patch over his right eye because he couldn't yet close that eyelid. (He also wore the patch in his role as the irascible gay hitman in Ishii Takashi's extraordinary thriller *Gonin*, arguably the best Japanese movie last year.) Disappointed that his comedy *Getting Any?* (*Minna Yatteruka*, 1994) hadn't worked out better, he spoke at that time about giving up most of his television work and disbanding his 'stable' of comedians so that he could concentrate on directing films and writing. He was the most sombre and subdued I'd ever seen him.

This spring he was back up to full speed. It's once again impossible to channel-hop without catching him on television (he currently records eight shows a week, spread across the major commercial channels) or to open a popular newspaper without finding one of his columns. I even saw him *singing* on his television show *Kitano-Fuji* – which is something he once assured me he'd never do again, with good reason. The eyepatch has gone, and the iconoclastic ebullience is back. But some things have changed. He's become completely teetotal, he's trying to give up smoking and he now ends most days working for several hours on his new interest: paintings. Drawn on paper and fully coloured, his pictures are essentially satirical and sardonic cartoons; they're carried off with sufficient graphic flair and wit to have caught the attention of the prestigious art monthly *Geijutsu Shincho*, which is currently publishing a selection of them in each issue.

We discussed *Kids Return* and other matters – including the Japanese establishment's increasing readiness to take him seriously as a director, thanks in part to the interest his films have aroused in the West – over dinner in an elegant Japanese restaurant in Roppongi.

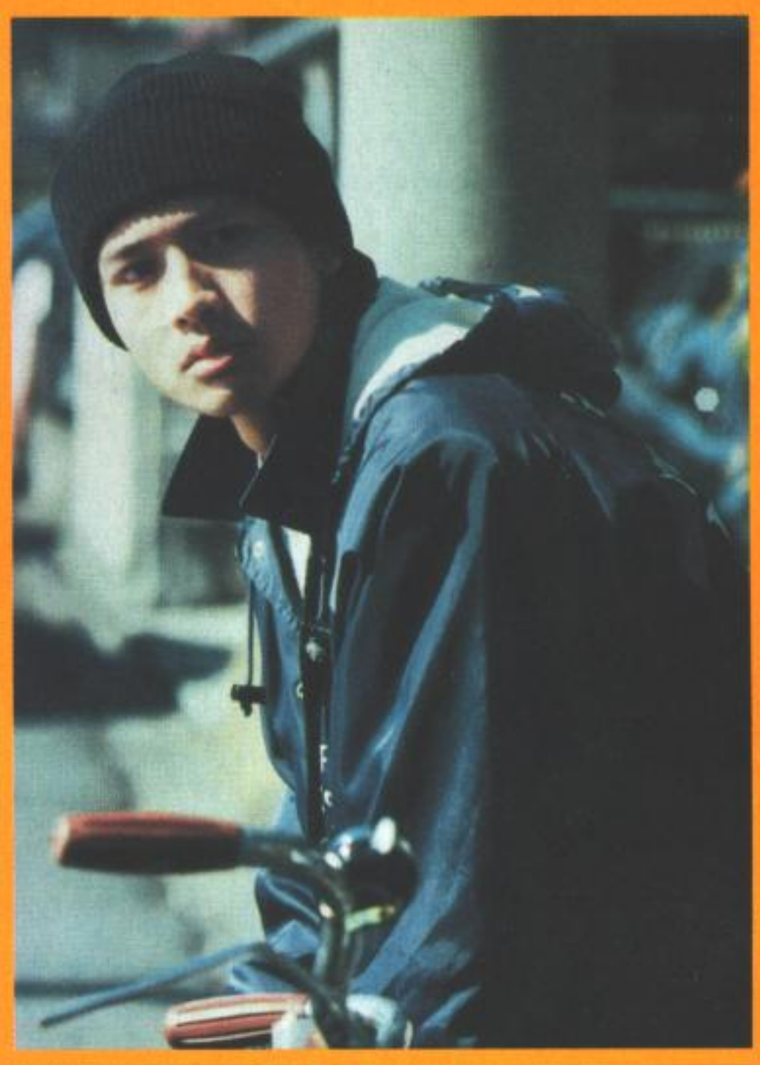
Tony Rayns: How close is this film to your own adolescent experiences? Is it fiction or rooted in fact?

Kitano Takeshi: The two central characters, Masaru and Shinji, are based on boys I knew at school. Their classmate Hiroshi, the kid who starts out as a salesman and ends up as a taxi-driver, is also based on someone I knew at that time. There were two distinct types in the high school I went to: the élite, the ones who studied hard, and the drop-outs, who cut classes all the time and thought it would be cool to become *yakuza*. The teachers pressured the first group intensely and generally ignored the second. The film, obviously, focuses on the drop-outs.

Most professors and pundits on youth matters spin you the line that adolescence is a time of unlimited opportunity. According to them, if you fail you can always try again and succeed later. But I have to say that my own observation suggests that the opposite is often true. Very often young people who fail in some way *cannot* undo their mistakes. I suppose that's the main perception behind the film.

At the end, when the two friends meet up again for the first time in two or three years, Masaru asks Shinji if he thinks that they're washed up. I asked myself the same question when I had the motorcycle accident in August 1994. 60-70 per cent of me thought that I was through, that I couldn't go on. But the rest of me thought that I'd hardly begun. I don't know if Shinji and Masaru will go on to achieve anything or not, but it's certain their past ▶

Below: "These two boys are doing a traditional manzai cross-talk act; this is from the point in the film when they've achieved a certain status. When we first see them, they're just starting out and having a hard time getting laughs. I put them in these outlandish jackets to get them into the routine they're doing: 'Everybody was staring at me, women, men, even animals...' That's a very typical manzai routine. I sometimes wear clothes like these on television myself, for similar reasons."



Left: Ando Masanobu as Shinji. "This is the moment in the film's present when Shinji sees and recognises Masaru: it's the first time in several years that they've met. This was one of the very last scenes we shot. I waited three months to shoot these framing scenes, to give the boys a chance to put on weight and look a little older. But they're still young enough to eat and drink all they like without it showing, and so that didn't really work. But I think that it's a measure of this boy's improvement as an actor that he was able to give me this very ambiguous expression in this scene. My only regret about this scene is that we had to shoot it in natural light. I wanted more of a chiaroscuro effect, but it wasn't achievable."

Above: Ando Masanobu as Shinji and Kaneko Ken as Masaru. "This was the first day of shooting, and I was worried we might not get through the film. The two boys are cutting class and fooling around in the schoolyard; other pupils are watching them, and not attending to the teacher. The two turned up with ideas about their performances very far from mine. One reason I shot this first is that putting them on the bike kept their hands and feet occupied. That stopped them 'acting' with their hands..."

Above: Shinji and Masaru try to pass for adults, to get into a porno movie. "I don't know if kids still do this today, but we used to try to disguise our school uniforms as suits, baseball jackets, whatever. Actually we went knowing we'd be refused admission. These scenes are a running gag, but also the only way to show the two have a sex-drive. I also shot them flirting with a waitress, but couldn't get what I wanted from them so I had to cut it."

Above: Hayashi (right) encourages Shinji to abandon his training diet. "The key thing about Shinji is his dependency on an 'older brother' figure – what we call in Japanese his sempai. At the school, Masaru was always his sempai. Now, at the gym, this older guy Hayashi fills that role. Hayashi is the one who shows him illegal moves like the elbow-punch, and then takes him out after training and tells him it doesn't matter what he eats and drinks. In other words, the roots of Shinji's subsequent failures lie in his need for a sempai."

Above: Hayashi (right) slumps in the dressing room after losing a match, watched by Shinji. "This character Hayashi was inspired by guys I met when I was climbing the ladder as a manzai performer. There were always guys around who'd never quite made it themselves but could always show you all the bad things: take you to bars, show you how to do drugs and so on. In every sector of society, guys like that zero in on the newcomers, dragging them down."

Above: Masaru, now a junior yakuza (centre), shoots his mouth off in front of his immediate superior Terashima (played by Terajima Susumu, right). "Masaru's problem is that he's all front: he has fixed ideas of how boxers and yakuza are supposed to be, and can't see beyond them. When he tries boxing, the first thing on his mind is choosing a ring-name for himself ('The Dynamite Kid') and it's the same syndrome when he joins the gang. Guys like him can be good to work with in a small organisation, but they become loose cannons when the frame is larger. Terashima, on the other hand, knows exactly how to place himself. He will always side with those above him rather than those below him – and he knows that he'll have to deal with this loose cannon if he wants to secure his own promotion."

Left: Shinji gives Masaru a ride on his pillion seat when they meet up after several years apart. "This is the final scene, and it obviously echoes the opening, with the two of them on the bike again several years later. I wrote the ending differently. After their chance reunion on the street, I had them going back to the old coffee-shop and then deciding to take a look at the school. Then I planned to cut to the two manzai performers one last time, really beginning to make it as comedy stars. But in the editing, I realised that would rob the story of these two of much of its impact, and changed it to how it is now."

Above: Shinji close to defeat in the boxing ring. "This is from Shinji's last boxing match, shortly before his trainer throws in the towel, and it was as real as it looks: he took a really hard hit, and he was drooling. I'd asked his opponent to hit lightly, but through an accident of timing one of his blows really hit home. When the boy took the punch, staggered and slowly picked himself up, I thought he was giving a great performance. I came over to congratulate him, only to find him with his eyes crossed, nobody home. We rushed him to hospital for a check-up, but there was no permanent damage."

◀ mistakes and failures will make it very hard for them – especially in Japanese society.

They're different from the protagonists of your other films in that they never really achieve anything.

The earlier films are about finding the right way to die. These characters have to live; they're the way they are because of the state I was in after the accident. Maybe the main reason for their failures is that they try too hard. The people who most often succeed in Japan are those who don't try too hard, the ones who simply go with the flow.

Boxing and membership of a gang are two obvious ways forward for kids with no academic skills. Are your depictions of the boxing game and gang life basically true-to-life?

We built the boxing gym for the film; real places at this level are much worse. Trainers from the Boxing Association will probably be horrified by some of the things I show, but I went to a boxing gym for a short time when I was young and so I know at first hand how beginners are introduced to things like elbow-punches and weight-reducing drugs. Boxing is full of dirty tricks, even at championship level.

The way that Masaru is recruited into the *yakuza* gang is certainly very typical of the way it actually happens. And it's also true that concepts of 'family' loyalty and honour are much stronger among the junior members of a gang. The higher up the ranks you go, the more 'political' they become; they're more into negotiated settlements than crude notions of revenge.

But isn't there also an element of parody in the way you show the gang, for example in the way they're dressed? We first see Ishibashi Ryo [playing the boss of the local branch] in an electric blue shirt and matching tie, and Terajima Susumu [playing his deputy] in a startling mauve jacket...

I used those costumes to say something about the characters because I couldn't find the location I really wanted. When I scripted the film, I didn't envisage that we'd see the gang members for the first time in that little *ramen* noodle shop. Some of the other clothes used in the film are also designed to compensate for visual shortcomings in the locations. One of the problems about filming in Japan is that every time you move the camera ten degrees you find something in frame that you don't want. Filmmakers in other countries don't seem to have this problem: they can shoot entire scenes in one mobile take without getting extraneous elements into the picture. Actually, the bulk of this film takes place in just three settings: the school, the gym and the *ramen* shop. The challenge that I faced was to find the best way of broadening the picture, both literally and figuratively.

This is the most story-packed of all your films so far. How did the structure resolve itself?

My university major was engineering, and maybe it was that background which helped me to organise the material. I try to conceive scenes in such a way that I give myself maximum freedom to structure and juxtapose them creatively. I like to edit while I shoot, because I find that editing can spark off new ideas about the direction the film should go in. That didn't happen so much in this case, because of the inexperience of the two young lead actors. I had to edit around the weaknesses in their performances, and that forced me back to the original script. Generally, though, editing is the part of film-making I find most satisfying.

How did you go about finding your 'unknown' lead actors?

Auditions. The casting people and producers saw some 250 kids and got the list down to about 40 before I saw them. I chose the ones who seemed *least* confident. The ones who came in swaggering with confidence were the first to go. This time it was a bit of a gamble for me: I'd never used pretty faces in my films before. Ando Masanobu, the boy who plays Shinji, came to see me with a face that said he knew I'd never choose him. Actually, I had another boy in mind for Shinji (he's the one who now plays the shortest of the three school bullies), but I wasn't sure that he could hold audience interest for the duration of the film. And so I gave the part to Ando at the last minute.

Why isn't there much about their sex-drive?

I could have set the film in a co-ed school, but then I would have had to make boy-girl interac-

"The earlier films are about finding the right way to die. These characters have to live; they're the way they are because of the state I was in after the accident"

tions a central focus. In Japanese society, there is always a very strong bond between seniors and juniors, bosses and staff. Maybe homosexual is too strong a word for it, but it's very much a same-sex thing. That's what I wanted to explore in this film.

Can you recall the moment you first got interested in movies?

My family didn't allow me or my brothers to see films or read comics or novels. In that post-war period the whole emphasis was on economic growth. Films were an irrelevance, and so they were out. That's why I studied engineering! I never really knew the worlds of movies and *manga* existed until I reached college.

The two boys seen performing manzai cross-talk routines in the film obviously echo your own entry into show-business as a comedian. But they don't represent you, do they?

No, if they'd been autobiographical figures they'd have become the main characters and it would have been an entirely different film. *Manzai* routines are a traditional way of making people laugh, but my approach has always been to break all the rules. When I first appeared as a comedian on a stage in Asakusa, I was banned from performing there again for six months – because I spoke badly of the management, the venue and the audience. I went on to break the rules of television performing and novel-writing too. Maybe I'm doing the same in film?

What was in your mind when you took over the direction of your first film, 'Violent Cop'?

Fukasaku Kinji was originally supposed to direct it, and he was best-known for his *Jingi Naki Tatakai* (*Battles Without Honour or Humanity*, 1973-76) series. I didn't want anything like the exaggerated actions and emotions in those films, and so my first thought was to rewrite the script to anchor it in things that I knew, to make it more believable. I had two real images of violence in my mind when I made that film: one was seeing a guy who'd been stabbed in my neighbourhood, and the other was the television image of an American soldier killing a Viet-Cong guerrilla with a single bullet. I found both of those far more shocking than anything I'd seen in the movies.

When you write a script, how do you decide whether to act in the film yourself or not?

For me, film is essentially silent. I like films without dialogue or music. The audience should be able to get all it needs from the images alone. Nothing should need to be explained through dialogue. Obviously I try to get inside my characters when I write them, and I know what their facial expressions and behaviour should be expressing. Whether I appear in the film myself is not the primary consideration. If there's a role for me I'll take it, because as an actor I know what I want as a director. But if the story doesn't offer me a role – as in the case of *Kids Return* – then I stay behind the camera. It all comes down to the way I want to stimulate the audience's imagination. I have very high expectations of my audience.

Has your success abroad changed your status in Japan? You told me last year you wanted to give up the television work, but you're doing as much as ever.

I think the reactions to my films in Europe have rubbed off here to some extent; I notice that younger Japanese film-makers now mention my stuff a lot when they discuss their own films. I've always taken my own work as a director seriously, but the Japanese public sees me first and foremost as a comedian – as 'Beat' Takeshi – and it's taken many years for them to accept the idea that I might be 'Director Kitano' too.

As a director, I'm like a sponge. I feel a need to take in many things. I do television, pachinko [*Japanese pinball*], baseball, the lot. And it's when I squeeze that a film comes out. I think I'd be a lesser film-maker if I limited my other activities. It's a good thing to experience everything you can. For example, I'm glad I once boxed a bit, so I could get the boxing details right in this film.

I hope you didn't have to become a yakuza to get the gang scenes right!

I don't think so, but I doubt that any other comedian or television personality is more popular with the *yakuza* than I am. One time I was in Osaka walking around with a friend when I noticed that there seemed to be a lot of *yakuza* types around. I later found out that the local *oyabun* had heard I was in town and sent bodyguards to make sure I'd be safe. When I heard that, I swore I'd never set foot there again!

And where does your new interest in painting fit in with the other things?

I think it's very similar to the way I make films. I want my pictures to tell a story, just like the scenes in my films. And what gets in the way of stories is dialogue, and so I avoid it.

'Kids Return' was premiered at Cannes. Japanese names throughout in the Japanese order: surname first. Grateful thanks to Hiromi Monro for help with translation