

# About a Boy: Ozu and Kitano’s “Orphan” Comedies

Richard HODSON

## Abstract

Ozu Yasujiro’s 1947 film *Record of a Tenement Gentleman*, and Kitano Takeshi’s 1999 comedy *Kikujiro* share the central premise of a childless adult temporarily taking charge of an orphan boy, and being changed by the experience. This paper examines a number of striking similarities between the films – most notably, their use of motifs of the seashore, of gambling, and of shared body language – as well as differences in their narrative structure, the places and communities that they portray, and in the ways in which their central adult characters alternately become parental (in the case of Ozu’s O-tane) or find their own childhood abandonment recalled by the adoption of an orphan (in the case of Kitano’s Kikujiro). Reference is also made to possible correspondences between *Kikujiro* and another early orphan comedy, Yamanaka Sadao’s *Tange Sazen: The Million Ryō Pot*.

**Key words:** Japanese film, comedy, Ozu Yasujiro, Kitano Takeshi, Yamanaka Sadao, orphans

## Introduction

Films about children deprived of their parents can be found throughout the history of Japanese cinema. They may be victims of historical or more modern forms of slavery or quasi-slavery, such as Zushio and Anju in Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sanshō Dayū*, 1954) and Kiyoha in Ninagawa Mika’s *Sakuran* (2007), and Shizuko in Mizoguchi’s *Street of Shame* (*Akasen chitai*, 1956), respectively.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, like the children in Koreeda Hirokazu’s *Nobody Knows* (*Dare mo shiranai*, 2004), they may be simply abandoned. Tragedy, potential or realized, is never far away in such situations, but the heartbreak of being orphaned can be seen also in comedies, including the two to be discussed in this paper, Ozu Yasujiro’s *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (*Nagaya shinshiroku*, 1947) and Kitano Takeshi’s *Kikujiro* (*Kikujiro no natsu*, 1999), films made more than half a century apart, but sharing a number of remarkably similar tropes and concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Except in quotations from external sources, Japanese names are given in the Japanese order of family name followed by first name, throughout this paper, with macrons used to indicate long vowel sounds when transliterating Japanese names and words. Films are given the most commonly used English title listed by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), with full Japanese titles given in the Filmography.

## Influences

### *Ozu and Western cinema*

Japanese cinema is not alone, of course, in exploiting the comic potential of orphan/surrogate parent relationships. One of the most famous early Western examples is Chaplin's silent masterpiece *The Kid*, released in 1921. Price (2004) mentions that – although it is “notoriously difficult to trace much influence over his own unique style” – Ozu “pursued his fondness for American films, screening titles that had been captured by the Japanese army” while in Singapore during the war. Could one of those films have been *The Kid*? According to Richie (1974, p. 231), Ozu himself reported having seen “over one hundred” American films there, and although *The Kid* is not amongst the titles that director Yoshimura Kimisaburo recalls Ozu viewing, he was familiar with Chaplin's work, including *A Woman of Paris* (Richie, 1974, p. 107), originally released two years after *The Kid*, in 1923. Richie (2005, p. 28) notes that Ozu's near-contemporary Kurosawa Akira saw both of these films, so it is not unreasonable to imagine that Ozu may also have done so. Other than the central premise, though, there are few other similarities between the films.

### *Kitano and Ozu*

According to an interview with Peary (2000), later cited by Richie (2007), Kitano only learned the names of Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi “when European journalists asked me about them.” Peary adds that Kitano “disapproved of the Ozu video he watched, and complained, ‘Oh, are the rest of his films like that?’” Kitano's filmography does, of course, contain one explicit Ozu reference: the opening scenes of *Glory to the Filmmaker!* (*Kantoku banzai*, 2007), Kitano's “take on ‘cinematic Cubism’” (Kitano, 2007). The fiberglass mannequin is first called “Yasujiro Ozu” on the medical monitor showing his stomach camera readout (0:01:55); subsequently, he appears as “Akira Kurowsawa” for his CT scan, and as “Shohei Imamura” for his sonogram. Ozu is referred to as an example of “more traditional Japanese cinema ... idolized by directors like Wim Wenders” (01:06:05). The Kitano mannequin decides to film “the life of the common folk” and the “heart-warming drama with no violence” that follows (a black and white movie called “Retirement”) contains several echoes of Ozu's characteristic style – a bar scene, followed by scenes of a husband, his wife, and their office-worker daughter sitting at home, filmed with a low-mounted, static camera – before it is abandoned after just over three minutes: “Who wants to see a boring film spending 30 minutes on just drinking liquor and tea!” asks the narrator (0:09:50), noting that “Nowadays, terms like ‘common folk’ and ‘sentiments’ don't count much. What remains are only the filthy rich and the poor.” He concludes that “compared to Ozu's works the film was also criticized for ‘lacking class’” and the mannequin Kitano is seen, in black and white, hanging by the neck in a traditional Japanese room. The film Kitano's rejection of Ozu seems to accord with the director's reactions recorded elsewhere.

Despite this lack of sympathy, though, critical comparisons between Ozu and Kitano are numerous, both in general overviews such as that of Richie (2007) – who cites their shared awareness of “the power of small image size and protracted duration (characters are shown in static compositions)” as well as “emotionless acting”<sup>2</sup> and “a style based on negation” as common features of the two directors' work – and in analyses of specific films, such as Freeman's (2000) discussion of Kitano's maintenance of the “legacy” of Ozu in terms of the “style and use of space” in *Hana-bi*. Looking beyond Ozu, Kitano's comedy has also been compared to Chaplin's, as “a comedy of repetitions, exaggerations and, especially, contrasts” (Davis,

2003). When Peary (2000) specifically asked Kitano if *Kikujiro* was influenced by Chaplin's *The Kid*, and also by sight gags in the films of Buster Keaton, the director replied that "In my practice of comedy I don't have any references", but Gardner (2000) does quote Kitano as saying that the narrative model for the film was *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

### Similarities and differences

#### *A common theme: orphans*

Definitions of the term "orphan" vary, but UNICEF (2012) notes that "a child must have lost both parents to qualify as an orphan" in many industrialized countries, and has therefore defined an orphan since the mid-1990s more broadly as "a child who has lost one or both parents". Neither of the children in these films has lost both of their parents. The mother of Ozu's boy is dead, and he has lost his father temporarily and by accident: they are happily reunited at the end of the movie. He seems to have no other living relatives. The situation of Kitano's Masao is rather more complicated. His father died in a traffic accident, and his mother is "working far away. She's doing it for you" – or at least this is what he is told by his grandmother (0:08:53), with whom he lives in Tokyo.<sup>3</sup> In fact, she is living in Toyohashi, having re-married, and with a daughter who appears to be around four years old. The picture of his mother that Masao takes with him was taken when he was a baby, so it is possible that he has never seen his mother since that time. Kikujirō's verdict – that Masao's mother "must've run off with some man" (0:06:08) – is a harsh but not entirely inaccurate one. Neither child then, is parentless, left to fend for himself, or in the care of an institution, but both would be described as orphans under UNICEF's modern definition. Both boys are in temporary need of a surrogate parent, and both surrogates are, initially at least, reluctant and themselves childless.

#### *Places and communities*

It is important to acknowledge that the differences between *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* and *Kikujiro* are as great as their similarities. Most significant among them are the two films' treatments of place and community. *Kikujiro* is essentially a road movie. Although it begins and ends in Tokyo, the film's main plot device is a journey, with Kikujirō taking Masao to Toyohashi in Aichi Prefecture, more than 200 kilometers away. This journey begins 15 minutes into the film, and takes in a long list of locations: a bicycle race track, hostess club, park, resort hotel, parking area and roadside bus stop; then after Masao's mother's house, a beach, local shrine, fields, river bank and seashore, before returning to Tokyo. The majority of the action happens outdoors, and the most significant people that Kikujirō and Masao meet – the juggling girl (Hosokawa Fumie) and her boyfriend, the two bikers (Ide Rakkyo and Gidayū Gurēto), and An-chan the travelling writer (Imamura Nezumi) – are themselves on the road.

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2 Ozu favoured "the elimination of acting", and stated that "When laughs and tears are as inflated as they are in most films today, trained monkeys would be perfectly adequate as actors" (Richie, 2005, p. 122). Kitano recalls that, in filming *Kikujiro*, "I treated this boy [Sekiguchi Yusuke, the actor playing Masao] like a little animal, without me ever telling him what to do, and he acted like an animal" (Peary, 2000).

3 Masao's grandmother's family name is Sugiyama, and Masao tells Kikujirō at 1:03:58 that his mother's name is "Sugiyama Satoko" so, although we are not told Masao's family name, it is reasonable to assume that he is living with his paternal grandmother, unless his mother reverted to her maiden name on becoming a widow.

Given this fragmented plot structure, it is inevitable that the world shown in *Kikujirō* is largely a world without a solid community. There are, it is true, some elements of a functioning society visible in the Tokyo-set scenes of the film's opening. Masao does have a family of a kind, but his grandmother works, and Masao's meals are left on the table for him to eat by himself. He has at least one school friend, and he is a member of a soccer club, but both of these ties are broken when the summer vacation starts. The friendly teacher who meets him at the soccer ground merely reveals his ignorance of the inadequacies of Masao's home life when he tells him cheerfully to go to the beach (0:08:18). Masao is known to some people in the Asakusa area where his grandmother works – notably Kikujirō's wife – but his world is largely a lonely place, and sometimes even a hostile one, where elementary school children can be mugged for a few yen by high school-age delinquents, or molested in park toilets by old men; what Saunders (2000) describes as “a harshness of space, of the indifferent and thuggish culture around Masao.” Kikujirō himself is part of this culture. Social critique is not the highest of the film's achievements, but its glimpse of late-20<sup>th</sup> century Tokyo suggests that the metropolis is not a particularly close-knit place. What bonds there are, are those made on the road, and they are necessarily transient ones, guardian angels that come and go.

This is, in fact, the inverse of what we see in *Record of a Tenement Gentleman*. Devastated though it might be, post-war Tokyo is a place of functioning communities, alongside its huge numbers of dispossessed, which include many orphans. The area of Tokyo where O-tane lives is materially poor, but rich in human relationships: we see friendships not only between single people, like that between O-tane, Tashiro (Ryu Chishu) and Tamekichi (Kawamura Reikichi), or between O-tane and Kiku (Yoshikawa Mitsuko), but also between those people and a local family, that of the local dyer Kawayoshi (Sakamoto Takeshi). These relationships are seen in the exchange of material goods and information about everyday items – a hose, potatoes – that are in short supply, in mutual banter, and in hospitality, receiving its most perfect expression in the famous scene in which Tashiro sings a folksong to the accompaniment of the Kawayoshis' other guests, beating time with their chopsticks. All of these people are reluctant to bring Kōhei into their community, but he is brought *in*, whereas Masao is taken *out*, onto the road.

### *The seashore*

O-tane's adoption of Kōhei is not an entirely interior affair, although many scenes take place inside her house. She does, in fact, take him out, in two distinctly different trips. The second is an outing of post-acceptance quasi-parental pleasure: to buy a new cap; to the zoo; to have a picture taken. The first time they go out is quite different. O-tane takes Masao back to Chigasaki to find out what happened to his family. They return via the seashore, where O-tane tries her best to abandon the boy, with no success: he will not be left behind and she ends up in an undignified run over the dunes, while he runs after her. Masao's beach is the scene of completely different intentions and emotions. Beginning with the inter-title, “Mister played with me” (0:12:08), shown over the image of an angel carved out of sand, the beach in *Kikujirō* is a place of bonding between Kikujirō and the boy who has just discovered the truth of his own abandonment. “Shall we go home?” Kikujirō asks (1:12:32) and turns to walk away. He turns back, then continues walking, and after a brief pause Masao runs after him, takes his hand and looks up at him. They then walk away from the camera, side-by-side and hand-in-hand. Kikujirō's assumption of the role of guardian angel is made explicit by the “angel bell” effects that end the segment. O-tane, by contrast, threatens to throw a stone at her boy, telling him, “I'll bite you,” turning her back, and eventually trying to chase him away. The next scene makes it clear that she has been forced to give up, and bring Kōhei back to her home, and to the community.

## Echoes

### *Kikujirō and Tange Sazen*

Ozu was a friend and contemporary of another great Japanese director, Yamanaka Sadao, whose "skill was in the creation of plausible communities" (Jacoby, 2008, p. 355). This is not a skill that one immediately attributes to the films of Kitano, but there are a number of elements in Kikujirō that do seem to reflect not only Ozu's film, but also an earlier cinematic child-surrogate parent relationship, portrayed most notably in Yamanaka's 1935 comedy *Tange Sazen: The Million Ryō Pot* (*Tange Sazen Yowa: Hyakuman Ryō no Tsubo*). Kikujirō and his wife (Kishimoto Kayoko) resemble Yamanaka's Tange Sazen (Denjirō Ōkōchi) and Ofuji (Kiyozo) in a number of ways; both couples are childless, and both end up taking care of an orphaned boy, although with differing degrees of reluctance and permanence. Both couples bicker frequently, trading snappy jibes and taunts. In both relationships, the man is in a financially subordinate position: Kikujirō is ordered by his wife to take Masao to Toyohashi, and the 50,000 yen expenses for the trip are provided by her. Similarly, Yamanaka's Tange is forced to admit that he is relying on Ofuji to feed him. Ofuji and Kikujirō's wife are physically alike: tough and rough in the way that they speak, and in the set of their faces, and moving in Edo/Tokyo milieu that would be mutually recognizable despite their chronological separation. The parallels between their partners are even stronger. With his physical disabilities – he has lost both his right arm and his right eye, and has a large scar on his face – gambling, gruff persona, and fighting skills, the ronin Tange is an early-Showa era precursor of the blind masseur-swordsman *Zatōichi*, a role later assumed by Kitano himself in his 2003 film *Zatōichi*, and Kitano's own facial features and acting style, combined with his character's gambling, propensity for violence, hinted-at underworld associations, and lack of obvious employment,<sup>4</sup> make Kikujirō something close to a modern-day Tange, who is described by Jacoby (2008, p. 355) "soft-hearted layabout". The extent to which Kikujirō is, or indeed becomes, "soft-hearted" will be discussed below, but it is clear that in Yamanaka's film as in Kitano's, the *ronin/yakuza* has been taken out of world of *chambara* or gang feuds, given a wife and a child, and partially tamed.<sup>5</sup>

However, the motivation behind Kikujirō's "adoption" of Masao is quite different from Tange's actual adoption of Yasukichi (Sō Shuntarō). Tange and Ofuji have a business relationship with Yasukichi's father, and are indirectly connected with his death. Kikujirō is forced into it by his wife – "My hubby loves kids," she tells Masao's grandmother at 0:16:34, in what is at best wishful thinking, and at worst a downright lie – but it is Ofuji who is consistently opposed to Tange's bringing Yasu into their home, although her frequent complaints and references to the boy as "filthy" have the ring of protesting just a little too much, and she is noticeably less hostile and more maternal when talking to the boy directly than when bickering with Tange about him. In fact, both Tange and Ofuji find it difficult to resist the cheeky charm of "Little Yasu" and both end up doing things for and with him – helping him play on bamboo stilts, walking him to school – that they had refused just a few moments earlier. Masao is not so charming or witty: Kikujirō calls him "gloomy", and Kitano deliberately cast Sekiguchi Yusuke in the role as his face and composure were "plain" and "old-fashioned" (Peary, 2000). This is another point of similarity with Ozu's movie, whose bed-

4 Kikujirō does not seem to have a job, and his tattooed torso suggests yakuza connections.

5 Standish (2006, pp. 94-95) argues that Tange is tamed by his association with Ofuji, as well as by his "surrogate father role." Something similar could be said for Kikujirō.

wetting, nail and cigarette-butt gathering, flea-ridden Kōhei, a boy who barely says a word, let alone break into a grin, is also hardly a conventionally cute or appealing child. Nevertheless, bonds of affection are built, and Kitano arguably succeeds in his aim of making Masao “look cuter as the film goes on.”<sup>6</sup> There is even an earlier moment in which Masao and Yamanaka’s Yasu seem like kindred spirits. After his adoption, Tange takes Yasu with him when he goes to play dice; chin in hands, Yasu looks up at Tange as he loses repeatedly, cheerily commenting on Tange’s habit of groaning when he loses. The joke is continued in the following scene, when the groans are those of a street thug whom Tange dispatches with his sword, having first shielded Yasu from the violence by having him close his eyes and count to ten. Kikujirō shows a similar inclination to protect Masao when the violence is about to be visited on himself, telling the boy to “wait here a moment” (1:20:03) as he goes off to be beaten up by a group of yakuza, and pretending that he “fell down the steps” (1:24:29) to explain his subsequent injuries. But, like Tange, Kikujirō is a man of violence himself, and his violence comes close to being used against Masao himself on two occasions, only for a sight gag to relieve the audience from that particular discomfort. At 0:40:20, Kikujirō strides across a hotel lobby to slap Masao on the top of his head: the boy is sitting with his back towards us, and it is not Masao. Earlier, looking very much like Yasu at the dice game, Masao at the bicycle racetrack gazes up at Kikujirō with an expression in which mischief and innocence are inextricably blended, leading eventually to a violent blow from Kikujirō to the racing helmet that he has bought for Masao.<sup>7</sup> As well as echoing Yamanaka, this gambling scene is one of the most striking resemblances between Ozu’s and Kitano’s films.

### **Gambling**

The reluctance of both Ozu’s O-tane and Kitano’s Kikujirō to be burdened by their charges begins to soften somewhat when it is discovered that the boys are a potential source of income. O-tane’s friend Kiku gives Kōhei 10 yen, and O-tane immediately sends him off to buy a lottery ticket with it, reasoning that he will win money because he is “more or less pure minded” (0:37:09). Her belief comes from an earlier conversation in which it is agreed that “Luck will fall on a pure minded person” (0:24:07) like a child; Kawayoshi’s son has just won 2000 yen in the lottery. Kōhei does not win, and O-tane calls him stupid and scolds him for losing the 10 yen, reducing him to tears. She then gives him 10 yen, but continues to grumble: “I lost 10 yen. You made me lose it. I lost 10 yen for nothing!” (0:40:20). Kikujirō’s first action *in loco parentis* is to take Masao to the bicycle racetrack. After losing several bets, and abusing other customers, he orders Masao to produce his own 2000 yen, and proceeds to use the boy as a tool to predict the numbers of the winning riders. The proceeds of his lucky guess are spent at a hostess club that night – a premature initiation into an adult world that returns to Masao in his dreams – and the bicycle track is their first stop the next day, as they set out to find Masao’s mother. Clad now in a bicycle racer’s uniform (“Who bought you the shirt and cap?” Kikujirō asks him in a pre-betting catechism), Masao is given 10,000 yen and asked repeatedly to guess winning numbers. He fails every time, and Kikujirō’s faith in his “genius” and “touch” soon turns to verbal abuse (“moron”; “What’s wrong with you?”), a ridiculously inappropriate promise (“I would have bought you an Armani outfit”) and eventually threats (“If they come in reverse,

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6 In contrast, cuteness is irrelevant to Ozu’s treatment of Kōhei. The change comes not in the boy, but in his guardian O-tane, who realizes that “The kid is just a kid. Once he sees his father’s face, he’s totally forgotten all the butts and nails here ... A father and a son, it’s very nice” (1:08:00).

7 O-tane also buys clothes, namely a cap and a sweater, for Kōhei, although her choices are distinctly more practical.

you'll be in trouble"; "I should sell you off") that culminate, in the sequence referred to earlier, in a blow to Masao's helmet; which turns out not to contain his head, as a cut from close up to long shot reveals that Masao is now sitting at the floor at Kikujirō's feet (0:25:14).

### *Tics and fleas*

The heart of *Kikujiro* is Masao's abortive meeting with his mother. Running from 1:03:10 to 1:06:30, the scene takes place almost exactly halfway through the film. When he finds that the name on the mother's gatepost is different from Masao's, Kikujirō hesitates and returns to the boy, who answers his questions with an apparent impassivity, which is betrayed by his blinking. Masao does not blink once in the two seconds that we see his face before Kikujirō first goes to the gate, but as Kikujirō asks him about his mother's name, and then turns back to the house again, he blinks about 35 times, with the blinking becoming more noticeable as the camera zooms in and then lingers on his face at the end of this 24-second sequence. We see his face in close-up three times as he watches his mother emerge from the house with her new family, and he does not blink once, until he looks down and turns to walk away. The blinker now is Kikujirō himself, his left eyelid twitching noticeably four times at 1:05:38. The twitch is serendipitous, the result of Kitano's near-fatal motorcycle accident in 1994, which "left his face with partial paralysis, scars, and a noticeable tic" (Totaro, 2004, p. 129) but in this context it adds an extra emotional resonance, a subtle visual signal that Masao's distress has also affected the usually stony-faced Kikujirō.

The turning point in O-tane's relationship with Kōhei comes shortly after the lottery-ticket sequence. O-tane wrongly accuses the impassive boy of having eaten her dried persimmons, and Kōhei disappears. The following scenes, in which O-tane walks through the windswept, almost deserted streets of Tokyo in search of the boy (0:48:06 to 0:51:13) mirror the earlier sequence in which he had tried to get rid of him by running away from him on the beach (0:18:00 to 0:20:00). She has no more success in finding the boy than she had in losing him. In her conversation with Kiku after she returns home alone, she is finally brought to realize the change in her feelings towards the boy. "He's precious to you, isn't he? You were fond of him, weren't you? ... You like him very much already," Kiku tells her. O-tane says, "I didn't realize it", and nods her agreement with Kiku's hope that a kind person will pick the boy up. Immediately afterwards, her shoulders twitch, and she flexes them. "I think the boy gave them to me," she says. Fleas or lice, we assume, but her twitching echoes that of the boy (for example, at 0:13:43, and 0:57:22). As with Masao's blinking, shared body language suggests an increased personal affinity.<sup>8</sup>

## **Mothers and fathers**

Both *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* and *Kikujiro* are comedies in that they end happily, as well as in the more contemporary sense of being amusing. Kōhei is reunited with his father; Masao runs off to continue his life in Tokyo with a broader smile on his face than he has shown throughout the film, touched emotionally by his trip with Kikujirō even though his material and familial circumstances remain unaltered. But it is arguable that neither film is really "about a boy" but about their temporary surrogate parents, O-tane and Kikujirō. Both are affected by their orphan encounters in a way that they probably could not

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<sup>8</sup> This mirroring of gestures is seen again during the photography session, as O-tane and Kōhei wipe their noses quickly, one after the other (1:00:37).

have anticipated. However, the differing trajectories of these two characters – in particular, the ways in which the threads of their lives extend either before or after the events that their respective movies depict – are the occasion of the most significant divergence between the approaches of Ozu and Kitano.

### *About O-tane*

Ozu's O-tane is a childless widow. We learn almost nothing about her other than what emerges during her time with Kōhei, and what that encounter brings is an awakened maternal instinct, the desire to take care of a child. "Children are marvelous", she tells her neighbours at 1:08:59, before asking them whether she is now too old to have a child herself. When her neighbours react with skepticism – it would be "awkward" for a widow, they say – she explains that she wonders if she might "adopt [a child] or pick one up" (1:09:23), and asks the fortune-teller Tashiro whether and how she might be able to so. His hint leads into the film's coda – a montage of war orphans in Ueno Park – and to a conclusion which, in Richie's earlier view on the film (1974, p. 233), is not entirely satisfactory. He states that it is:

the first and last time Ozu can be caught making a nod in the direction of civic endeavor, an idea imported from abroad that enjoyed a brief popularity during the Occupation. At the end of the picture the middle-aged woman decides to open a center for war orphans like the one she had come to love. This unlikely, one may almost say un-Japanese, resolve almost ruins the film.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, this summary of the ending does not seem entirely accurate. O-tane's decision to adopt or pick up a child is certainly prompted by her new awareness that "our feelings have changed a lot. Being selfish like we are now won't do. Like pushing people away to get on the train. Eating our fill, ignoring others who are starving", but it is some way from a decision to "open a center for war orphans". Recent critics have viewed the ending in more positive terms. Acquarello argues that "beyond the levity and tenderness of the film lies a powerful, underlying social statement on the human condition: the alienation that results from urban migration; the hardship caused by postwar rationing; the plight of neglected and abandoned children", and that the film's ending leaves us with "a poignant image of senseless despair and lost innocence, and a reaffirming glimpse of renewed hope and humanity" (Acquarello, 2001). For Price (2004), the ending is a "profoundly affecting coda ... [which] offers a strongly pacifist statement about the effects of war". However, regardless of whether we regard it as successful or almost-ruinous, the ending to the film is just that: the point at which the film ends. We do not see O-tane adopt an orphan, but we have watched her come to love a child. Hers is an unfinished journey, not so much towards philanthropy, as away from misopedia, an awakening of "maternal love" (0:58:03).

### *About Kikujirō*

Like O-tane, Kikujirō too, has no children, but unlike O-tane his journey cannot really be said to bring him closer to fatherhood. Gardner (2000) argues that the film presents us with "the sight of male decline" and points out that Kikujirō is "clearly past his prime." His response to the surrogate parenthood thrust upon him by having to take Masao to Toyohashi is a strange mixture of the wildly inappropriate, especially in the first half of the film, and the charming; Saunders (2000) argues that "his treatment of Masao ... is in its indifference bordering on the despicable; and is only redeemed through small gestures, oblique

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<sup>9</sup> However, his later assessment of the film (2005, p. 283) is rather less critical, describing it as "One of Ozu's most perfect domestic comedies."



moments, which are often only 'glimpsed at' with certain other malevolent clouds overhanging." Peary's interview with Kitano (2000) is instructive on the film's portrayal of fatherhood:

The titular character - sometimes kind, sometimes snappy and hostile - exists so that Kitano can contemplate the troubled relationship with his own father. "As a small boy, I hardly talked to him," Kitano said. "He was drunk, violent, and I'd hide under my bed. The film started out as being about someone who could be my father with this child, though I know nothing from my life about the real relationship of a father and a child."

Kikujirō is very much like Kitano in his ignorance about what a "real" father-child relationship might be; his one conversation with Masao about his surrogate-father role (1:02:22) is comically, but embarrassingly inappropriate:

Kikujirō: I was just thinking. If you meet your mom, you'll stay over tonight, right? What shall I do?  
 Masao: Why don't you stay, too?  
 Kikujirō: That won't be good. Your mom's pretty so I might get really friendly with her and I might end up marrying her. I'll be your dad then. Wouldn't that be great? You'll have to call me daddy. Call me daddy. Come on. Call me daddy.<sup>10</sup>

This conversation takes place immediately before the film's mid-point, with its revelation of Masao's abandonment by his mother, and this revelation is of course a turning-point for Kikujirō's relationship with the boy, as Kikujirō takes on the role of guardian angel and orchestrator of angels. In Kitano's words, he "becomes tender" (Peary, 2000) – but he does not become paternal.

In this respect, Kikujirō's journey does not take the same course as O-tane's, but the film is still distinctively his. According to Kitano himself, "At first, it was about the holidays of a little boy. But as we shot, I realized it's about the summer holiday of an adult" (Peary, 2000). This realization is made explicit to the audience by the last-minute reveal of Kikujirō's name. Kikujirō gives Masao a hug, telling him to take care of his grandmother, before ruffling his hair and then turning to walk away. "Mister," Masao asks, "What's your name?" The reply comes with a laugh, "It's Kikujirō, dammit. Get out of here." Masao smiles, and runs off. The revelation works on several levels. Kikujirō has never been addressed by this name throughout the film, so the film's title is something of a puzzle until this moment. If we think about it at all, we might ask ourselves who Kikujirō is; or assume that Kikujirō is a nickname for the boy, even though we know him to be called Masao; and even if we do associate the name with the man, "Kikujirō" – a name made up of the Chinese characters for "chrysanthemum" and "son" – seems somehow incongruous for Kitano's character.<sup>11</sup> When he laughs as he says his name, the film seems on the verge of breaking the fourth wall, Kikujirō and Kitano becoming indistinguishable as they announce to the audience, "This film was all about me/him, didn't you know?"

10 O-tane explicitly asks Kōhei to be her son at 0:56:50 and the boy, absorbed in eating, agrees nonchalantly. Throughout the film, Kōhei calls O-tane "Oba-chan" ("Auntie") and she calls him "bōya" ("boy"). Masao is called "bōya" or "bōzu" (also meaning "boy") by Kikujirō and calls him first "Oji-san" and later, "Oji-chan" ("Mister"). The switch from the formal "-san" to the more casual and affectionate "-chan" is perhaps an index to Masao's feelings towards Kikujirō: it is notable that he calls the friendly hotel receptionist "Oji-chan" when he is still addressing Kikujirō using "-san" (0:41:26).

11 Peary (2000) quotes Kitano as saying that "I gave the character a theatrical name, not a normal Japanese name, to keep a distance." It is rather strange that, although Kitano explicitly refers to his own father in this interview, he does not mention his father's name: Kikujirō.

Unlike O-tane's story, *Kikujirō* is not the story of a man becoming a parent, or of a boy finding one. Instead, it is the story of the loss of one, doubled. Masao's mother has left him for a new family, and we discover just over three-quarters of the way through the film that something similar may have happened to Kikujirō, who takes time out from arranging Masao's entertainment to visit an old people's home (1:35:50 to 1:39:15), where he is met by a nurse (who addresses him as Mr Takeda) and taken to a day-room. The old woman who he sees there, rebuffing the greeting of a fellow resident and moving to another table to gaze out of a window by herself, is his mother. There is no contact between them – Kikujirō turning down the opportunity to speak to her – and Kikujirō leaves, telling "Fatso" to mind his own business when he asks how she was. Kikujirō is clearly emotionally affected by the incident, the back-story to which comes at the beginning of the film in a few lines of banter between Kikujirō and his wife as they discuss Masao (0:05:54):

Kikujirō: My God, what a gloomy kid.  
Wife: I used to live near him.<sup>12</sup> He lives with his grandma.  
Kikujirō: Where are his parents?  
Wife: I don't think he has a father.  
Kikujirō: What about his mom?  
Wife: I think she's working somewhere.  
Kikujirō: She must've run off with some man.  
Wife: Not everyone's like your mother.  
Kikujirō: Hell. Yours remarried three times.  
Wife: Lay off my mother.  
Kikujirō: You do the same with mine, dammit.

Masao and Kikujirō have suffered a mutual loss, and their consolation for it is bounded by the summer; Kikujirō says, "Let's go find your mom again" (1:56:00), but Masao does not respond to this – indeed, how could he? – and the film ends where it began, with Masao running through the streets of Tokyo. Ozu's comedy ends with a family reunited, and with the discovery of hitherto unknown maternal affection. Kitano's ending is more bitter-sweet: there is no reunion for the child, but the rediscovery of loss for the adult; a shared summer, but the summer is over.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, there are a number of parallels between *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* and *Kikujirō*, not only in their central theme – the temporary "adoption" of an orphan by a childless adult, which leads to a change in that adult's outlook – but also in a number of details, including but not limited to: the contrasting uses of the seashore as a place of abandonment or assumption; the exploitation of a child's innocence for gambling; and the signaling of mutual affinity and emotional attachment by the mirroring of body language. Both films also share a potential link to an even earlier orphan comedy, Yamanaka's *Tange Sazen*: externally, through Ozu's personal connection with Yamanaka, and internally, through the

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12 The English sub-title translation of this line is a little misleading, leading to the implication that Kikujirō and his wife have not been married very long. In fact, Kikujirō's wife actually says, "Watashi ga mae ni ita toko no kinjo no ko de saa": "He's a kid from the neighborhood where I used to live."

many similarities between the characters of Tange and Kikujirō. There are also, undeniably, a number of divergences between the ways in which the shared central theme of Ozu's and Kitano's movies is developed, caused not only by narrative structure – urban drama and road movie – and social setting, but also by the paths taken by the central characters, both adults and children. Given Kitano's explicit denial of "references" in his comedy, and his apparent antipathy to Ozu in general, any conclusions that could be built upon the common ground of these two films must remain in the realm of speculation, but it seems clear that there is much in *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* that the director of *Kikujiro* could appreciate.

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