

## The films of Mitani Kōki: Intertextuality and comedy in contemporary Japanese cinema

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the importance of intertextual references in the films of one of Japan's most successful contemporary comedy filmmakers, Mitani Kōki. Since Mitani consciously makes references to other films, intertextuality works as a key element to comprehend his works. Although the recognition of the references used in his films is not too significant to influence entertaining perspectives, the absence of these detailed intertextual components would prevent the films being recognised as 'Mitani films'.

By analysing all of his four films, this article will provide a useful example of the idea of intertextuality. In addition, this study will also focus on Japan in the 1990s, when Mitani debuted as a film director. This is an important point to be discussed, since his film-making approaches seem to be significantly related to the social background of the time.

### Keywords

Intertextuality, Mitani Kōki, Comedy, Cinema, Japan in the 1990s

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to investigate the importance of intertextual references in the films of one of Japan's most successful contemporary comedy filmmakers, Mitani Kōki.<sup>1</sup> Although all texts are related to other texts,<sup>2</sup> Mitani's films are characterised by particularly 'self-conscious forms of intertextuality',<sup>3</sup> a result of his deliberate intent to embed elements from American cinema in his own work. Rather than drawing attention to the original American texts, Mitani's intertextual components are used to enrich the dimensions of his characters and storylines.

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1 I will use the name of Mitani Kōki instead of Kōki Mitani in this article.

2 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 5; Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. 162; Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody and Intertextuality*, p. 27.

3 Chandler, 'Intertextuality'.



Intertextuality is a term created by the Bulgarian-French theorist, Julia Kristeva (b. 1941). Although Kristeva originally applied this theory to the field of literary production, the idea of intertextuality has been developed and adopted to other fields of cultural production. The core idea of this theory is that texts, such as novels, films and plays, are always related to other texts in a way that produces multiple meanings.<sup>4</sup> Among many areas of cultural production, cinema is particularly considered as an intertextual medium due to its flexible nature.<sup>5</sup> Of all the forms of cinema, comedy seems to be the genre that can be most easily intertextualised. It can be fused together with other genres and these other genres have the potential to become comic in turn.<sup>6</sup>

The films of Mitani Kōki (b. 1961) provide one of the most useful examples of intertextuality in contemporary Japanese cinema. Mitani, who was born in Tokyo in 1961, originally worked as a playwright before making his cinema debut in 1997 with *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald* (*Rajio no jikan*).<sup>7</sup> As is often the case with people of his generation,<sup>8</sup> Mitani grew up with significant American influences. In particular Billy Wilder and Woody Allen had an impact on Mitani's film-making approaches and he often references their works in his films. More importantly, these American works are actually key elements in the comprehension of Mitani's materials.<sup>9</sup>

Austrian-born Billy Wilder (1906-2002) is regarded as one of the most well-known Hollywood directors to date.<sup>10</sup> This Academy award-winning director left several masterpieces, including *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Woody Allen (b. 1935) is also an Academy award-winning director whose works include *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Everyone Says I Love You* (1997). After a long career in the film industry, Allen is now recognised as one of America's 'most inventive and idiosyncratic filmmakers.'<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the complexity generated by the intertextual components in Mitani's work, there are other compelling reasons for choosing Mitani's films as the subject of research. The first of these reasons is related to the 1990s when Mitani debuted as a filmmaker which was also a significant time for Japan as a country. This decade was actually a turning point for the Japanese film industry. During the 1990s, when Japan

4 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 5; Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. 162; Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody and Intertextuality*, p. 27.

5 Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, p. 225.

6 Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, pp. 115-116.

7 This article will refer to Mitani's films using the English title. Thus, for example, *Rajio no jikan* will be written as *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald* in the remainder of the article.

8 Hantke, 'Postmodernism and Genre Fiction as Deferred Action: Haruki Murakami and the Noir Tradition', p. 11.

9 Mori, 'Gaiikōsei to Naikōsei wo Orai Shite Zenshin Shituzukeru Hyōgensha', p. 42; Nakōji, 'Mitani Kōki to Iu Sakka', pp. 125-127.

10 Chaffin-Quiray, 'Billy Wilder', p. 152.

11 Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia: The Complete Guide to Film and the Film Industry*, p. 28.

was going through the so-called 'lost decade'<sup>12</sup> after the burst of the bubble economy, a large number of new and innovative directors including Hirokazu Kore'eda (b. 1962)<sup>13</sup> and Shunji Iwai (b. 1963)<sup>14</sup> debuted. Followed by the success of these directors, more newcomers emerged and contributed to the prosperity of the industry.<sup>15</sup> Besides the domestic recovery, the Japanese film industry received renewed international attention in the 1990s, due to their efforts.<sup>16</sup>

While there are many contemporary Japanese filmmakers of comedy, Mitani's comedies remain distinct from those of other directors. Scholars acknowledge the fact that American comedy is very popular in Japan and has influenced Japanese comedy formats.<sup>17</sup> However, there are radical differences in the style of comedy practiced in the two countries. As a result, writers and performers of comedy in Japan have experienced difficulty in trying to adopt American comic elements into their own work. Mitani's successful efforts to emulate American comedy make his comedic style highly original and innovative, as this is rarely seen in the works of other Japanese directors.<sup>18</sup>

Another reason for considering Mitani's work is his place in the global consumption of films. In comparison to world famous Japanese directors such as Takeshi Kitano (b. 1947)<sup>19</sup> and Hayao Miyazaki (b. 1941)<sup>20</sup> Mitani has received limited recognition overseas in spite of the fact that some of his works were shown in other countries, little English language analysis has been conducted on his works. Nonetheless, by taking his film-making approaches such as adopting universal narratives into consideration, it becomes clear that Mitani's films have great potential to be appreciated by a more diverse international audience.<sup>21</sup> All these factors encourage a greater analysis of his films.

In spite of Mitani's popularity in Japan, the director has produced a mere four films: *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald* (1997; *Rajio no jikan*); *All about Our House* (2001; *Minna no ie*); *Suite Dreams* (2006; *THE uchōten hoteru*);<sup>22</sup> and *The Magic Hour*

12 Johnson, 'Recovery Demands a Clear-out of Old Guard', p. 16.

13 Hirokazu Kore'eda made his debut in 1995 with *Maboroshi (Maboroshi no hikari)*, which received international acclaim at the Venice International Film Festival. Since then, he has produced a series of quality films, such as *After Life* (1999; *Wandafuru raifu*), *Distance* (2001; *Disutansu*) and *Nobody Knows* (2004; *Dare mo shiranai*).

14 The remarkable debut work of Shunji Iwai, *Love Letter (Rabū retā)*, was released in 1995. He has continued to produce hit films, such as *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996; *Suwarō tēru*), *April Story* (1998; *Shigatsu monogatari*) and *All about Lily Chou-Chou* (2001; *Riri Shushu no subete*).

15 Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, p. 71.

16 Nakata, 'Foreword', p. ix; Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, p. 7; Tanaka, *Gendai/ Nihon/ Eiga*, p. 36.

17 Barrett, 'Comic Targets and Comic Styles: An introduction to Japanese Film Comedy', p. 216.

18 Komori, 'Gekisakka, Mitani Kōki, Furikaeruto "Ibara no Michi"', p. 137.

19 The comedian-cum-director, Kitano, also known as 'Beat Takeshi', debuted with *Violent Cop (Sono otoko kyōbō ni tsuki)* in 1989. His *Fireworks* (1997; *Hana-Bi*), which was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival, made him a well-known director overseas.

20 Hayao Miyazaki is the most well-known Japanese animator, whose *Spirited Away* (2001; *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*) received the Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2002. His films include *Castle in the Sky* (1986; *Tenkū no shiro Raputa*), *Princess Mononoke* (1997; *Mononoke hime*) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004; *Hauru no ugoku shiro*). The animations of Studio Ghibli (Miyazaki's studio) have contributed to world cinema as an exemplar of Japanese cultural products.

21 Ishihara, cited in Pia Mooks, p. 41.

22 This 'THE' is in the original Japanese title.



(2008; *Za majikku awā*). In this article, all four will be analysed from the perspective of intertextuality and how other texts are referred to in his films.

The discussion below will commence with an analysis of the theoretical concept of intertextuality. This will be followed by some comments on the social background to the 1990s, Japan's 'lost decade', when Mitani debuted as a filmmaker. The article will then provide a close reading of each of Mitani's four films in chronological order. In doing so, reference will also be made to film as a medium that is particularly suited to intertextuality. With regard to Mitani's four films, it will be suggested that intertextuality is an essential element to make the director's films 'Mitani-like'.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Intertextuality*

Intertextuality is a powerful theoretical framework through which to view Mitani Kōki's films. Intertextual theory is often misunderstood as merely being related to the direct influence of one writer on another, or to a writer borrowing from other texts. This, indeed, is often part of what happens in the process of intertextuality, however, from a wholistic perspective it is more productive to consider the process as involving the factors of a complete 'textual system'.<sup>23</sup> For Kristeva, a literary text is defined as 'a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, a literary text can be regarded as a process of 'productivity'<sup>25</sup> and also an 'intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning)'.<sup>26</sup>

According to Kristeva, a text is also a place for the intersection and neutralisation of dialogues taken from other texts; that is to say, a text is a 'permutation of other texts'.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the inherent nature of 'textuality' can be regarded as 'intertextuality'.<sup>28</sup> Taking into consideration the fact that creators are consumers before they create texts and that they (the creators) are exposed to other texts, it would be understandable that texts are always intertextualised.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Bakhtin, whose ideas had a significant impact on

23 Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, p. 15.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Still and Worton, 'Introduction', p. 2.

Kristeva,<sup>30</sup> remarks that texts become meaningful only by interacting with other texts.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, the elements that comprise a text are not necessarily merely the product of a writer's consciousness. As Roudiez points out, texts are also influenced by the writer's unconscious.<sup>32</sup> Associated with this is the fact that forms of intertextual representation are also various, ranging from explicit forms to implicit ones.<sup>33</sup>

For instance, Mitani's second movie, *All about Our House* (2001; *Minna no ie*), shows evidence of interacting with Carol Reed's film version of Michelangelo's biography, *The Agony and The Ecstasy* (1964).<sup>34</sup> Mitani's movie features a scene which conveys the idea that the designer of the house, Yanagisawa, secretly respects the great Italian artist, Michelangelo. In this scene, based on a famous episode in Reed's movie in which Michelangelo demonstrates his dissatisfaction with a painting he is creating by scattering paint across the wall, Yanagisawa also throws paint across a wall when frustrated with one of his designs. By having Yanagisawa replicate the filmic Michelangelo's actions, Mitani gave his viewers an insight into Yanagisawa's spirit as an artist. In other words, that scene suggests Yanagisawa's respect towards Michelangelo without directly stating this. Viewers also learn from this scene that many differences in opinions concerning the design of the house between the young designer, Yanagisawa, and the carpenters (all of whom are a generation older than Yanagisawa) come from not only the generation gap but also Yanagisawa's notion of not being able to compromise as a professional. Thus, the information implied through these intertextual references assists in enriching audience understanding of the characters.

While Mitani's intertextual practices add depth to audience interpretations of his films, his intertextual references are not so significant as to prevent enjoyment on the part of those members of the audience unfamiliar with the source text. Younger members of the audience, in particular, may have no knowledge of Carol Reed's film on Michelangelo. However, since this information is not essential to the storyline, audiences without this information are still able to find the movie entertaining. The absence of these detailed intertextual components, however, would prevent the movie being recognised as a 'Mitani movie'. Meticulous attention to intertextuality at all levels of the production – even if others fail to notice these small details – is the hallmark of his film-making approach.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, regardless of audience recognition of the references used, intertextuality is an essential strategy in making Mitani's movies 'Mitani-like'.

30 Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody and Intertextuality*, p. 24.

31 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 5; Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. 162.

32 Roudiez, 'Introduction', p. 8.

33 Frow, 'Intertextuality and Ontology', p. 45.

34 Reed's movie is based on the novel, *The Agony and the Ecstasy: A Novel of Michelangelo* (1961), written by Irving Stone.

35 Mitani, cited in Pia Mooks, p. 164; Mori, 'Gaikōsei to Naikōsei wo Orai Shite Zenshin Shituzukeru Hyōgensha', p. 42.



### *Intertextuality and the Media*

Intertextuality has also been applied to other fields of study. Stuart Hall, for example, investigated this concept in the field of media and cultural studies via the theory of 'encoding/decoding', a model still predominantly used in those fields today.<sup>36</sup> According to Hall, meaning is 'encoded' by producers into a given text, after which receivers (consumers) 'decode' the meaning.<sup>37</sup> However, since the codes used when encoding and then again when decoding are not always identical, misunderstandings and distortions – which give a text new meanings – sometimes occur during the processes of production and reception. Therefore, as Kristeva points out, not a single meaning, but multiple meanings are produced regardless of encoders' intention. Thus, meanings are not fixed, but fluid.

The practices of 'representation' are also important here. Representation is defined as a process by which meaning is produced by members of a culture via the use of language.<sup>38</sup> This idea is closely related to the constructionist approach of Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs that consists of the signifier and the signified. The term signifier refers to the 'form', such as an actual word and image, while the signified is the concept that is associated with the signifier.<sup>39</sup> For instance, the word 'red' is a signifier, while concepts associated with words such as 'blood' and 'STOP' are examples of the signified.

Moreover, there is an important premise in the notion of 'representation' which implies that nothing – no object or its various images – can have a single, fixed meaning. Meaning is fluid in different cultures as well as in different periods of time. It is the response of people at various times and in various places that creates meaning – things are made meaningful by people.<sup>40</sup> In this process of meaning production, decoders are as important as encoders. In fact, while every signifier is encoded with potential meaning, it is not until this is decoded by a reader or viewer that this meaning is effected in any useful sense.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, according to Fiske, texts relate to other texts in both similar and different ways.<sup>42</sup> It is through these relationships that meaning is culturally produced for audiences. Therefore, meaning is 'not fixed in a universal, empirical 'reality', but in the social situation of the viewer.'<sup>43</sup> Fiske has identified two dimensions operating

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36 Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody and Intertextuality*, pp. 21, 32.

37 Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', p. 131.

38 Hall, 'The Work of Representation', p. 15.

39 Saussure, cited in Hall, *Ibid.*, p. 31.

40 Hall, *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 61.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

42 Fiske, *Television Culture*, pp. 115-118.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

in the intertextuality process – the horizontal and the vertical. In the horizontal dimension, intertextuality works via explicit fundamental factors, such as genre and character.<sup>44</sup> For example, because Mitani's works are categorised as comedy, viewers expect his texts to generate laughter and humour. In other words, the genre 'pre-orientates' the viewers to activate the text in certain ways by making some meanings rather than others.<sup>45</sup> Simultaneously, the vertical dimension is used to mobilise and fix meanings.<sup>46</sup> Secondary texts, including advertisements, posters and reviews that precede the release of a new film, are categorised into this group. These secondary texts help to construct certain meanings and images that function in conjunction with the primary text of the film itself. The vertical dimension most obviously operates when associated with commercial promotion.<sup>47</sup>

To understand how Fiske's vertical dimension functions, we might consider the advertising posters for the following films: Mitani Kōki's *The Magic Hour* (2008; *Za majikku awā*), Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), Peter Bogdanovich's (b. 1939)<sup>48</sup> *Paper Moon* (1973) and Frank Capra's (1897-1991)<sup>49</sup> *It Happened One Night* (1934).

Firstly, each poster produces meanings individually. For example, while the poster of *It Happened One Night* seems to give the impression of a love story, the first impression given by the *Paper Moon* poster, in which a frowning girl holds a cigarette, is that of a comedy. However, there are common elements that appear across all posters and have the potential to operate in similar ways in the advertisement for each movie. The moon and the sparkle, for example, are common to each poster and tend to evoke a nostalgic response.

The poster of Allen's movie, *Sweet and Lowdown*, refers to the poster of *Paper Moon*,<sup>50</sup> which in turn refers to the poster of the original text, *It Happened One Night*. Those familiar with the three American posters would have certain expectations raised when they viewed the poster of Mitani's movie. It is likely that they would think *The Magic Hour* would be a similar sort of movie to all or any of the American films featured in the other posters. From all these perspectives, we can see that even advertising material can include intertextual references and can orientate a prospective viewer's mind in a certain way.

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44 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

48 Peter Bogdanovich is an American filmmaker. He actually started his career as an actor before his debut film, *Targets* (1968), was released in 1968. His film-making approach keeps the forms of veteran Hollywood directors, such as Howard Hawks and John Ford. Bogdanovich referred to Ford's perspective of rural America in *Paper Moon*.

49 Frank Capra was born in Sicily and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of six. He directed successful comedies in succession between the 1930s and 1940s. Some of his movies, such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), are regarded as classic screwball comedy. *It Happened One Night*, received an Oscar for both Best Picture and Best Director.

50 Hagio, 'Eiga Ai ni Michita Kokoro Yasashii Komedī', p. 40.



### *Intertextuality and Comedy Films*

Cinema - not only Japanese cinema, but cinema in general – demonstrated a strong intertextual tendency even before intertextuality became a global concept. From the very beginning of film history, the repeat as well as the sequel has been a part of cinema. In addition, cinema, which is a medium that totally depends on a ‘delicate blend of repetition,’ used and ‘borrowed’ ideas from other media, such as novels and stage-plays.<sup>51</sup> The inherently flexible nature of cinema as an art form – for example, the capacity to edit – in conjunction with its relative newness, has made this medium very receptive to change. Among the specific genres within cinema, comedy is the one that is most capable of being easily fused with other genres.<sup>52</sup>

Comedy, one of the most pervasive of all cinema genres, is said to originate from stage farces or comic novels.<sup>53</sup> Comedy is also divided into sub-categories, including slapstick, burlesque, parody, irony and black comedy. Since parody is defined as a piece of work that deliberately ‘imitates the style’ of other people or texts for the purpose of amusement,<sup>54</sup> this form of cinema might be regarded as the best example of intertextual material. Interestingly, it is not only comedy that produces parody – all genres actually have this capacity. This is because when a genre starts to mock its own conventions, it tends to step into a phase of parody.<sup>55</sup> As already mentioned, comedy is capable of integrating with other genres.<sup>56</sup> From these perspectives, comedy can be said to be a very inclusive and flexible genre, a fact that further contributes to its being easily intertextualised.

### **Cinema in 1990s Japan**

Since Mitani Kōki debuted as a film maker in the 1990s, some consideration will be given to the social conditions of the time and how these impacted both the Japanese film industry in general and on Mitani’s film-making in particular. The 1990s was a turning point for the Japanese film industry. As already mentioned, a large number of new directors, including Mitani, made their debut during this decade. Their increasing world-wide recognition due to the screening and critical recognition of their films at international film festivals revitalised the Japanese cinema industry both domestically and internationally.

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51 Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, p. 225.

52 Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, p. 116.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

54 *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, p. 1202.

55 Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, p. 115.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Although each of these newcomers has a distinctive individual signature, many of them are 'Generation X' filmmakers. According to Howe and Strauss, Generation X refers to those who were born between 1961 and about 1981.<sup>57</sup> One of the most successful of these newcomers, Hirokazu Kore'eda, remarked that the directors who emerged in the 1990s come from a generation 'that never apprenticed in a film studio'.<sup>58</sup> The Japanese film industry has traditionally provided few opportunities for direct entry outsiders.<sup>59</sup> However, the emergence of the new cohort of 1990s directors saw the collapse of this long-standing industry convention.<sup>60</sup> This breakdown had a very positive impact on Japanese cinema since the success of the new directors resulted in more opportunities to enter professional film-making opening up to others that followed.<sup>61</sup>

The new generation of 1990s filmmakers received strong cultural influences from the United States. After Japanese society reduced the conflict with the U.S. that arose at the time of the 1960 re-negotiation of the *Nichibei Anzen Hoshō Jyōyaku* (U.S.-Japan Security Treaty), the country entered into a political alliance with the western superpower that resulted in American cultural influences quickly spreading throughout the whole of Japan.<sup>62</sup> Japanese Gen Xers, including Mitani, grew up under these circumstances where the cultural boundaries between the indigenous and American imports started to blur.<sup>63</sup> Thus, it can be said that, for these young artists, breaking 'Japanese' conventions did not present the serious barrier it may have for the generations that preceded them.

More importantly, the 1990s in Japan was a time of great social upheaval and transformation. This led to significant changes in the film industry itself. The decade was preceded the previous year by the passing of the Shōwa emperor, Hirohito, in January 1989, an event that ensured a clear division between the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>64</sup> Starting with the loss of the emperor, the 1990s was not a joyous decade for the country. The early 1990s saw the collapse of Japan's so-called 'bubble economy' leading to long-term financial stagnation and the contraction of the labour market. The degree of impact on the nation due to this economic downturn was tremendous and is evident from the fact, as noted above, that the 1990s is referred to in Japan as 'the lost decade'.<sup>65</sup>

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57 Howe and Strauss, cited in Ortnier, 'Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-saturated World', p. 416.

58 Kore'eda, cited in Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, p. 208.

59 For instance, Hirokazu Kore'eda was a television producer while Shunji Iwai created music videos, promotional films and television dramas prior to entering the film industry.

60 Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film*, p. 71.

61 *Ibid.*

62 Aoki, 'Murakami Haruki and Contemporary Japan', p. 268.

63 Hantke, 'Postmodernism and Genre Fiction as Deferred Action: Haruki Murakami and the Noir Tradition', p. 11.

64 Fukushima, 'Japanese Literature, or "J-Literature," in the 1990s', p. 41.

65 Johnson, 'Recovery Demands a Clear-out of Old Guard', p. 16.



In 1995, the mid-point of the decade, two catastrophic events occurred. These were the Great Hanshin Earthquake and the sarin terrorism attack by the religious cult, *Aum Shinrikyō*. The former happened on 17th of January, striking the area around Kōbe (one of Japan's major cities) early in the morning. More than five thousand people were killed and thousands of others left injured and displaced. The massive earthquake also damaged highways, railways and major utility pipelines. However, more significant was the manner in which this natural disaster revealed serious defects in the 'system' of Japan. For instance, there were significant delays in the provision of services such as emergency facilities and water supply immediately after the disaster because of the slow governmental response. To make matters worse, the government clung to demands for 'national autonomy' and rejected offers of foreign aid.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, it was also revealed that the Ministry of Construction closed its eyes to the fact that a large number of buildings actually failed to meet construction safety-standards.<sup>67</sup>

Just two months later, on March 20th, Tokyo's subway system was attacked by members of the cult known as *Aum Shinrikyō* who released the highly toxic substance, sarin, on selected trains running on the underground during the morning rush hour peak. Twelve people were killed and more than five thousand commuters were injured. The incident is regarded as one of the worst terrorist attacks in Japan. Again, it was not only the issue of the attack itself. As it witnessed the catastrophe unfold before it, Japanese society was forced to reflect upon the assumptions that sustained it.<sup>68</sup> The inability of such a large number of 'ordinary' people – most of the cult's devotees were young and well-educated - to assimilate into the society was attributed to flaws in Japanese societal function itself.<sup>69</sup> Although 1995 was actually the 100th anniversary of Japanese cinema, the disasters that occurred at the time completely swept away any thought of celebrating the memorial year.<sup>70</sup>

The socially disruptive events that happened throughout the 1990s had a strong impact on and are reflected in Japanese cinema. According to Tanaka, live coverage via the medium of television in the aftermath of the earthquake and the *Aum* incident led to Japanese people witnessing the extraordinary and tremendous panic of human drama as if these were happening in a film.<sup>71</sup> The dreadful images of 'reality' generated by both disasters, which went far beyond people's imagination, made viewers realise that no film could surpass reality any longer. Tanaka argues that this complete defeat of previous cinematic approaches stopped filmmakers from clinging to old styles and patterns

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66 Iida, *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan*, p. 238.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 238; Leheny, cited in Roquet, 'Ambient Literature and the Aesthetics of Calm: Mood Regulation in Contemporary Japanese Fiction', p. 89.

70 Tanaka, *Gendai/ Nihon/ Eiga*, p. 37.

71 *Ibid.*

which in turn gave directors the opportunities to produce the material they wanted to in new and innovative ways.<sup>72</sup> It was this drastic change that brought about the recovery of Japanese cinema. Regardless of technical difficulties, Mitani's response of trying to incorporate American comedy strategies and styles into his own productions can be considered representative of the typically unconventional approaches to film-making that emerged around this time. In the case of Mitani and others like him, the chaotic social circumstances actually provided an opportunity for these young artists to step into the film industry and to produce alternative films.

The social conditions of the 1990s supported the emergence of a new group of Generation X filmmakers, in addition to contributing to total transformation of the Japanese film industry. In fact, it seems to be no exaggeration to say that the chaotic circumstances of the time provided Generation X filmmakers in particular with the opportunity to produce innovative films that permitted full rein of their individual creative talents. Despite being a dark time, the events of the 1990s were essential for the revival of the industry and also for the emergence of directors like Mitani Kōki.

### **Mitani's Films: The Texts and Their Intertexts**

*Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald* (1997; *Rajio no jikan*)

In order to understand the operation of intertextuality in Mitani's films, it is necessary to analyse each of his references in the chronological order of production. Mitani debuted as a film director in 1997 with the typical *gunshū geki* (group comedy) film, *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald*. The characters of this work provide comic depiction of the various human relationships among the people working in a radio station, which is a prime example of Mitani's favorite setting of 'limited space'.<sup>73</sup>

The film's narrative concerns a radio drama that has been written by a prize-winning amateur writer, Miyako Suzuki (Kyōka Suzuki). Although the drama is about to be aired, changes are still being demanded by the self-centred main actress, Senbon Nokko (Keiko Toda). Even during the live broadcast of the drama, the script is continuously changing. It finally gets to the point where the original script, which featured a pure love story, is completely altered turning Miyako's romantic dream into a nightmare.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Mitani, *Mitani Kōki no Arifureta Seikatsu 6: Yakusha Kidori*, p. 116.



From its inception, *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald* had a strong intertextual element with Mitani intentionally setting out to create in his debut work an American-like Japanese film.<sup>74</sup> In order to do this, the director overlaid his own understanding of the meaning of humour across American situation comedy and screwball comedy formats.<sup>75</sup> In fact, while filming *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald*, Mitani strived to showcase all his knowledge about American films.<sup>76</sup> In other words, what Mitani decoded through American comedy was deliberately encoded in Mitani's first film.

One of the factors that clearly distinguish Mitani's movies from those of other Japanese directors who produce comedy is that other directors rarely make any deliberate attempt to adapt material from American forms of the genre.<sup>77</sup> Although American comedy remains a popular entertaining product, difficulties arise when a Japanese director/producer attempts to create a similar style using local resources.<sup>78</sup> This seems to suggest that there are radical differences between the two. Under these circumstances, Mitani's adherence to and study of American comedy appears to have given him a rare position as a Japanese filmmaker.

There is a further intertextual factor embedded in the setting of *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald*, one that provides an example of implicit intertextuality. The film's setting of the radio station is actually copied from the command post of NASA in the film *APOLLO 13* (1995). This setting contributes well to the narrative strategy of the work in that the focus on a limited space helps the character relations look more dramatic than is the case in the actual storyline.<sup>79</sup> We might say that the signifier of a limited space was taken by Mitani and constructed into the signified of a radio station. In other words, Mitani consumed (decoded) the space as a command post, but produced (encoded) it as a radio station. This indicates that there can be different uses for one object depending on whether it is passively seen or actively used. Clearly these two processes are not necessarily identical.

### *All about Our House* (2001; *Minna no ie*)

Mitani's second film, *All about Our House*, was released in 2001. This film features a young married couple Naosuke (Naoki Tanaka) and Tamiko (Akiko Yagi) who are in the process of building their own house. While the young couple have their house

74 Mitani, *Shigoto, Mitani Kōki no*, p. 167.

75 Ishihara, cited in *Pia Mooks*, p. 39.

76 Mitome, 'Mitani Eiga no Seikō to Daishippai, Sono Riyū wo Tokiakasu!', p. 76.

77 Komori, 'Gekisakka, Mitani Kōki, Furikaeruto "Ibara no Michi"', p. 137.

78 Mitani, *Shigoto, Mitani Kōki no*, p. 205.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of dreams firmly in mind, their desire conflicts with the opinions of Tamiko's father, Chōichirō (Kunie Tanaka), who is in charge of the builders working for their house, and the designer, Yanagisawa (Toshiaki Karasawa).

It is evident that Mitani decided to take a different approach for his second production. In contrast to producing the 'American-like Japanese film' format he had used for *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald*, the aim of *All about Our House* was to produce a 'Japanesque American film'.<sup>80</sup> This approach was determined by the fact that the narrative is based around a specifically Japanese experience involving, for example, Japanese ceremonial scenes and landscapes. However, in order to diminish the Japanese elements and create space for an American influence, Mitani decided deliberately to omit various scenic elements that are typically seen in Japanese films.<sup>81</sup>

There are two major influential references in *All about Our House*; these are Woody Allen's *September* (1987) and *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993) also by Allen. Although Mitani drew on a range of elements from each of these films, colours were a central focus. Each colour has been blended into a unified sense of calming orange, a strategy that is hinted at in both of Allen's films. Orange or sepia coloured lighting is a feature of American cinema. While lighting in Japanese films generally brightens the entire area of the screen, American films are often more muted in tone. This produces a highly aesthetic effect on the screen.<sup>82</sup> While influenced by these American strategies, Mitani also sought to create a colour scheme that matched Japanese expectations of brighter cinema lighting. In addition to producing similar lighting effects to those that might be featured in American film, he also transferred these orange shades to, for example, the clothing worn by his characters to create a warm impression suitable for a comedy about family life.<sup>83</sup> In other words, it is Mitani's response to produce a hearty impression via Allen's usage of orange colour.

Even though Mitani 'borrowed' the colour pattern from Allen's films, the storylines of the three films are not necessarily similar. While *September* is categorised as a home drama, the narrative is serious rather than comic. The storyline of *Manhattan Murder Mystery* is a cross between mystery and comedy. Thus, the colour scheme has been used for different purposes by each of the two directors (and, in fact, for slightly different effect in each of Allen's films). This difference seems to indicate a culturally different perception towards the orange colour. In Japan, the colours featured are categorised as *danshoku-kei* (warm colours) and, as the name indicates, considered to

80 Mitani, *Shigoto, Mitani Kōki no*, p. 167.

81 Mitani, cited in Schilling, 'Screen Review Entertainment Show'.

82 Takama, *Shi-na Eiga to Ko-ki Eiga*, pp. 310-311.

83 Mitani, cited in Schilling, 'Screen Review Entertainment Show'.



give a warm impression. On the other hand, orange is often associated with nostalgia in western countries. Whereas Allen made the settings of his films nostalgic and mysterious, Mitani successfully encoded a warm and homely impression in the orange-coloured lighting and costumes. Besides the example of borrowing a limited space from *APOLLO 13* for *Welcome Back, Mr. McDonald*, this example of Mitani's second film (borrowing orange colour) also shows how the same object is transformed by a person from a different cultural background. As Hall points out, there are different signifieds produced in different cultures.<sup>84</sup>

Although there were differences in the treatment of colour, Mitani actually did replicate a number of Woody Allen's approaches throughout *All about Our House*. For instance, in the scene set in an *izakaya* (a Japanese pub), Mitani did not frame all the characters on the screen at the same time. Rather, moving away from his usual preference for long takes, he used a series of facial close-ups of each person. By doing so, an atmosphere was created which led the audience to feel as if they were in the space drinking with each of the characters. This point of Allen's approach actually comes from early Hollywood movies, such as the comedies of Ernst Lubitsch (1892-1947).<sup>85</sup> After this Berlin-born director started his career in Hollywood, his 'sophisticated comic style' quickly became popular and influential enough to the extent that it was imitated by many other directors. Lubitsch works are regarded as an essential part of American national cinema.<sup>86</sup> Thus, it can be said that elements of these classic Hollywood comedies are present in Mitani's movies indirectly via the use of Allen's techniques.

#### *Suite Dreams* (2006; *THE uchōten hoteru*)

Audiences would have to wait another five long years after *All about Our House* for Mitani's third film, *Suite Dreams*, which premiered in 2006. This film adopts the American situation comedy format which is overlaid across the Japanese group comedy (*gunshū geki*) style. One of the most prominent intertextual references is Edmund Goulding's classic *Grand Hotel* (1932) starring Greta Garbo.<sup>87</sup>

It is New Year's Eve and a few hours before a party commences at the Avanti Hotel. The film's many characters, including a world-famous actor, Kōji Yakusho (b. 1956),<sup>88</sup> in the starring role, encounter various difficulties as preparations for the party take place, again, in a limited space – this time, a hotel. As in *Welcome back, Mr.*

<sup>84</sup> Hall, 'The Work of Representation', p. 32.

<sup>85</sup> Schwarz, 'On the Construction of Reality and Imagery in Jan Van Eyck and Woody Allen', p. 20.

<sup>86</sup> Gemunden, 'Ernst Lubitsch's "To Be or Not to Be"', p. 61.

<sup>87</sup> Mori, 'Gaikōsei to Naikōsei wo Orai Shite Zenshin Shituzukeru Hyōgensha', p. 42; Schilling, 'King of Comedy Scores Again'.

<sup>88</sup> Yakusho is in such other films as Jūzō Itami's *Dandelion* (1985; *Tanpopo*), Shōhei Imamura's *The Eel* (1997; *Unagi*) and Shinji Aoyama's *Eureka* (2000; *Yuriika*).

*McDonald*, Mitani's first film, this limited space seems to provide a sense of tension and dramatic effect that exceeds that of the actual storyline.

There are intertextually important elements hidden in the names. Firstly, the name of the hotel, Avanti, was actually taken from Wilder's film of the same title.<sup>89</sup> The names of the four suites of Hotel Avanti actually reference the real-life names of the actors, such as Lionel (Lionel Barrymore), who appear in *Grand Hotel*. The use of these names is, in fact, a clue to the fact that Mitani is referencing the classic film. Thus, Mitani used Fiske's horizontal dimension, in which explicit elements such as genre and character produce intertextuality, so that *Suite Dreams* would be seen as a similar kind of film to *Grand Hotel*. This clue, again, would not be significant enough to devalue *Suite Dreams*' entertaining elements, however, this is what Mitani stresses and enjoys in his filmmaking.<sup>90</sup>

*The Magic Hour* (2008; *Za majikku awā*)

Mitani's latest film, *The Magic Hour*, which was released in 2008, also attracted large audience numbers. The storyline of this screwball type comedy begins in a port town called Sukago ('Chicago'). When the local gang boss, Teshio (Toshiyuki Nishida) discovers that his lover, Mari (Eri Fukatsu), has been cheating on him with a young gangster, Bingo (Satoshi Tsumabuki), he swears to take revenge. The only way the lovers can get into Teshio's good books is by helping him search for the legendary hit-man, Dera Togashi, whom Teshio wishes to contract for some work. Bingo, who has no idea who Dera Togashi is or where he is to be found, disguises himself as a film director and hires a third-rate actor, Murata (Kōichi Satō), to play the role of the hit-man, as a solution to save their lives.

Compared to Mitani's first three films, *The Magic Hour* shows a clear difference in the setting. Sukago is a non-Japanesque city with western-style buildings that appear to be 'caught in a 1920s time warp'.<sup>91</sup> The waitress, Natsuko (Haruka Ayase) comments on these unrealistic looking surroundings by observing 'It's like something out of a film. This place is always like that. This view...that building, the hotel...doesn't it remind you of a film set?' (*The Magic Hour* 2008). There is actually a similar line in Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950): 'See this street! This is a fake city, made of plywood. I love this street more than any other place in the world.'<sup>92</sup> The similarity between these two lines indicates that the idea of using an obviously artificial and feigned town, Sukago, in *The Magic Hour* comes from Wilder's masterpiece.<sup>93</sup>

89 Hagio, 'Eiga Ai ni Michita Kokoro Yasashii Komedī', p. 42.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

91 Schilling, 'King of Comedy Scores Again'.

92 Taneda, cited in Mitani, *Mitani Kōki no Arifureta Seikatsu 7: The Majikku Iyā*, p. 187.

93 *Ibid.*



Additionally, Jorge Roy Hill's *The Sting* (1973) is obliquely referenced throughout the film. Many elements of the mise-en-scene, including the settings and the costumes, were actually borrowed from Hill's film.<sup>94</sup> While he did not overtly acknowledge the fact, Mitani also seems to have found inspiration for the music and the editing from *The Sting*. In other words, *The Sting* is partially revived 35 years later in the foreign film, *The Magic Hour*. Taking into consideration that the opening theme song of *The Sting* is taken from the classic, *The Third Man* (1949), we can easily see the extent of the circulatory system of texts.

As in Mitani's previous three films, there are also a range of references from Billy Wilder and Woody Allen in *The Magic Hour*. First of all, the broad storyline was influenced by Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959), which presents as a perfect combination of gangster drama and comedy.<sup>95</sup> *Some Like It Hot* also supplied *The Magic Hour* with the narrative strategy of disguise.<sup>96</sup> While, at first sight, the Wilder film and *The Magic Hour* do not appear to have much in common, this assumption ignores the more subtle elements - including the film's general concept - that Mitani encoded from the Hollywood narrative. In fact, components of Wilder's masterpiece are pressed into 'Mitani's world' as the very foundation of the Japanese film.

One of the highlights of this film is Mari singing as she sits on the moon. As already referred to in the previous chapter, this scene is a pastiche of a scene in Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), which actually harks back to Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* (1973)<sup>97</sup> and Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934). In fact, the signified of the moon could be *It Happened One Night*, *Paper Moon*, *Sweet and Lowdown* or *The Magic Hour*; depending on when and where the scene is viewed.

Moreover, there is a deeper meaning in Mitani's use of this scene hidden in the lyrics of the song the young woman sings, *I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles*.<sup>98</sup> In Mitani's film, the words 'I'm blowing bubbles... They fly so high, nearly reach the sky. Then like my dreams they fade and die. Fortune's always hiding...'<sup>99</sup> actually symbolise film-making.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, it can be decoded that the scene is not merely a reference to Allen's film, but also Mitani demonstrating respect and honour towards cinema itself.<sup>101</sup> While it is not necessary for an audience to have access to this element in order to be entertained by the scene, having knowledge of Mitani's intention adds to what Hall argues is 'meaningful' in the text.<sup>102</sup>

94 Mitani, *Ibid.*, p. 39.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

96 Mitani, *Shigoto, Mitani Kōki no*, p. 116.

97 Hagio, 'Eiga Ai ni Michita Kokoro Yasashii Komedī', p. 40.

98 *Ibid.*

99 Kenbrovin, *I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles*.

100 Hagio, 'Eiga Ai ni Michita Kokoro Yasashii Komedī', p. 40.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Hall, 'The Work of Representation', p. 33.

In this section, Mitani's four films and the kinds of references used in his works have been outlined. It has been argued that a large number of American films are embedded both explicitly and implicitly in Mitani's works. Furthermore, it has been noted that the encoded elements of these adopted texts provide clues in how to receive or decode the films. Thus, for viewers of Mitani's films, the American texts referenced assist in the comprehension of the Japanese films.

## Conclusion

This article analysed the work of contemporary Japanese film director, Mitani Kōki, with an emphasis on the 'self-conscious forms of intertextuality'<sup>103</sup> found in each of Mitani's four films. While Mitani's intertextual inspiration comes from a variety of sources, attention was given to the two most prominent – the works of Billy Wilder and Woody Allen. It was noted that, while familiarity with the work of these artists adds depth to audience interpretations of his films, his intertextual references are not essential to enjoy or be entertained by Mitani's material on the part of those members of the audience unfamiliar with the source texts. However, the absence of these detailed intertextual components would prevent the film being recognised as a 'Mitani film'. Meticulous attention to intertextuality at all levels of the production – even if audiences fail to notice these small details – is the hallmark of Mitani's film-making approach.<sup>104</sup> As a result, regardless of recognition of the references used, intertextuality is an essential strategy in making Mitani's films 'Mitani-like'.

Through Mitani's films the circulatory power of media can be observed; old films are revived and freshly re-created across borders and time. As suggested by Mitani's admiration for the two American artists, Wilder and Allen, in most cases American texts provide the intertextual foundation for Mitani's films. This means that when viewers watch Mitani's films, they actually watch American texts via the Japanese director's works. This dominance of American texts seems to represent the cultural outcomes of Americanisation, a process which, although global, operated particularly strongly in Japan over the past six and a half decades because of the post-war American occupation of Japan. From this perspective, Mitani's films are typical products of the new crop of post-1990 American influenced Japanese Gen X directors. However, it is worthwhile noting again that Mitani is in a unique position as a Japanese comedy creator due to radical differences between Japanese and American comedies.

<sup>103</sup> Chandler, 'Intertextuality'.

<sup>104</sup> Mitani, cited in Pia Mooks, p. 164; Mori, 'Gaikōsei to Naikōsei wo Ōrai Shite Zenshin Shituzukeru Hyōgensha', p. 42.



There is an interesting impression about Japan from other nations. According to Barrett, Japanese comedy (*kigeki*) is little known in the West.<sup>105</sup> In fact, viewers and readers in both the West and in other parts of Asia have a common image of Japanese people as lacking a sense of humour, in spite of the fact that Japanese comedy actually has a long history.<sup>106</sup> Mitani's increasing recognition overseas as a comedy filmmaker has the capacity to dispel the stereotypical impression of an absence of comedy and humour in Japan. Through his films, foreign audiences can understand the strong tradition of comedy and humour in Japanese popular culture.

This, in fact, is one of Mitani's aims. Rather than incorporating American comic elements in his work to become individually famous overseas, Mitani's desire is to give foreign viewers a sense of the highly developed nature of Japanese comedy.<sup>107</sup> To be sure, he successfully changes original American signifieds through his perception to something more Japaneseque. By doing so, these signifieds fit into his storylines and turn into 'Mitani-like' elements from mere extraction from American texts. In other words, despite the fact that Mitani's texts often become meaningful by interacting with American texts, what he wants to express belongs to Japanese cinema. This cultural tangle seems to indicate the power of intertextuality; any intertextual references could communicate with each other regardless of nationalities. Thus, it can be argued that the prevalence of the theory in a large number of fields across the border partially attributes to this powerful nature of intertextuality.

In addition to his films, Mitani's plays have also reached audiences in other countries. The theatrical version of *University of Laughs* (2004; *Warai no daigaku*), which was originally produced as a radio drama in 1994 and then as a play in 1996 before it was adapted as a film directed by Mamoru Hoshi in 2004, was performed in the U.K. by British actors and also by local actors in Korea. As Mitani has noted, it was incredible that the play was favourably received in Korea, since the social background of this play is the Second World War,<sup>108</sup> a time of harsh Japanese proto-colonial rule of Korea. From this point of view, comedy provides the power to alleviate international tensions and to improve cultural relations. In this sense, Mitani's comedy works as a very positive form of 'soft power', particularly in this globalising world. 'Soft power' is defined as a combination of intangible resources such as 'culture, ideology and identities'.<sup>109</sup>

105 Barrett, 'Comic Targets and Comic Styles: An introduction to Japanese Film Comedy', p. 211.

106 *Ibid.*; Buruma, 'Humor in Japanese Cinema', p. 26.

107 Mitani, cited in *Rikkyō Journal*.

108 Mitani, *Mitani Kōki no Arifureta Seikatsu 8: Fukkatsu no Hi*, pp. 99-101.

109 Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Policies*, p. 166.

While power of this kind can serve questionable political and economic ends,<sup>110</sup> the ‘soft power’ inherent in Mitani’s comedies has great potential for a positive influence especially when presented in film format. As he pointed out, film is a medium that entertains people all over the world.<sup>111</sup> Although Mitani was a successful director and a playwright for theatre and television drama, he noticed the limitations of these two media. Theatre is a medium that is made to be enjoyed as a live performance, while Mitani feels that television drama must be seen over a series of weeks.<sup>112</sup> Films, on the other hand, are a one-off easily distributed format that, in effect, has ‘eternal life.’ Mitani said ‘I am still moved by films that were made in Hollywood more than 50 years ago. Isn’t it amazing? This means that, if I really try, my films may be able to entertain people all over the world decade after decade.’<sup>113</sup> This eternal potential of cinema may be one reason for its strongly intertextual nature. In other words, the fact that cinema has more potential to be consumed means it has more potential to be re-used (intertextualised). Currently, it is Mitani who references the texts of other directors. However, his increasing international recognition via the power of global cinema gives his works, too, the potential to be referenced and intertextualised by others.

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110 McGray, ‘Japan’s Gross National Cool’, p. 53.

111 Mitani, *Shigoto, Mitani Kōki no*, p. 131.

112 Mitani, *Mitani Kōki no Arifureta Seikatsu 5: Uchōten Jidai*, p. 55.

113 *Ibid.*



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