

The Essence of Kami

By Marcel Swiboda



Towards the end of John Lynch's film *Kami* there is a short scene in which the audience sees a young girl, shot in profile, wielding a bubble gun purchased from a street vendor's cart. On the day I first watched this film, prior to my first encounter, I had found myself walking down the city of Leeds' main thoroughfare when, just as I was about to turn right onto an adjacent street, I was assailed by a cloud of bubbles. In front of me a young girl, of a similar age to the girl in the film, looked up and asked her mother where all the bubbles were coming from – a question that I was also asking myself. Upon turning the corner, I noticed the street vendor and his cart, a bubble gun the source of those no longer mysterious airborne spheres.

There must have been many times when I have walked by such street vendors and the carts from which they dispense their wares, but I'm not sure how many times I had been conscious of them. What brought them to my attention on this occasion was one of those standout occurrences in the life of our cities: an ephemeral and transformative encounter. Literally within a few hours I found myself watching the same scene, set on the very same street, but this time in a film – simultaneously reprising the encounter and redoubling its ephemeral and transformative quality with uncanny force.

The film begins with the mortified body of a cat being removed to a lay-by from a hectic dual carriageway by a teenage boy. The name-tag hanging from the red ribbon fastened around the cat's neck reads 'KAMI'. The reverse-side of the tag contains the phone number that the teenager dials, in an attempt to establish contact with the cat's guardian. Yet as the story unfolds, the audience is eventually brought to the realization that the role of guardian

in the film falls no less to the cat than to any of the human protagonists: ‘*Kami*’, a Shinto term, traditionally describes ‘spirits’ that guard the gateways between terrestrial and transcendent realms. In accordance with a more modern rendering of the word, *Kami*’s feline guardian stands at the gateways between the realms comprising our contemporary urban life-worlds.

In each of the cat’s appearances in *Kami* the red ribbon is visible. As such the ribbon – along with the cat it adorns – is the film’s connecting thread. Throughout *Kami* the cat can be recognized by this primary trait, whereby the audience follows it through the border spaces in which the film’s life-worlds come into contact. *Kami* often makes novel and effective use of a cinematographic technique known as plane photography, or tilt-shift (literally tilting the angle of the lens to vary the focus within a shot), to bring these border zones inside the frame, whereby the film’s various characters enter into momentary proximity within the spectator’s visual field, yet this is invariably done so that each character seems only to be physically discernible to the other in their peripheral field of vision. As the director states in a press release for the film, ‘*Kami* is about those that are almost invisible in the most visible of places within the city’.

Yet the use of plane photography adds another dimension to this contraction of visual space – it also places the audience in a state of intermittent uncertainty regarding what takes place at the outer edges of their cinematic gaze. As the above quote suggests, there is something more than merely metaphorical about the connection between the constraining of perception of character and spectator and the issue of invisibility at the margins in *Kami*. It is not just the film’s storytelling devices that are brought to bear in its exploration of the play of visibility and invisibility in the city, it is also the material and technical mechanisms that are mobilized in order to solicit a perceptual play of uncertainty, whereby the audience’s desire is also solicited – the desire to know what might actually be connecting these characters together, over and above the mere physical presence of the cat bestride their respective paths.

Such is the ethos of *Kami* – to invite the audience into a relationship of embodied perceptual participation with the characters on the screen, whereby their attention is perpetually being drawn outward towards the uncertainties residing at the periphery. The pioneer of early cinema Dziga Vertov famously proclaimed the movie camera superior to the human eye. Through the shifting of the tilt angle of the camera lens comprising the plane photographic technique, John Lynch has gone in the opposite direction – he has used the camera to explore the limits of the human visual sense. However, rather than stigmatize or romanticize the physiological limitations of the human sensorium, or affirm tunnel vision (an all too easy gesture in this day and age), the shifting optics of *Kami* press against the perceptual and cognitive constraints limiting our purview of the world, to challenge us to

perceive and think differently.

The next episode of the film commences with an interior scene in which a woman gazes towards a collection of objects collected on a sideboard towards the right of the frame. The objects might be souvenirs of some kind – those of a seasoned traveller perhaps, gifts from a distant other, or memento mori. The exact origin or purpose of these objects is uncertain, yet as the scene unfolds it becomes evident that these artifacts are bestowed with a strong affective force. One thing is clear regarding the objects comprising the shrine is that feline figures play a prominent role. Clearly discernible among the artifacts is a ‘maneki-neko’, or ‘beckoning cat’. In its trans-national popularization as an image of Japanese bonhomie, the maneki-neko’s identifying gesture has come to be associated with the invitation to good fortune.

While *Kami* stops some way short of resolving fate into fortune, the affirmative potential of fortuity in the face of a tragic and irreversible fate is in some ways its own signal gesture. Fortuity in *Kami* is affirmed in the form of a *gift*. Whether or not the souvenir was a gift from another, in the context of the film’s economy the maneki-neko – whose name derives from ‘*kami-neko*’ – remains a gift nevertheless. As the director describes in his press release is ‘*Kami* is in essence a spirit [...] whose paradoxical course is initiated by an uncharacteristic act of giving’.

The pattern of perceptual play continues into the following scenes, in which the woman leaves her abode – a cello strapped to her back – as she heads from the outskirts of the city towards its centre. On her way towards her destination she apparently walks by the teenager from the opening scene, walking in the opposite direction, before encountering the ubiquitous cat. At this point, something of the film’s time, as well as its mystery is concretely signalled. As regards the time of the scene and by extension the whole film, *Kami* no more seeks to centre the audience temporally within a linear chronological scheme, than to centre them spatially in relation to the visual field. The latter motif is evident again here, the tilt-shift technique redoubling the scene’s temporal uncertainty and mystery.

Sound and music further reinforce the subdued intensity of the scene. While an ambient electronic soundtrack runs from early on in the film, the presence of semi-improvised electro-acoustic playing during this scene brings the music to a short-lived pitched of intensity at the precise moment when the woman encounters the cat, aurally punctuating the scene’s significance within the overall scheme of the film. The use of improvisation also proves both apt and significant, as a mode of musical practice whose own ethos combines fortuity and decisiveness. The increasingly busy soundtrack also heralds the passage from

periphery to centre as the urban clamour of the city increasingly infiltrates the film's sonic space, coterminous with the woman's arrival at its centre – a soundtrack nevertheless often muted and muffled, requiring that our auditory sense be no less keen than our visual one, in the search for tangible evidence of urban conviviality.

Upon arrival at her destination, the woman has seated herself, uncased and uprigthed her instrument in the middle of a pedestrian thoroughfare and commenced tune up and play. The piece she plays is J. S. Bach's Cello Suite no. 2. The role that Bach's music plays here is reminiscent of the filmmaker Patrick Keiller's use of Beethoven's String Quartet, no. 15, at the end of his 1994 film *London*. While the use of music in Keiller's film entirely eschews explicit narrative purpose, it nevertheless conveys a similar sense of melancholy – not merely of an individual but also of the city itself. In both cases, the city's 'voice' is ventriloquized, by means of music and sound. The electronic soundtrack continues to run in counterpoint to the Bach, its minimal character both offset and emphasized by the more busy playing of the cello – reemphasizing the former's ambient function, lending its sparse sonic aspect to the film's rarified atmosphere. The meticulous and subtle editing situates the diverse musical materials in a tightly choreographed spectral dance across the sonic space of the film in another of its fragile, barely perceivable encounters.

Once the woman's playing ceases, a camera pan turns towards the young girl with the bubble gun. The space of encounter opens up to bring the woman and the girl into momentary spatial and spectatorial proximity, but as ever with care undertaken to keep them in each other's border space. The audience also encounters the two remaining characters to be introduced towards the end of *Kami*: two black, male street vendors who alternately man the cart from which the bubble guns are sold, as they swap shifts. We first encounter the vendor at the end of his shift as he moves his cart up the street towards his meeting point. The sensory register of the scene momentarily becomes one of touch, or rather of the conjoining of vision and touch.



The vendor holds one of the bubble guns from the cart in his right hand, the same hand also used to maneuver the cart, almost as if the gun's handle pressed alongside the cart's vertical frame provides him with extra purchase. Signalling his arrival, the vendor holds the gun aloft and fires off a few of its liquid rounds. *Kami* thus playfully critiques populist reductions of black urban- demographics to gangland cliches, confounding such reductions by bringing the city's cosmopolitan character to visibility in a way that displays it in its unsensational quotidian banality and in the process shows something of its singularity. The shift change takes place, represented by the literal handing over of a money pouch – the only time in the film when human figures verifiably partake of a social encounter. Yet while the space is a shared one, the use of tilt shift again ensures that physical proximity is no guarantee of any kind of sustained explicit human congress.

The film's penultimate scene finds the relieved vendor on a solitary bus journey home, returning him to his dwelling on the periphery of the city and, upon arriving there, preparing a tray of cat food, before his mobile phone rings and he answers. There follows a short moment, charged with an uncertainty and a mysterious intensity echoing the earlier scene in which we see the cat alive for the first time. The audience anticipates a conversational encounter that will perhaps explain what they have seen – a verbal resolution to the visual uncertainties of the film – but instead the only voice to be heard here is that of the man who has just returned home, as he beckons forth a dialogue that does not take place, at least not within the screen-time of the film.

Far from heralding a misanthropic *denouement*, what happens at the end of *Kami* is at once banal, extraordinary and unforeseen – providing the film with an ending more epiphany than explanation. The audience is encouraged to interpret what takes place beyond their habitual recourse to ratiocination and common sense. As such, *Kami* points to the ethical potential of looking beyond what is in one's immediate purview and turning attention towards the peripheral zones of cinematic, urban and social space, not to mention what resides at the edges of our moral, social and subjective ambits. Such an act requires that one affirm the vagaries of non-consensual, non-habitual thought and action, rather than common sense maxims declaring that 'out of sight is out of mind' or demanding one 'turn a blind eye'.

City dwellers often fear being blindsided, yet such a fear has its price. To be blindsided can have multiple meanings: for example, to be restricted in one's view and to be threatened or attacked are examples of being blindsided. Yet a fault in the ability to perceive or conceive fully what resides at the periphery of inner and outer vision need not necessarily be viewed as a shortcoming, but rather a sign of a need to adjust our visual and cognitive optics. John Lynch's *Kami* is an ethically prescient film on account of its capacity to challenge and change our habitual ways of perceiving. If we are all in our own little bubbles

– as contemporary parlance so often likes to situate us – then we would do well to remember that those ephemeral spheres are made as much from without as from within. *Kami* points the way.

Marcel Swiboda
Leeds University
2013