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When White gets Dark: Balance in *Tekkon Kinkreet*

Black and white, dark and light; one can't exist without the other. It's only through their relationship that either can be defined. Black and White, the main characters in *Tekkon Kinkreet*, maintain that balance with each other. *Tekkon Kinkreet* is a Japanese animated movie based on a comic of the same name in which the balance of good and evil is tested. As the city that the movie is set in, Treasure Town, transforms and the character of the city changes, Black struggles and reacts violently while his partner, White, begins to adapt. White's innocence balances Black's dark tendencies. As their names suggest, White is portrayed as the naïve, innocent half of the duo while Black is shown as the cruel, aggressive half. However, their roles aren't that simple, and throughout the movie, White shows signs of darkness in him. Even White, the symbol of purity and innocence in both the movie and Treasure Town, tips that balance and falls into the darkness.

One scene in particular, the assassin fire scene from 53:40 to 55:12¹ shows White at his darkest. As Black and the assassin are fighting and Black is about to die, White comes from above and sets fire to the assassin. Through the entire scene, he is shown in a position of power and is separated from the violence going on below him, while Black is fully immersed in it and on the edge of death. Although White is the one who actually gets rid of the assassin, he maintains a calm demeanor through the scene, making him

¹ This particular clip can be watched on YouTube, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-a6yZXIDLw>. It should be noted that the YouTube clip has blurred out the edges, which is not how it is in the actual movie.

seem more sinister. The framing, the camera angles, the pacing, the scene cuts, the colors, and the sound design all point towards a darker, more in-control White.

The few cuts of White in the scene all emphasize his shift into darker behavior. The way the scene is set up, he is on the roof above Black; he literally stands at a higher level. He is either shown through the hole in the roof, where he appears smaller and above the entire situation, or he is shown in a close-up. When he is shown speaking, only parts of his body are in frame. When he strikes the match and again when he holds it up, his entire face is off-screen, and sometimes you can only see his smile and the burning match. Because his face isn't concretely linked with his actions and each cut of him is different, he seems disjointed and above the situation, almost in a god-like way. Up until then in the movie, White is shown in smooth cuts, so the fragmented view of him given here signals a change in his character; he's becoming less predictable and less stable.

Unlike the mixed framing, the angle White is shot at is consistent and always has him in power. He is either shown from below, through the broken roof of the building, or level with the camera. Even while he's talking and the framing changes, the angle remains the same. The angle links the dark side of White lighting the match and the light side of him smiling about his dream. He is also constantly shot from below, reinforcing his position above the other two in the scene. The animators easily could have shown him from above and given us a birds-eye view without any additional equipment, but they chose to keep him shown from below.

The other two are shown more dynamically, shot from both above and below and in wide shots as well as close-ups. At the beginning, when White first dumps gasoline on its head, the assassin is shown from above and looks quite normal sized. However,

generally, the assassin looks huge and scary, shot close-up and from below. Shots of the assassin alternate with shots of Black, bringing out the contrast in both their size and power. Next to Black, the assassin looks like a huge, immovable wall. Below White, the assassin looks like an average person. Because the film is animated, these size comparisons are even more exaggerated. If it were live action, the crew would have had to play with placing the actors differently in order to emphasize their gap in power. Because each frame is hand-drawn, the animators could really exaggerate the character proportions. The frequent angle changes and close-ups on them make Black and the assassin's actions seem more frantic and more dramatic, while White remains a separate steady force, calmly wreaking havoc from above.

When White is describing his dream, there are several sporadic cuts to different scenery that distance him from the immediate life-or-death situation. The cuts are quick, just long enough for the viewer to register a rising balloon or rocking boat, and none of them are explained or contextualized. These cuts follow shots of White, indicating that although he is dealing with the situation right in front of him, he is focusing on something bigger. Because this movie is animated and it all had to be created by hand, we know these cuts are important to the scene. Even if the background is flashed for a couple of seconds, it still has to be painted with the same amount of detail as one that is reused constantly.

Sporadic wide-shots of unrelated environment are rare in western media. Usually in western media there is just a single long pan at the beginning of a scene, but in Japanese media more time is devoted to shots of environment, as McCloud states (78). Although McCloud is talking about comics, the way films are paced and how the cuts are

made are very similar. This is especially true in animated films, and even more so for *Tekkon Kinkreet*, which is based on a comic. The separate scenery shots in the scene are spaced between still shots of White and followed by a heavy action cut of Black and the assassin. The chaos of the way the scene is cut distracts us from what is actually happening—it moves from the gasoline to a peaceful scene of the sky, from a lit match to the gentle rocking of boats. However, when the lit match actually reaches its target and the assassin bursts into flames, the rapid switching stops and the scene focuses on the burning. The audience, whose focus is initially all over the place, is suddenly drawn to the result of White's actions. The drastic change in pacing amplifies the change in White's behavior and emphasizes his tip into darkness.

The cut immediately before the assassin bursts into flames shows bright colored scenery that stands out from everything in dull Treasure Town. Instead of a wide shot, it is a close-up of flowers and there is no background in it. It builds up the contrast between White's usual innocent, vibrant behavior and his actions in this scene. The colors in it match the vivid colors of White's daydreaming sequences.

The cut with flowers is the most vibrant cut in the whole scene. The entire movie is a dull grey, even with so many colors in the city. Because Treasure Town is so old and has a very lived-in feel to it, even the bright reds and blues of the store signs are dulled down and greyer. The only vibrant scenes in the movie are White's daydreaming sequences, including the cut of the flowers in assassin fire clip. The rest of the scene has more brown tones, especially from the abandoned building they are fighting in. The bright pinks from the flowers draw attention to how different White's thoughts are from the reality he lives in. Coupled with the line "My dream," that cut really reinforces

White's abnormality and ability to be so pure as to dream of something so ideal in the bleak situation he is in. White manages to have both his dreams and the reality in front of him, and the fact that he can dream about blooming flowers in a grey town and set an assassin on fire at the same time is startling. Both these things lie dormant in him, and just because he has wild daydreams doesn't mean he is incapable of evil and violence.

White is also lit very differently from Black and the assassin. Because he is outside of the building, on top of the roof, he is lit evenly by the natural light. He is also surrounded by the blue sky, giving him a brighter backdrop and a sense of freedom. Black and the assassin are both essentially trapped in the building, though only slightly in shadow. The lack of dramatic lighting lets the viewer see the whole frame and get a feel for the entire space the action is occurring in. Even the characters in the scene are colored dull like the backgrounds, making the viewer more aware of the context in which they are acting, contrary to how characters in western films are usually lit (Dyer 86). Black is fighting for his life in a dim and dingy abandoned building while White looks down through a hole in the ceiling where the bright blue sky is shining through. In the end, although Black was the one struggling and fighting, White is the one who ended the conflict. White was in a separate space, merely an observer to the struggle, and he chose to intervene. All White needed to gain control of the situation was the small opening in the ceiling. It was just that opening that allowed him to tip into the darkness.

As I mentioned before, *Tekkon Kinkreet* is based on a comic of the same name². The comic is a great start for planning the storyboards and camera shots for the movie, and a lot of it can be translated directly over. The assassin fire scene in both comic and

² The English edition of the comic can be found in MIT's Hayden Library.

movie is very similar. The way the gasoline is shown first, the way White is shot from below, the frantic pacing of White lighting the match against Black and the assassin struggling, and the sudden change of pace once the assassin starts burning are all directly from the comic. Much of the scene was actually decided on before the moviemakers even got to it. However, the added color differences and the quick cuts to scenery wide-shots show that the movie director really wanted to highlight this change in White and take it even further than the comic did.

White, although the symbol of purity in the movie, the one who says “Be happy, be happy” while floating gently to the ground, is much more than just a naïve ten year old with a few screws missing. He is like every other human being, with both light and dark in him. Despite being the symbol of light in *Tekkon Kinkreet*, even he doesn’t fit neatly into the box of “pure good.” Humans, just like Treasure Town, just like White, just like Black, just like so many others in the movie, are constantly changing and will always betray the boxes they are forced into.

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