Akira Kurosawa's Heroes: Rebels, Saints and Killers on the Social Front Line

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Akira Kurosawa is Japan’s foremost filmmaker. With his kinetic mastery of the camera, his flawless, exact cutting, and his unpretentious predilection toward the rousing codes and devices of the West, it is only appropriate that Kurosawa, in winning first prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival for Rashomon, was first to the breach that the isolationist levee surrounding Japanese cinema and join the ranks of the world’s film artists. He is “one of the few artists to achieve international communication while at the same time remaining true to his own highly distinctive and insular national culture” (Mellen 42). Besides acting as the global cinematic ambassador for the Land of the Rising Sun, Kurosawa, in the twenty-eight films that constitute his career, has cultivated an impressive, unmistakable signature style that has consistently challenged and enhanced the established norms of his native cinema and society.

One of the most discernible recurring constituents of Kurosawa’s groundbreaking artistic legacy is his penchant for a certain type of protagonist—a development of and adherence to a specific mold of hero. Kurosawa often described himself as “the last of the samurai,” and he consistently informs and intensifies the central character, a brash, overly anxious martial arts student who is edified in a new fighting technique and through it matures into a noble, out-going human being. Kurosawa had chosen to “begin his career with a film about the young man and the new,” with the cultural changes represented by the conflicts between two diametrically opposed forms of martial arts (Desser 63). The revolutionary new technique, jūdō, is based upon defense, and contrasts drastically with the currently prevalent and more strategically offensive jūgen.

Immediately in the film, Kurosawa introduces his heroic convention of an individualist protagonist set in a time of transition. However, Kurosawa made Sanshiro Sugata under the auspices of the Japanese military government of that time, and was required to meet a certain propaganda requirement, which most likely deterred him from the unsettling social commentary that would characterize his later works (Desser 62). Politically and socially tinged narratives were not allowed due to the wartime environment of the film. Many of Kurosawa’s scripts had already been rejected for production, and he was only allowed to direct Sanshiro Sugata because of the safe period quality of the novel on which it was based (Richie 14). Alas, Sanshiro Sugata would have to serve less as a work of social critique and more as an introduction for Kurosawa’s exceptional new cinematic style. As a result, Sanshiro Sugata stands as the incipient Kurosawa hero, an embryo embodying many of the traits that would characterize semiotically. Sanshiro experiences a “moment of awakening,” which is essentially a “discovery of self” predicated upon attaining the devoutness and humility that are the truth of life (Prince 50). This moment of awareness sets the stage for the protagonist to move from the more passive role of a student to a more active one in the pursuit of enlightenment (Prince 45). Sanshiro finds himself doing so during a time of sweeping historical change and jarring social upheaval. The historical disharmony in the past and the present do not gently coalesce, and the period during the past as a model for the current state is certainly a competitive individual; he begins the film by declaring that he will not die to the right now! He immediately rises, throws open the sliding door of Yano’s home, and, in an impulsive, impudent display of rebellion, leaps into a pond below.

The following scene, set under the glimmering moonlight of a brisk evening, is key to the thematic development of the film. Sanjirō, Sanshiro’s brother, is given a pole to hold in the middle of the water, bears the perilous chill of the water in a fit of youthful stubbornness. During this time, his master ignores him, and the hero is challenged to maneuver through this rocky terrain without relinquishing the wholesome, decent ideals he knows to be right. Sanshiro defends his teacher’s lessons, and impudently replies, “I can face death! I am not afraid to die right now!” He immediately rises, throws open the sliding door of Yano’s home, and, in an impulsive, impudent display of rebellion, leaps into a pond below.

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the dynamism of his still unformed protagonist heroes. The remainder of the film chronicles Sanshiro’s rise to the status of juvenile champion. Ensuing matches demonstrate that he has learned to fight with the skill, restraint, and calmness “of one who has attained enlightenment” (Prince 45). These competitions also educate Sanshiro toward “the empty and illusory nature of glory” (Prince 50). In Sanshiro’s final bout, an informal challenge from a mysterious opponent named Higaki, Kurosawa introduces another stylistic feature that arises again in later films: the primary villain as a foil for the hero. Kurosawa establishes Higaki as Sanshiro’s double “through similar actions that he has each character repeat” (Prince 48). Higaki and other examples of the Kurosawa villain are not “villains” in the traditional sense; they are mirror images of the hero, similar yet reversed. Both the hero and the villain are equally steeped in the virtues and vices of life. The hero sees in the villain, “merely another man, and he feels compassion” (Richie 18). The opposition between the hero and the villain is a dialectical tool by which Kurosawa enhances the integrity of his protagonist. This theme will be discussed in a more specific, informative extent regarding Stray Dog.

Upon defeating Higaki, Sanshiro is depicted as leaving on a train in the company of a woman with whom he has fallen in love, his days of fighting in temporary reprieve. Back at Yano’s household, the master and his assistants poke jovial fun at Sanshiro’s newfound status. Thirty years have passed since these, barbed in communal happiness and friendship, are early exceptions to a rule that Kurosawa will later emphasize. The narrative events of Sanshiro Sugata, because they lack the incisive social catalysis of Kurosawa’s later films, are for the most part lacking in serious consequence. To quote author Stephen Prince, “Sanshiro Sugata lacks the socially critical dimension so important in the later films. Those heroes, too, learn discipline and dedication, but unlike them, Sanshiro does not place these values in the service of socially productive action” (53). Unlike future Kurosawa heroes, “Sanshiro is permitted to retain his intimate connections to traditional normative sources: teacher, family, religion” (Prince 52). Later Kurosawa protagonists take actions to their detriment.

Stray Dog is a true Kurosawa original, based on a novel he wrote but never published, about a harried police detective who loses his handgun to a pickpocket and vows to regain possession of it after the thief begins killing people (Richie 58). The director regards the film as one of his least favorite. He calls it, “too technical. All that technique and not one scene that the hero has any control over. That’s the limit of extroverted narrative, which is not exactly a fault for a film of its kind: the detective-chase-thriller genre. Authors Joseph Anderson and Richard Richie refer to the film as, “probably the best detective picture ever made in Japan” (186). Along these lines, Stray Dog is extremely notable, and important to the examination within this paper, for the way it sets the tone of bold and boldly purveying the character definition and narrative conventions that its stylistic predecessor, Sanshiro Sugata, either introduced and lightly asserted or was denied the chance to explore.

In Stray Dog, the historical flux and social reflexivity that Kurosawa kept minimal and suppressed in Sanshiro Sugata bursts forth with a vengeance; its presence is known from the get-go. Unlike the previous film, in Stray Dog “the social milieu is an active part of the film rather than just an exotic background” (Richie 59). The opening sequence dissolves over the lingering close-up of a sooted, panting dog, its tongue lapping restlessly. Already, the diegetic environment is established; it’s broiling hot. The time is the present, immediately following the war. It is in this context of which he pursues the case becomes an essential quality of the director’s heroes, ones who “are distinguished by their perseverance, by his re-fusal to be defeated” (Richie 18). To quote author and critic Donald Richie, “The Kurosawa hero is a man who continues in the very face of certain defeat” (61). This boundless tenacity is not only a Kurosawa hero, “refuses to give up even after everything he hears” (Prince 90). He has become one of the ‘transparent vagrants, the unidentified nameless strays that take sad comfort in the social, moral, and ethical void left by the war. It is at this point that Murakami begins to fully comprehend the situation of the man who stole his gun, and how little it differs from his own. Stray Dog furthers another convention established initially by Kurosawa in Sanshiro Sugata, the villain as double to the hero. Almost immediately in the film, the killer, later revealed to be named Yusa, takes on a psychological counterpart to Murakami: he is the generalized man, his counterpart, the director’s alter ego. Murakami’s excursion through the slums infuses him with sympathy for the utter depravity of Yusa’s situation, though this still does not entirely absolve him in Murakami’s mind. However, once Sato and Murakami begin questioning Yusa’s colleagues and family, the motivations behind the killer’s actions become clearer. Before long, “Murakami not only feels sorry for Yusa but accountable for him, just as he cannot escape a similar sense in connection with the sufferer of Yusa’s victims” (Prince 53). Murakami learns that, like himself, Yusa was a soldier in the war. Upon his return to Japan, all his possessions were stolen, dragging him into despair. Later, Yusa loses his rice ration card, and only then resorts to robbery and torture in order to return to him to the only routes that seem to him to be the only routes by which he can survive. Murakami feels, “a kinship to the criminal ... Similar past misfortune produces...
the bond Murakami feels with the thief" (Prince 93). Their immediate post-war situations were very akin. If Murakami had not been fortunate enough to have had his possessions stolen upon returning home, what might have happened to him? Would he have become a thief? Murakami suggests that he himself might have, and it was the possibility of this inclination that made him decide to become a cop (Prince 93). Murakami's experience with the war has taught him "about the power of circumstance to affect behavior," and Yusa becomes the misled Murakami who was not, but could have been (Prince 93). The similarity between the detective and the killer becomes more and more striking as the film progresses. Watanabe, facing the变态双胞胎he question whether what Yusa has done is truly wrong. The question lingers unanswered until the final chase sequence, when Murakami tackles the fleeing Yusa in a grimy marsh. The two struggle in the mud, which covers their features until they cannot be told apart. When Watanabe finally relents, the two fall to the ground together, "positioned similarly and framed symmetrically" by Kurosawa (Prince 94). At this point, Murakami reaffirms his moral standing; he retrieves his gun and apprehends Yusa. The question of how his choice opposes everything the office has primed itself to do. Watanabe's noble actions are deflected, defeated, and misconstrued by the people as his wake because his act of human determination posed a silent subversive threat to the concerns and auspices of the bureaucracy within which they work. Watanabe's defiance of the bureaucracy's ideals is indicative of the Kurosawa hero's obligation to "reject the established code of human relationships, especially to the extent that the imperative of sociability works to nullify the pursuit of individual goals" (Prince 111). Watanabe discovers this truth at an early montage sequence. Watanabe is the most dynamic of the Kurosawa heroes. His transformation in the film from an idle, paper-shuffling automaton to a resurrected human being capable of compassion and achievement is so strikingly documented that the audience does not doubt Watanabe's humanitarian intentions even when he is not alive for the last half of the movie. The hero's transformation is his complete embodiment of the "perseverance in duty of the hero." He must, "reject the normative codes offered by essential subversive threat to the concerns and auspices of the bureaucracy in order to live in a politically and socially just manner" (Prince 52). This is the incontestable duty of the hero.

Another component of Watanabe's iconic supremacy over the other heroes. Kurosawa protagonists is his complete embodiment of the "penetrating quality of the teeth of adversity" that "describes nearly every one of Kurosawa's main characters" (Burch 296). Watanabe's "masochistic perseverance in the fulfillment of complex social obligations" finds a startling fruition in Watanabe (Burch 296). There are many scenes in the final third of the movie when Watanabe, while working and picketing for the park, falls to the ground from exhaustion. It becomes clear that his campaign to build the playground is the only thing keeping him alive. In a scene late in the movie, Watanabe is shown walking through the construction site of the playground. He stumbles, and the women of the neighborhood help him to his feet and bring water. Kurosawa then cuts to a close-up of the hero's face. In the last seconds of this extraordinary scene, Watanabe, with his institutional framework and typical Japenese society, that is, the family and the company" (Prince 107). Watanabe discovers this truth at an upscale restaurant, where several young waitresses are preparing a birthday celebration. In an astute use of vertical montage, Kurosawa juxtaposes the crowd's singing of "Happy Birthday" with Watanabe's epiphany. It is his final rebirth. He becomes an entirely autonomous figure, a bastion of the individuality for which Kurosawa shows such a profound appreciation.
preciation. For, "in arguing for the autonomous self only concern is wreaking damage on the competing as positive value in postwar Japan, Kurosawa over-turns, and in a sense reverses, centuries of tradition and clan" (Prince 97). Watanabe is a pioneer, a moral in which an individual's range of choice was con-sidered traditions. An opening title informs the audi-ence of existing social relations as the economy shifted to reemphasizes the anachronistic quality of Sanjuro. change of commodities and the rationalizations of ridiculous little gun means the end of the warrior "Kurosawa discovers Japan through democratically available to all" (60). The samurai Yojimbo, frame, in an over-the-shoulder, telephoto close-up, does not occur to him, which distinguishes him from and each with their own respective gang of mur-derous thugs. For seemingly arbitrary reasons and min-ute financial gain, the cunning samurai hires him-self out to both gangs, playing both sides against the middle, until both families are entirely wiped out. The film is, irrefutably, a parable for the rise of organized crime, institutions fueled by the acquisi-tion of money and the elimination of rivals, as trivial, as ridiculous, and utterly negligible to society. They "must become a fantastical apparition; a soiled vagabond of our society past these defects, suffers in the process. He must be eliminated. Unfortunately, the Kurosawa rid-iculous, and utterly negligible to society. They must be eliminated. Unfortunately, the Kurosawa hero, the moral role model responsible for directing society past these defects, suffers in the process. He must become a fantastical apparition; a soiled vagabond who kills for sport and money, with no real code or humanistic ideal. The social atmosphere portrayed by Kurosawa "is so bleak and unapologetically corrupt that the hero cannot escape tarnishing and becomes transformed into a literal outcast, bearing the marks of his stigmata" (Prince 230). Indeed, the Kurosawa hero has come a long way. The individual heroic figure stands as one of the most successful and availing elements in the films of Akira Kurosawa. Like any fictional protagonists, they are the bridge between the creator and his audi-ence. However, this link is especially important to Kurosawa as an artist. Oftentimes he has expressed a serious distaste for the majority of his native country's cinematic offerings, primarily because "they don't care about anything people" (qtd. in Richie 242). Kurosawa does not exempt himself from this dedic-a- tion to the human lot, consistently utilising grab-bing and entertaining stories as foundations for in-sightful social commentaries. Kurosawa's works have celebrated and expanded the film medium's capabil-ity for expression. He raises probing, complicated questions and proposes possible solutions, all to the benefit and education of the audience. Because of this, Kurosawa is "perhaps the only Japanese director who can be called a creator in the pioneer sense of the word" (Anderson and Richie 376). Kurosawa, "biding his time, and standing alongside his heroes, looks out into the his-torical and social maelstrom and struggles forward, informed with "awareness of the fact that the world and the self do not, cannot, match," knowing that the only important thing, the only thing worth cul-tivating, is the self (Richie 243). His heroic figures are celebrations of the independent, corrigitte indi-vidual. Kurosawa is, in spirit, the ultimate auteur. 

Endnote

1 Kurosawa would do this again to similar effect in Record of a Living Being (1955).

Works Cited


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I AM WOMAN, HEAR ME GASP FOR AIR: AN ANALYSIS OF WENDY WASSERSTEIN'S ISN'T IT ROMANTIC.

BY HEATHER BAGGOTT '99

Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the bed, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question "Is this all?"

Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique

Over the past thirty years, feminism has become such an explosive word filled with different meanings and connotations that many scholars and laymen are afraid to casually apply it to their work and everyday life. The meaning of feminism has changed and been distorted to such an extreme extent that we are often confused as to what it actually means. This obscuring of definition has given rise to questions which the modern, enlightened, and conscientious person is forced to ask of himself or herself. Can a man be a feminist? If I do not believe in glass ceilings and gender discrimination in the military am I a feminist? Am I a feminist if I believe that women have reproductive control over their body and it is their right to an abortion? Can you still be a feminist if you choose to have a husband and children over a career?

Such questions haunt the modern reflective psyche as it commonplace to open the latest book about the feminist movement and perplexingly discover that there is not just one variation on the theme, but indeed several. Today, it seems out of fashion to casually apply it to their work and everyday life. The meaning of feminism has changed and been distorted to such an extreme extent that we are often confused as to what it actually means. This obscuring of definition has given rise to questions which the modern, enlightened, and conscientious person is forced to ask of himself or herself. Can a man be a feminist? If I do not believe in glass ceilings and gender discrimination in the military am I a feminist? Am I a feminist if I believe that women have reproductive control over their body and it is their right to an abortion? Can you still be a feminist if you choose to have a husband and children over a career?

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