

Two Paths after Defeat: Postwar Mentality and Morality in *Stray Dog*

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This essay explores Akira Kurosawa's treatment of postwar morality and social attitudes about economic class in the 1949 film *Stray Dog*. The film is a simple detective film on one level, but the subtext in the film suggests criticism with the economic divisions within society that force some individuals to turn to crime in order to survive or from sheer desperation. He presents this dilemma by showing contrasting the fate of two former soldiers, one who is the detective chasing the criminal who has gained possession of his gun and uses it to commit crimes. The men resemble each other and represent two distinct choices that many individuals faced in the desperate times following defeat in WWII, where Japan is in the process of rebuilding itself. It is clear by Kurosawa's film that he believes that, while it is ultimately up to individuals to act accordingly, the context from which this should take place is in the interconnectivity of society in general.

Key words : Kurosawa, film, *Stray Dog*, Japanese postwar morality

Introduction

Stray Dog (*Nora Inu*, 1949), Akira Kurosawa's tenth film, can be seen as several films in one. It can be viewed on several different levels; as a detective "film noir", as a doppelganger story of the protagonist in a race against time to stop the antagonist double from killing again, a protégé/mentor story between the seasoned veteran and rookie cop, or as a realistic social commentary on the postwar Japan. Apparently Kurosawa saw this film largely as a failure, since he set out to make a George Simeon (a French detective novelist Kurosawa admired) mystery story. The result may be a failure when evaluated as a genre piece, however it is a success in

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other aspects. This is a more complex and nuanced story that rises above the limitations of a mere detective mystery story:

Kurosawa was right, in a way, about his failure to imitate Simenon. *Stray Dog* isn't as tidy or compact as a Maigret novel, but for the best possible reason: it's the work of a more generous and more complex artist. Kurosawa's film has a richness-an abundant and almost unruly curiosity about the extremes of human behavior-that the French writer's slender, shapely books never demonstrated. It's obvious in the movie that at this point in Kurosawa's career (just a year before his international breakthrough, *Rashomon*) he was outgrowing his influences, and that, whether he knew it or not, he was destined to become more than a reliable genre craftsman, a *petite maitre* like Simenon. *Stray Dog* isn't an ideally efficient detective thriller; the excitement it provides is deeper and more satisfying than simple suspense. (Rafferty 4)

The story becomes the vehicle that Kurosawa uses to develop other complex issues and themes.

The plot of the story is fairly simple, but is rendered complex by Kurosawa's cinematic exposition of the story and nuances. Murakami, a young detective played by the legendary Toshiro Mifune, has his pistol pick pocketed on a crowded bus on one of the hottest days of the year. Murakami feels obligated to overcome his carelessness by recovering it. Later, it turns out that the gun has been borrowed by a desperate army vet, named Yusa, who goes on a crime spree in which he robs, injures, and murders. Murakami is assisted by the wily veteran detective Sato, played by Kurosawa regular Takashi Shimura. It is a combination that will be copied in scores of movies that follow, becoming a crime story archetype of the cop movie with the brash rookie being teamed with the experienced older cop. In the end they get their man while making social commentary on postwar Japan and the postwar mentality and morality of the people who survived it. Murakami (a collective preparation and hope for a better future) and Yusa (the individual need for a better life in the here and now at any cost) represent the two divergent paths available to the postwar defeated Japanese. Furthermore, Kurosawa is also making a critique of capitalism and underscoring the lack of interconnectedness among the classes following WWII.

The Black Market And Survival Through Crime

Michael Grost suggests that the film was inspired by the American film *The Naked City* (1948). In this police drama the director, Jules Dassin, used hidden cameras to capture footage of real life crowd images. Like, *Stray Dog*, it was based on a true story. The live footage in *Stray Dog* was shot on location in Ueno and Asakusa. Kurosawa has done a remarkable job reproducing the post war black markets by using actual footage

of daily life in Tokyo during the period of filming:

I had Ishiro Honda do mainly second-unit shooting. Everyday I told him what I wanted and would go out into the ruins of postwar Tokyo to film. There are few men as honest and reliable as Honda. He faithfully brought back exactly the footage I requested, so almost everything he shot was used in the film. I'm often told that I captured the atmosphere of postwar Japan very well in *Stray Dog*, and, if so, I owe a great deal of that success to Honda. (Kurosawa p.175-176)

Kurosawa gives us a sense of time and place by showing the everyday suffering people continue to deal with even though the war has ended.

After the war, Japan was reeling from the lean war years in which the country had sacrificed for the war effort and the struggle to rebuild decimated cities. As a result, a surprising number of people were forced to turn to crime for survival. For some, it was through participation in the black market to obtain food and other essential items that were lacking in postwar Japan. For others it resulted in theft, organized crime, or prostitution. As a result a number of women were driven to crime to survive. This is reflected in the film. When Murakami gets his pistol pick pocketed, it is by a team, one of which is the light-fingered lady, Ogin, a well-known pickpocket. After Murakami obtains information that the pistol has been fenced to a black market dealer, he haunts the back streets of Tokyo looking for an introduction to such a dealer. Along the way he encounters several prostitutes and when he finally gets the introduction to the gun dealer, the contact is a woman. It is this desperate struggle for survival that has forced so many people to engage in illegal activities, especially those who traditionally had been absent from such activities.

Yusa-Murakami's Doppelgänger

After arresting the fence, Murakami and Sato are able to identify the stray dog (Yusa), which has become rabid. Yusa, like Murakami, is a war veteran who had his backpack with all of his worldly possessions stolen from him on the train ride back home. Furthermore, he hasn't been able to get meaningful employment and has become increasingly desperate. It is suggested that he may have borrowed the gun on credit in order to commit suicide, but has a change of heart and decides to turn to crime instead.

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (2002) points out the significance of Yusa's unusual name:

His full name is Yusa Shinjiro. "Shinjiro literally means a "new, second son" or "new, second man." Yusa's first name, therefore resonates with the film's important motifs: the first character draws our attention to the newness of postwar Japan and, by implication, to the question of historical continuity

and discontinuity; the last two characters belong to a chain of signifiers that posit a relationship of double between two male characters, Yusa and Murakami. If we focus on the pronunciation, “Shinjiro” can also mean “believe,” so the first name becomes part of another important narrative motif, the question of ethical standards and individual choice. The first character means to “play,” “to wander,” or “to float around,” and the second signifies “to help.” Thus the name “Yusa” suggests two opposite possibilities of action: to float around without committing oneself any constructive purpose (Yusa), or to help others realize a better future (Murakami)...

Murakami identifies with Yusa and feels sorry for him. Sato points out that people aren't bad, but rather it is the circumstances that force people to act badly and war is one of those circumstances in which good men often go bad. Sato, who didn't experience the war first hand and represents the old guard, feels no empathy or kinship with the likes of Yusa. For him Yusa is an evil man who must be stopped-he has no sympathy for him. In a sense Kurosawa is showing that postwar citizens, and Japan in general, have two paths available. Murakami's path involves a conscious moral choice to do something constructive and fight the cause of his misfortune, while Yusa has chosen to give up and join in the destructive, immoral behavior that has caused his misfortune.

Yusa, on a larger scale, represents a threat to the future. He is at once a reflection of a postwar breakdown of morals. On the *Stray Dog* commentary, Stephen Price catalogues a number of sensational crimes that received a lot of press after the war. But there are clues in the crimes committed by Yusa as well. The first robbery resulted in the theft of a woman's dowry, which prevents her from marrying and starting a new life. The second robbery, which results in murder, takes place amid children's toys. Furthermore, the husband tears up the tomato plants that his wife has planted suggesting the waste of a harvest, which reflects how he has been robbed of his future with his wife for a mere 40,000 yen. Despite this, Kurosawa suggests that Yusa is everyman, when Murakami tracks him down at the train station, he doesn't know what he looks like and there are several men dressed similarly-it could be anyone. Moreover, at the end of the film when Murakami captures Yusa the two men are struggling in a field of flowers trying to kill one another. At the end you cannot differentiate between them-they are both dirty, exhausted and in white suits-man is hero and villain. Yusa needs to be exercised for the future. This can be seen in the contrast of Yusa's capture and the singing of the children, who represent the future, in the background at the end of the film.

Kurosawa's Critique of Capitalism

Yusa is driven by a lust for more in life, which consumer culture expresses in goods and services. It is this idea that bonds the chorus girl, Harumi, to Yusa. They have survived the austere living that took place during the war, only to be defeated and instilled with a sense of helplessness. Harumi sees the unfair display of wealth

as crime, she dreams of a beautiful dress that she sees in a shop window but could never possibly own. After one of Yusa's robberies, he buys it for her. She confesses as much to Murakami and then puts it on and dances into a frenzy and breaks down crying, suggesting that it doesn't really make her happy. Yusa doesn't get satisfaction from the fruits of his crimes either. It is unsustainable; he quickly spends the money and feels the need for more. A hotel clerk remembers his unhappiness saying no one came to visit him and he seemed like a miserable drunk.

It is interesting to note that class separates the victims of Yusa's crimes from him. He robs from the middle class folks, people who have money to invest in their futures. These people, from Yusa's point of view, extol a resentment of the underclass through their conspicuous consumer behavior. They are bad people who are in control of goods and food, and express this disparity between the "haves" and "the have nots" in their eating habits and dress. For Yusa, there is little hope for the future. Yusa feels depression, lassitude, and his experiences of war are that of defeat. This leads to a crippling exhaustion and despair; essentially he is a nihilist due to his reactions to hardship and defeat. As a result, he is driven to create a future in the present. He cannot conceive of working, saving, and scrimping to prepare for a better future. For him, there is no future. He is driven toward conspicuous consumption in the present. He wants materialistic goods now to ease his pain and suffering.

At the end of the film as Murakami closes in on Yusa at the train station, a chase ensues. During the apex of the chase, a bourgeois woman leisurely playing piano briefly stops stifles a yawn at the window and returns to her piano. These actions represent the upper class indifference to the struggle of those less well off. It calls to mind the opening sequence of Kurosawa's version of the Maxim Gorky play *The Lower Depths*, where monks at the temple on the hill dump leaves on the lower class tenement below as a physical manifestation of society's disregard of the lower classes. This is a theme he returns to in *High and Low*, where a wealthy industrialist who lives high above the struggling underclass in the valley below in an imposing mansion. This constant reminder of class difference inspires a struggling medical intern to ruin the industrialist's life through kidnapping and extorting a ransom for a child. So in all three cases Kurosawa is showing how a sense of separation between the classes can lead to a feeling of disaffection among those who struggle to get by.

Conclusion

In the films of Kurosawa, his heroes must accept their responsibility to society, which often means making a connection between the individual and society in general. In the beginning of the film Murakami makes a bust at a cafe where guns are being sold in order to get his own gun back-which he succeeds in doing. But Sato chastises him. Because he could have gotten a whole cache of guns if he hadn't acted so rashly and selfishly. Again, later in the film Sato reminds Murakami that his actions affect others, thus they must be careful when trying to

capture Honda, the gun black marketer, at the baseball game. They lure him out of the crowd to confront him so that if there is an outbreak of violence no innocent bystanders will be injured. Murakami's morality should be defined by how his actions affect the people around him.

Kurosawa's critique of capitalism reflects this idea of interconnectivity. Capitalism rewards individuals rather than societies. So while some people live comfortably and others suffer in poverty. The effects of this can lead to social disorder through resentment and alienation that leads to crime. Kurosawa offers no solutions, but rather shows how resentment and alienation can turn men and women desperate and forced them down a road of crime amorality if they can see no future for betterment. Murakami and Yusa represent the two paths available to postwar Japan and history has shown that Japan as a society has chosen the moral path of faith in a prosperous future, rather than reverting to a violent past.

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敗戦後の二つの道 『野良犬』における戦後の精神と道徳

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本論文は、黒澤明監督の1949年の作品『野良犬』に描かれている経済的階級差に関する戦後の道徳観や社会的態度について探求したものである。この映画は刑事物であるが、その背後には、生き残るため、あるいは自暴自棄から人々を犯罪に走らせてしまう経済的に分離された社会に対する批判がある。黒澤は、銃を盗んで犯罪を犯した男とその犯人を追う刑事という2人の復員兵の運命を対比させることで、このディレンマを描いている。2人の男は互いに似ており、敗戦後の絶望の時代に多くの人々が直面した2つの選択を描写している。黒澤の映画から明らかに見て取れるのは、どう生きていくのかは全く個人次第ではあっても、それはまた社会の環境と大きく関わっているということである。

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