

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Idiot 1951

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Auteur Kurosawa was intimately wrapped up in the story that underlay Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Idiot* (1869), which concerned a man who was victim of epilepsy and of anxiety, the latter bred by a traumatic memory of nearly being executed by a firing squad, one of Dostoyevsky's own most tragic memories. At the same time Kurosawa treasured the image of the soul of this man, 'a positive good and beautiful person,' whom Dostoyevsky called Prince Myshkin, the chief character. In his own film script Kurosawa 'experiments' by placing Myshkin in the center of the worldly uglinesses--'greed, jealousy, hatred'-- to see how he handles himself. As it is he handles himself well, until, in the end, he self-destructs.

Film *The Idiot* (1869) was the twelfth film directed by Kurosawa, and the film with the most complex film history. *The Idiot* was based on a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and we should by reason expect it to be regularly interpretable, as were Kurosawa's versions of the Shakespeare plays, *Hamlet* and *Lear*, or the *Lower Depths* of Gorky--all of them films based on great borrowed texts. Kurosawa had taken with perfect ease to the reshaping of those masterpieces he loved. He was also a great friend of the mind of Dostoyevsky, and was eager to share his understanding of it. At first, though, we may be puzzled by Kurosawa's intentions.

The problem with Kurosawa's Dostoyevsky script. resulted from a short relationship with his, Kurosawa's, publisher, to whom Kurosawa presented a script for a four and a half hour, 265 minute film, a monstrosity the public would never have patronized. (As it was the finally released Kurosawa film, carved down to three hours by the studio, was not a hit; and as far as the original was involved, it seems to have disappeared in all the brouhaha about cutting. On a return trip years later, to the studio with which Kurosawa had drawn up the original contract for *The Idiot*, the director searched in vain for the original narrative in the film company's archives, but could find no script of the original version of the film.

Historical background Kurosawa permitted his characters to take their own heads, and to develop along narrative paths that were unique and personal to them. As a consequence of this laissez faire attitude, toward the structure of his work, a very involved, casual, often over complex narrative emerges. The unusual experimental mode of this narrative was accentuated by the chaotic conditions under which Dostoyevsky--who set out the original narrative plan-- was living when he conceived this novel. He was living in Switzerland with his new wife, and, in self-imposed exile from Russia. He was in bad financial condition, fleeing debtors, presiding over his wife's danger fraught child birth. Kurosawa inherited the fruits of this disturbed authorial condition.

SYNOPSIS

We are in black and white and sepia, now, and the film smells of the history of film, cranked up reels in the old movie houses of our youths. We are on a ship heading north to Hokkaido from Okinawa--while diverging abundantly from the Dostoyevsky landscape Kurosawa is eager to maintain the northern quality of the present film--and wintry Hokkaido suited his purposes. (Later in his life he will take a dream fulfilling journey to the Soviet Union, and remain there several years,) The main character, Kameda, immediately comes to the fore. Kameda--parallel to Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's novel-- enters the film in the aftermath of a great trauma. He is suffering from what he calls 'epileptic dementia.' Prior to this trip he has been confined to a mental institution. Mistaken for a war criminal, after WW II, Kameda has nearly been executed by a firing squad, and saved only by a last minute reprieve, which left him in that state of 'idiocy'

highlighted by the film. We are in time to realize how multi significant is this word 'idiocy.' for indeed something like 'sanctity' would be closer to the point.

On the trip to Hokkaido Kameda makes friends with a dour gent, Akama, who is the scion of an old Sapporo family. Akama speaks to Kameda of a beautiful girl, Taeko, with whom he is in love. (She has been the mistress of a wealthy man, Tohata, since she was a child. Akama has stolen money from his father, to buy a ring which he is taking to give the lady.) Akama's father has died. And Akama himself is going home to collect his inheritance. The men converse about these life derails. The train chugs along. Carrying the two men to Sapporo. Kameda is on his way to visit Mr. Ono, 'his only relative in the world.' By the end of Part One of the film, we are aware that Taeko, the beautiful but long abused mistress of Tohata, has fallen in love with Kameda.

We have at this point the raw material for a plot which reminds us of Dostoyevsky, two men drifting into travel friendship with one another, both open to change and romance. We learn that Kameda has in return fallen in love with the beautiful but abused Taeko and that Akama, for some time lover of Taeko, has decided to give the lady to Kameda. The story seems to be looking for a resting point, but no so truly simple resolution is at hand. Taeko, though loving Kameda, thinks it would not be right for him to marry someone of her poor reputation, so she considers marrying Akama. Kameda proposes to Ayako, who vacillates between feelings of love and hate for Kameda.

The tale is on its way to a violent conclusion. Taeko is realizing that she has been unnecessarily deferential to Ayako; she is in fact as worthy as anyone of Kameda's love. When Kameda returns to Taeko's house, he realizes that his friend Akama is desperately jealous of him because of the love Taeko feels for him, and yet he cannot cancel his friendship for Akama. In the end Akama kills Taeko, and in the end the two men light a candle over Taeko's body and sit vigil during the night. In the morning both men are dead.

CHARACTERS

Kinji Kameda. The 'idiot.'
Denkichi Akama. Best friend of 'the idiot.'
Taeko Nasu. The beautiful mistress of Tohata
Ayako. Rival with Taeko for the love of Kameda. Daughter of Mr Ono.
Ono. Ayako's father.
Sotoko. Aysko's mother
Tohata. The rich sugar daddy of Taeko.
Mutsuo Kayama. The secretary
Takako

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kameda The 'idiot,' a psychologically fragile war veteran who had been mistaken for a war criminal after World War II, and who, upon arriving in Sapporo, ultimately finds himself caught up in a fatal love conflict. Vulnerable and sensitive.

Akama. Travels with Kameda to Hokkaido. Known as dour and northern, but learns to laugh, in the company of Kameda. In Hokkaido he and Kameda get involved in a nexus of love affairs which center on their mutual and ultimately fatal love for Taeko.

Taeko. Has been the 'captured mistress' of Tohata since she was a teen ager. Six months earlier she has run away from Tohata. She is a weakened character after her years in bondage, but her beauty attracts. Ultimately she dies at the hands of the jealous Akama.

Ayako. Fascinating beloved of several suitors, noteworthy for her inability to commit herself. Condemns herself, at the end, as the true 'idiot' of the tale.

Ono, the one true relative of Kameda, looks after him after he arrives in Hokkaido.

Tohata The sugar daddy of Taeko, regrets his many tears of abusing her as his mistress. Gladly looks for the opportunity to see her marry someone else.

Kayama, loves Ono's daughter, Ayako. Offered large sum to abandon his marital intentions.

THEMES

Friendship The initial trip to Hokkaido is full of the romanticism of the north, as well as of an impending feeling of doom. The 'idiot' himself is just on the recovery side of serious traumas, and his new friend, Akama, is returning in a haze of love dreams, the outcome of which is a source of great anxiety. This general mood brings the two travelers together.

Bondage. Taeko has been the mistress of Tohata for many years, and has only recently run away from him. He, for his part, is trying to marry her off, to reduce the stain on himself, for having held her in bondage.

Fear. Both the idiot and his traveling companion, on the trip to Hokkaido, are acutely anxious, the former from his recent traumas, the latter out of deep concern about his romantic relation with Taeko, and the uncertainty of his inheritance.

Jealousy. After realizing that his new friend, the idiot, has rapidly won the heart of Taeko, and has bested him in that contest, Akama grows wildly jealous of the idiot, his new friend. It is a tribute to the idiot, that he can retain his intimate bond with Kayama even after the latter has murdered Taeko.

Humility. It seems that Kurosawa drew heavily on Dostoyevsky's vision, expressed in his own 1869 novel, *The Idiot*, of a truly good man living in the crass welter of the fallen world. The idiot of the present film is an approximation of the Dostoyevskyan figure; modest, capable of great friendship, and able to look far beyond his own interests.

SCENES

1 On shipboard, heading to Hokkaido, Kameda makes the acquaintance of Akama, who is returning to see his beloved Taeko. He has a precious diamond ring which he is eager to give her.

2 We come quickly to realize what an uneasy background Kameda has had; taken as a war criminal after the Japanese defeat, and nearly handed over to the firing squad, before a last minute reprieve. He is anxiety ridden.

3. Kameda and Akama form a close relationship, which assuages the nervous temperaments each of them is carrying into the return to Hokkaido.

4. Back in Sapporo. Both individuals make their ways to their connections: Mr. Ono for Kameda, Akama to the presence of Taeko. With expensive diamond he hopes to woo her conclusively.

5 Ono's daughter, Ayako, knows of the large inheritance awaiting Kameda--and about which he is up to now ignorant. The intricate interpersonal relations among the converging characters heat up.

6 Tohata, eager to get out from under the onus, of having abused Taeko since her adolescence, offers a dowry to Kayama, if he will marry Taeko. However having disfigured the self-confidence of Taeko, he can no longer count on her complicity.

7 Kameda gets to know Taeko, and is attracted to her. (As is Akama, whose friendly collision with Kameda is going to provide the fatal finale of the tale). The gentle nature of his insecurity--because the Kameda is beginning to manifest itself, his loveable 'idiot' character.

8 Taeko wants to marry Kameda, but is held back by her insecurity. Tohata's abuse of this mistress has disqualified her for normal social sexual relations. A point is about to come when Taeko will realize her inadequacy, and see Ayako as simply one more person, rather than as a threat.

9 Realizing her own genuine beauty, Taeko decides that it is proper that she should marry Kameda, and stop yielding to Ayako. At this point we are close to the end of the drama. We are about to see the tragic implications of Taeko's new self-awareness.

10. Huge jealousy erupts between Kameda and Akama, the latter having grown hopelessly jealous as he sees Taeko falling for Kameda, whose gentleness she greatly appreciates. Nothing surprising here, as we become aware of the persuasive power of the 'idiot.' What surprises us is that, even after Akama has murdered Taeko in a jealous rage, the two men are able to pass the night cordially, in vigil over Taeko's corpse, then themselves to pass away into the other kingdom.