

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Quiet Duel (1949)

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

The present film, like *Drunken Angel* (1948) the year before, shines its spotlight on the cultural role of the medical doctor. We are in a just post war atmosphere of gurneys, white medical gowns, scalpels and forceps; for the American viewer it is the atmosphere of the television show *Mash* (1972-83) which for so many of us at home perfectly encapsulated the mood of the Korean war. The doctor sits at the perfect point of observation for the atrocities of the war as well as for varying modes of cynicism and dark humor which tend to define the atmospheres of war. He—for these wartime docs are always guys—is likely to buy into a slightly tired cynicism, but at the same time to know how to enter the heroic. It is at this unlikely point, where cynicism and heroism meet, that we find Dr Fujisaki, the 'hero' in the present film.

*Auteur* Kurosawa self-portrays, typically, with only limited authorial bravado. He typically lies low inside his characters and allows the story to 'tell itself.' In the present instance, Dr. Fujisaki is a moral man who has simply been caught up in the trammels of war, has—as an army medic—contracted syphilis from exposure to the blood of one of his patients. An idealist, he is profoundly aware of the shameful implications of syphilis, and of its life changing implications for its victims. Without directly adopting the burden he imputes to the idealistic doctor, Kurosawa makes it evident that he can understand, in the doctor's situation, the whole breadth of the human condition. In *Drunken Angels* he lets the doctor speak for him as in the end a lively and even romantic spirit who has reached a point on the far side of heavy darkness. Like Camus, in the *Plague*, Kurosawa turns to the figure of the doctor as a potentially humane figure in the midst of conflict and chaos. We might at the same time recall the figure of Redbeard (1965) a doctor figure from earlier centuries who blends compassion, respect and discipline to cure seemingly intractable cases. (The period of the film, *Redbeard*, is early nineteenth century; while the spirit of curing, in the present film, reaches far back into the rituals of mediaeval Japan.)

*Film* For his ability to grasp the Zeitgeist, Kurosawa seems uniquely gifted. Take the operating room theater in which from the beginning of the film we find our attention centered. All is in motion, as nurses and medics interact in what seems an unceasing circulation of the appropriate tools and gestures. Viewed solely as pictorial material one marvels at the adeptness with which the director navigates across jawlines, leg crossings and angles of posture to establish a reigning geography of intentnesses—stress here, pure color there, a cloudburst there after the dynamic fashion of Kurosawa's own painting. One lives into the vigorous establishment of a new set of existential conditions. It becomes germane to discuss Kurosawa's film work in terms of the aesthetic drive most congenial to Kurosawa in his own work, circling regularly around the issue, as it does, of existential analysis. The Zeitgeist, on which Kurosawa is so adept at putting his camera finger, is the whole setting of being-here at a time toward which Kurosawa's inventive techniques so artfully direct us.

*Historical background* The accident of self-infection, which infects and then goes on to plague the post war life of Dr. Fujisaki, is taken here as a gateway accident, triggering a sequence of existential awarenesses. Because the doctor finds himself tainted, in all innocence, he only gradually comes to realize the situation that has become his. (He might, in that sense, be compared to Oedipus in Sophocles' tragedy. He is the last one to know that he himself is the source of the plague which is destroying his city. He believes himself innocent. The more vociferously he asserts that innocence the more deeply he embodies himself in his guilt. It is this kind of self-discovery that interpreters have turned to in considering *Oedipus the King* an existential drama, and Kurosawa an existential cinematographer. Trapped ultimately by the revelations of his surrounding players, he prepares himself for the

transcendence Sophocles built into the last play of this trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus*). Kurosawa proves himself, in this brief movie, capable of placing himself inside Sophocles' daring.

## PLOT

During the World War an idealistic young army doctor contracts syphilis from cutting himself near blood from a syphilitic patient. Infected with the then often fatal infectious disease, the doctor returns from war to the obstetrical clinic run by his doctor father.

There he comes onto the patient who contaminated him, and in the process learns how dangerous it can be not to take syphilis seriously. (Taking it seriously, at the time, meant treating it with newly discovered *salvarsan*, an arsenic based cure just entering the market.) While he himself takes *salvarsan* secretly from the small supply at his father's clinic, he observes that the veteran who gave him the disease, and for whom there is no salvarsan to spare, is declining in health; Dr. Fujisaki, an Idealist anyway, is deeply pained by the discrepancy between his fate, with the salvarsan, and that of the original Infector.

At the same time the young doctor finds himself in a dreadful dilemma with his own fiancée. He can for one thing not reveal to her the shameful secret of his syphilis—'shameful' as the world would interpret it--nor can he expect her to wait for the several additional years before his syphilis is cured. The girl cannot, in the nature of the situation, be brought to understand the nature of the situation. The doctor can not, finally, explain his secret complexity, and in the end he asks his heartbroken fiancée to leave him and to find someone else. He himself, by a twist which injects fresh human complexity into the film, starts to fall for the sympathetic nurse working in his father's clinic.

## CHARACTERS

*Toeshiro Mifune*, Kurosawa's classic standby, plays Dr. Kyoji Fujisaki.

*Misao*, the fiancée of Dr Fujisaki.

*Doctor Konosuke Fujisaki*, clinic director, father of Dr. Kyoji Fujisaki.

*The nurse* in Director Fugisaki's clinic.

*Patrolman, old soldier, policeman, officer, boy* with appendicitis.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Dr, Kyogi Fujisaki**

The central figure, in whom the central drama of syphilis and loss plays out, is an idealistic Army medic. Having contracted syphilis, while performing an operation, he slowly grows aware of the social implications of his situation. The disease is both shameful and difficult to cure. (The first practicable medicine for syphilis, *salvarsan*, had just been made available, but was difficult to acquire, and the doctor was only able to get enough for himself.) Upon return to his father's clinic, after the war, he comes into contact with the veteran from whom he first contracted the disease, and is terribly remorseful that he cannot help the man. Then he realizes that he cannot any longer commit himself to his fiancée, and must break off that relationship, for it may take up to six years for the syphilis to disappear. He can neither help the soldier from whom he got the ailment, nor keep his fiancée, who is heartbroken, and to whom he cannot explain the details of the situation. With courage and discipline he keeps his secret and accepts his isolation. It is the needed touch of his humanity, that in the end of the film he falls for the nurse in his father's clinic.

## THEMES

**Venereal disease** was long most seriously dreaded, both because of its inherent dangers—on occasion death—and because the common interpretation of the disease was that it had to have come from a toxic intercourse event. It lurks-- for the threat is now greatly reduced—in our culture as a reminder of back alleys and whorehouse marriages gone down the drain. A primal stain attaches to the reference to this disease.

**Chance** The chance of infection, like the chance of any medical mishap, is just, chance, the random striking. If the infectious blow lands because you were careless the blow is no less for being solicited by the victim. Chance is luck, and can of course be good or bad, but because it is chance you can blame nothing for it, except the human condition.

**Shame** Shame hangs over the backdrop of this film. While the shamefulness of syphilis, which disfigures the life of Dr. Kyogi Fugisaki, is the product of an accident, the view of society, toward the infecting disease, makes no distinction with regard to the manner of infection.

**Honor** Honor is the noble recourse of the Doctor once he has been nailed by destiny. He can do nothing effective to help the original infector, except to mourn his inability to help. Dr. Fugisaki cannot so easily meet the demands of honor, when it comes to his fiancée. In this case the path of honor, as the doctor sees it, is to break with his fiancée, leaving her free to find someone else. (He realizes it will take six years for the salvarsan to disperse the last traces of the syphilis.) He steadfastly refuses to let the girl involve herself in such a bitter future.

**Steadfastness** The doctor is nothing if not steadfast. From the outset of his discovery that he is infected, he thinks of others. To the end he strives to create the best possible outcome for his fiancée, eager not to draw her in to his now compromised life, or allow her to stick with him for an indefinite time, at her own expense.