

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Stray Dog (1949) Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Stray Dog is a just post war noir\ crime thriller, and a detective thriller as well, both of these genres having found their way into popularity on the postwar international screen. We have watched Kurosawa's exploration of Tokyo underlife in *Drunken Angel* (1948), in which he looks at the broken postwar city's ragged edges, poverty and crime intertwined. By the time of *High and Low* (1963) we have worked through the intricacies of police procedure and protocol, as it bears on a case of kidnapping. (We have in fact gone, with Kurosawa, into the very heart of Tokyo's criminal justice world, as we will in the present film.) In *Dodeskaden* (1970), while skirting the issue of crime, Kurosawa will take us into intimate life in the shantytown underbelly of Tokyo.

Auteur As Kurosawa observes, in his autobiography (*Something like an Autobiography, 1983*), he and his co-writer of the script of this film, were closely attuned to such films as Jules Dassin's crime thriller *The Naked City* (1948) or to the tough guy urban fictions of George Simenon. (Post war realities, too familiar in both Japan and the United States at that time. had prepared audiences for sociological hardball, when it came to characterizing the life of a society). Kurosawa himself fluctuated sharply, when it came to the larger issue, *to what genus of film, in general, was he to commit himself?* From epics like *Seven Samurai, Throne of Blood or Rashomon* through detective thrillers like *High and Low* or *Stray Dog* to psychological-existential studies, like *Red Beard* or *Ikiru*, Kurosawa shows a startling versatility, which it is tempting to ascribe to a widely distributive aesthetic stance. Two of Kurosawa's rapt cinematic concerns come into play here--his preoccupation with camera shoots themselves, and his obsession with excellent script editing. These two preoccupations suffice to grind a rare consistency into all of Kurosawa's work, of whatever genre.

Film You feel like writing, about the way a Kurosawa film begins, that you didn't know what hit you. A few seconds before, you've been in the mesmer zone watching the bold slashes of *kanji* stud the screen, reminders enough that you are not in downtown Manhattan. Segue briskly, after the cast of characters, into the midst of a crowded bus in a crowded Tokyo trolley. A rookie detective--you only know this later--is jostling his way out the trolley door when he realizes that the revolver in his pocket has been snatched out; the segue is instantaneous; immediately spotting the thief running top speed along some dusty trolley tracks the rookie falls exhaustedly behind, as the thief ducks off into a side lane from which he disappears, farther in the distance now and in a moment out of sight. This lightning fast opening of the film is what gives the watcher the sense of not knowing what has hit him.

Historical Background Kurosawa's sense for the post war atmosphere of Tokyo serves him well in the present film, as it had, say, in *Drunken Angel*, where the chaos of the hard hit but frenziedly active center of Tokyo becomes a major actor. Kurasawa makes every effort to impose this turbulence on the viewer. The director and his camera crews go where they must--dangerous back alleys, baseball diamonds, procedure rooms in the Central Tokyo Police Station.noon rush hour trolleys, to capture what to them reads as deeply now. Kurosawa collaborated in this film with Ryuzo Kikoshima, a street savvy observer who offers us masterful segments throughout the film--in particular the ten minute long sequence in which the pistol-less rookie cop, Murakami, wanders the back alleys of Tokyo, looking for any trace of his lost weapon.

SYNOPSIS

The film opens on slashing heat, a midsummer heat wave that has convulsed Tokyo, sending kids and dogs pell nell into the streets for water. Just the time for a rookie detective, Murakami, to find himself

pickpocketed, as he struggles off the noonday trolley, surrounded by crowds. And to discover that it is his personally coded pistol that has been snatched from his back pocket. His most prized weapon is in the hands of the guy he sees racing away into the noonday crowd. Murakami's superior encourages the rookie to investigate the theft, while just at that moment Murakami is getting his first lead, from one of the ladies who was travelling on the trolley with him. He goes underground with his new information. Murakami finds an illicit gun dealer, with an illicit gun, but soon discovers that the gun is not his own. With a bit of luck, and much ingenuity, the detective finds his way to another gun dealer, on whose rice ration card Murakami learns that the gun in question, Murakami's, has been loaned to a crook named Yusa. Meanwhile Murakami is linked with a buddy-detective, Sato, who quickly sheds more light on the gun mystery. Together they track the gun dealer, Yusa, to a baseball diamond, where he is enjoying his favorite sport.

Sato, the buddy cop, learns that Murakami's gun has been used a second time, this time to murder a woman during a robbery; Sato sets out to track Yusa, while Murakami remains at Sato's house, where he will question Sato's relative about Yusa, and enquire of her, who happens to be the shy and stubborn girlfriend of Yusa, where Yusa is to be found. Sato tracks Yusa to the hotel where he is staying. In the course of the tracking he is ambushed, shot and almost bleeds to death. This, the film's tragic moment, brings Murakami to a level of pain he has never felt. He fears that Sato is dead but he is mistaken. Murakami learns from Sato's sister that she expects to meet Yusa early in the morning at the train station so that they can flee. Murakami makes his way across the city at high speed, catches Yusa just as he is about to escape, engages him in a ferocious mano a mano, and takes him into custody. Murakami feels sorry for Yusa. In the end Sato recovers. Murakami visits his buddy in the hospital, and says what rookies say, that in fact he feels sorry for Yusa. Sato says cool it, wait till you have a few more encounters like this. You won't give them a thought.

CHARACTERS

Detective Murakami. A rookie detective with the Tokyo Police Force. The central personage, whom we track through the first stages of his career life, from the loss of his revolver to his first serious arrest. Sensitive, persistent, and in the end capable at his job.

Harumi Namiki, sullen but ultimately cooperative with the police; girlfriend of Yusa, ultimately responsible for his being caught.

Eiko Miyoshi, Harumi's mother. It is she who finally wins over Harumi, to spill the beans on Yusa.

Yusa, bad guy who uses Murakami's pistol to commit murder. Ultimately arrested by Murakami.

Shimizu, Police Inspector Nakajima, superior to Murakami. Sympathetic and a good counselor.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kurosawa follows the line of a person's action, in order to bring out character. Murakami, the rookie detective, meets his first real job challenge when his pistol is stolen. He walks the streets for days, hunting for the weapon, acquainting himself with a variety of underground characters. Ultimately it is the emergence of Yusa, as the true criminal, which brings out the true police readiness of Murakami. Life, as it unfolds, unfolds the character of Murakami. We see in him the makings of a devoted cop, on the far side of his rookie experiences.

THEMES

Character development The character of Detective Murakami is malleable. From his first shock, at discovering the loss of his pistol, Murakami is a study in the reaction of character to unfolding events. Expecting a reprimand from his superior he is pleased to find himself encouraged, and given a buddy cop to work with. His own character grows into the encouragement. His character will expand and widen again, when he makes his first serious arrest, of the fleeing Yusa. Success breeds new confidence, which

breeds wider ranges of success. This developmental success pattern is quintessential to the social world Kurosawa observes.

Determination Murakami is instantly in panic mode when he realizes that his gun has been stolen. From that point on he is defined by pursuit of his lost weapon. Determination, like character development, is a crucial definiendum of the way uncontrolled behavior can spread ruinously in a society, from the theft of a pistol to two--at the end of the film--murders.

Evil The film helps us to see how banal and casual serious evil can be. A casual pick pocketing, a couple of murders, the rat race of big city crowds, the harsh breakdown of humanity. What meaning does the film's title give it? Who is the stray dog? Is it Yusa, the criminal? Is it Murakami, the young pup wandering out into the dangerous condition of mankind, wandering in his own wilderness? Evil lies across this 'police thriller,' in which goodness seems to have no place to breathe.

Detection Kurosawa was attracted to the techniques of modern police work, as well as to the mind set required of the good detective. In preparation for the present film, it seems, the director sent his collaborator into the offices of the Central Police Station in Tokyo, where he was given access to case files. In the present film, as in *High and Low*, the fruits of those researches are evident. We sense the detection process in action, and through it the glimmers of light which emerge, even in an 'evil society', from penetrating the 'way things are put together.'

Urban life In the background of the present film throbs the city. From the first scenes, when the thief vanishes with the rookie's revolver, we feel the fast evil city waiting to absorb events into its maw. In his search for his lost pistol Murakami disappears for days into the underworld. His quest borders on an epic Odyssean wandering into the subterranean, and Kurosawa is content to enchant us with this mystical dimension.

SCENES

The film opens on a heatwave in Tokyo, dogs and humans chasing after water wherever they can find it. The human condition seems reduced to bare minimum.

A rookie detective squeezes through noon time traffic in the trolley, and as he is getting off, his pistol is snatched from his pocket. In the distance he sees the fleeing thief, disappearing into the slums.

Searching through the Tokyo underworld, Murataki comes on leads to the whereabouts of his pistol, which has been used in a murder. The detective's anxiety grows. He bears full responsibility for the loss of the gun.

Forensic experiments help to guarantee the identity of the murder weapon. The Tokyo gun trade is closely regulated, and yet none of the gun shops yields a trace of the weapon.

Murataki is paired with a more senior officer, Sato, who joins in the quest to find the murderer who has used Murataki's stolen weapon.

Sato tracks Yusa--who has been identified as the murderer who killed with Murataki's pistol--to a downscale Tokyo Hotel, where an ambush awaits him, and he is shot and bleeds so seriously that he nearly dies in the hospital.

Yusa's girlfriend, who has been doing all she can to provide cover for her man, relents, and reveals to Murataki that she is set to meet Yusa the next morning at the train station, so that they can flee together.

Murataki carefully id's Yusa, among the passengers awaiting the early morning train, and out wrestles the murderer, making thereby a stunning first arrest.

The rookie, glowing from his success, visits with Sato, who is recuperating in the hospital. Murataki tells his mentor and buddy that he felt sorry for Yusa in the end, as he took him off to prison. Sato replies that his buddy will not feel that kind of emotion, as he gets farther into his career. He will realize that there will be many more Yusa's coming down the pike.