

Humanities Institute  
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# The Lower Depths. 1957

Akira Kurosawa

## OVERVIEW

Kurosawa grafts his imagination, here, onto a play by Maxim Gorky (1865-1936), (*The Lower Depths*, 1902). Gorky addresses the lamentable living conditions of the underclasses in St. Petersburg, at the end of the nineteenth century. His sympathies are unreservedly with the poor, and his thinking is with the growing Bolshevik Movement. He bequeaths to the world a new conception in drama, the social idealistic opinion piece. It fell to Kurosawa to adapt and rework this vigorous new dramatic perspective. He takes it on directly in his own *The Lower Depths*, but with his own spin, perhaps with his own turbulence. Central to this spin is the historical transfer, of the whole early Bolshevik climate, to the Edo period in Japan—17<sup>th</sup> century-- under the administration of the Tokugawa shogunate.

Kurosawa is not a philosophical film maker, although certain thought themes transect his films—the power of knightly tradition, the pressure of moral choice in life, the value of loyalty, the inevitability of suffering, the cognitive element in sensing, the volatility of the truth—and there is no central spot at which to isolate the audition of his central beliefs. (As a graphic artist, he leaves much of his ‘philosophy’ to the nuances of his senses—his painterly eye for a slashing rainstorm on tin roofs, the criss-crossing of pedestrians at an overcrowded urban crossroads, or the backsliding of rubble against the iron shoes of stallions mounting a hillside—and in so doing builds a cognitive element into startling disclosures from untamed nature. Kurosawa is, however we come down on the philosophy issue, a thinker on the side of mankind, basically what we could want to call humanistic, and, as befits his perilous historical moment, what the world was at the time calling *existentialist*, seeing life at every moment as ‘on the line.’ Kurosawa did not for nothing acquire the reputation of spokesperson for his time.

*Auteur* We will have found Kurosawa’s eye and mind in many ‘hidden’ places, in the undercity trash depot (*Dodeskaden*), in places where a double life goes on in the underbelly of an urban crime, in a megalopolis, in an underground film noir like *High and Low*, or in a hunt through the undercity of *Stray Dog*, where the chasing of a hot criminal opens any number of nooks. He knows where he is taking us in the present film, and it is into that always provocative heart of darkness, which Conrad nailed as a key to one definition of our own time. Is Kurosawa chasing the meaning of that darkness in the present film?

Darkness in every sense surely plies its way inside that world through the present film, and abets the director’s effort to spread openness and complexity around him. What could have been created as a period piece background of sooty gray, simply a tract about the abuse of a citizenry, is opened from the center, just as it seemed to be settling for a stable portrayal. Characters in the depths are what open the diversities of the film. Kabei, the pilgrim, is arguably the most widening leaven of the narrative. We will see why. Suketichi, the handsome petty thief, opens out the tale into what becomes both the romance and the morbidity of the tale. We are at the branching point, here, which will lead us to a plurality of underground characters—an actor within that world, a gambler, a tinker, who in the end establish in the present tenement the silent pathway to a simulacrum of a world. Kurosawa has found a way to let himself out through the box of claustrophobia into a world view, and if any individual stands up firmly within that worldview, it will be Kurosawa himself.

*Film* Of the film itself we will note foremost that it is filmed in grey against a background of implacable gray. We are in the backstory of a tenement, an under street level space in which a disparate shadow life of subterranean beings are dispersed; a landlord and bitter landlady, a petty thief, the landlady’s sister and husband, a gambler, an actor, a pilgrim, an ex-samurai, a tinker, a whore, a cooper, a cobbler, a candy seller, and a wrestler, all interacting in the murky spaces, occupying their own cots, dialoguing and vituperating across a filthy, badly lighted rental space. Inside this constricted space,

Kurosawa lays out a maelstrom of love makings, conflicts and desolation—the raw materials Gustave Dore assembles for his illustrations of the squalor in Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. There is no overstating the talent with which Kurosawa thinks with his eyes, in the putting together of this action space. Tones of black, tones of gray, tones of heavy rain playing across those leaden places; and deep on the inside of this tenement the tatami mats which the residents of the lower depths rent for a few pennies a night.

*Historical background* It was Kurosawa's intention to create of this entire scenario a theatrical effect, an added dimension of self-awareness for the performers, perhaps especially because one of the chief performers, Danjuro, is in fact a stage actor. (In preparation of the ongoing shoot of the film Kurosawa worked his actors hard, in a rhythm smacking more of stage than of film; intense dress rehearsals on stage for sixty days running, the kinds of shared text discussion which kept any one film team breathlessly attached to the assignment facing it.)

## PLOT

We are in an Edo-period partially underground tenement, a lodging place of a sort run by an old gent and his embittered wife, who charge a few pennies a night to an eccentric gallery of down and outs, who retrieve for their money a reserved mat on the floor, a minimum of heat from a thin heater flame, and the dubious comfort of their fellows from the lower depths. All of these individuals, whom fate has brought together, are struggling simply to survive. The landlady's younger sister, who helps her sister 'run' the tenement, comes in with an old man, to whom she rents a bed. Kabei, the old man dressed as a Buddhist priest assumes an air of grandfatherly belonging, perhaps of superior wisdom. Meanwhile Sutekichi, the self-appointed leader of the tenement, comes to the center of the scene, is clearly having an affair with the landlord's wife, Osugi, an affair which we see morphing into a sweet spot for the landlady's sister, Otayo. Osugi's scorn for Sutekichi is evident, with the result that she urges him to kill her husband. One sees how life proceeds in the lower depths. In the end Sutekichi fights, almost to the death, with the landlord; the bitter blood is in the end tamed by the interventions of Kabei. Around the plotline established here, the petty thief, the romance of Sutekichi, Osugi and Otayo-- revolve a gallery of comedic events and characters: a gambler nihilist, who plays off as the cynic against the shabby but positive Buddhist, Kabei; an old actor, who has lost his ability to memorize his lines; a craftsman, scraping away at pots, while indifferent to the impending death of his wife; an impoverished man who claims to be a descendant of samurai, but is later unmasked as a fraud.

## CHARACTERS

Sutekichi, the petty thief, the romantic interest for the landlord's wife and her sister.

Osugi, the landlady and the initial love of Sutekichi.

Otayo, Osugi's sister.

Rokubei, Osugi's husband, the landlord.

Yoshisaburo, the gambler.

Danjuro, the actor.

Kabei, the Buddhist pilgrim.

Tonosama, the ex-samurai.

Tomekichi, the tinker.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kabei is an outstanding mystery, a seeming Buddhist pilgrim, a significant streetlevel philosopher, who from the start brought knowledge and perspective to the discussions among the tenement dwellers. His mind as well as his outfit bespoke Buddhism, and he retained the pregnant rich silences of Buddhism as part of his arsenal of charms. He kept his interpretations to himself, yet seemed gifted in ways to interpret others' dilemmas.

## THEMES

**Social class.** The entire film is a testimony to the social class gap, and to the penalties imposed, by society, on those who have not earned its blessings. The underclass before us, in the present film, is impoverished, poorly nourished and cold, but is not oppressed by individual restraints, or by the class structure directly.

**Philosophy** If any single philosophy appears to dominate, in the world of the lower depths, it would be the loose pragmatism of Existentialism, living the moment for whatever unexpected gifts it can offer you. A dash of this perspective is omnipresent in the world of the lower depths.

**Oppression** No decree from above or militant dislike of underachievers sets out to oppress the residents of 'the lower depths,' for they are victims of an inertia which establishes itself with their birth. No aperture of freedom or option to choose makes itself felt in the life space of these individuals.