

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Dodeskaden / Clickety Click 1970**

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** The present film was Kurosawa's first in five years, and the only full length film he created in color. One has to imagine, from this work he produced after a five year break, after *Drunken Angel*, that he was formulating, to himself, a broad artistic departure. And though we know, already from an early film like *Drunken Angel*, that Kurosawa knew how to display urban ugliness, we are nonetheless surprised at the practiced fascination he can display for the richness of the world of urban garbage.

**Film** The film before us was a low budget undertaking, Even so Kurosawa found that the financing of the film exhausted his resources. He was obliged to mortgage his own home, in order to support the production of the film. And he was looking at a dearth of employment possibilities. His debts were heavy. Within the following year he made a serious effort to kill himself.

**Historical background.** As we see, in *Drunken Angel*, Kurosawa had a sharp eye for the scenes of urban destruction left behind in Tokyo by the Second World War. The doctor's clinic, in that film, is set on a swamp, from which miasmatic fumes steam, and through which toxic rivers flow. Kurosawa gives us a kaleidoscope of portraits of life from which the only escape is fantasy.

### SYNOPSIS

The present film itself is set in a shanty town on the outskirts of the capitol. (The only visual escape from this self-enclosed nightmare is a long purview onto stretching seagrass and the promise of ocean, but our eyes are only twice tempted away into the other world of those spaces.

We move from one vignette to another, occasionally picking up idiosyncratic landmarks---a broken table, a rusty door handle, an inverted sink or child's garbage bespattered toy--or meeting barely identifiable individuals whom we believe we have seen before. The first individualized portrait is a young man named Rakuchan, who lives in the dump, and who lives in the dream life of himself as a trolley car driver. With his makeshift trolley and his improvised rails, he takes the watcher along a network of trails, through garbage, dilapidated houses, and pipe crossings, paying meticulous attention to accuracy of schedule and safety of passenger crossings. The title of the film mimes the sound of clickety click, the noise of the trolley cars as they make their way through the shanty town dumpsters. The film will both open and conclude on this scenario, which cannot fail to remind the western entertainment hound of aspects of the world of Pee Wee Herman. (Is Rakuchan mentally handicapped, as the setting makes us surmise?)

There follows a succession of vignettes--when possible intertwined-- of life in the city dump. One might call these grotesqueries, or at best pain marks inscribed on the sloppy underbelly of the city. Only rarely do we gain a view of the world outside the city. (Parallel kinds of analysis occur to us in nineteenth century writers like Zola or the Goncourt brothers; dissectors of the lives of those 'petits gens' from whom Balzac draws the substance of his 'Comedie humaine.') Let us read some of those inscriptions.

There is a hairbrush maker whose life assignment seems to be to take care of the many children deposited into his life by a wife too uxorious to confine her passions to this one man. And the charm of it? The guy seems to carry out his domestic assignments with zest!

There is a pair of wife-swapping laborers who return to their wives at regular intervals, and behave as though nothing had happened. Are we reading a 'happy go lucky theme' into this cast of characters? The theme is quick to modify itself.

There is a man, Hei, who is frequented by his ex wife, who continues to carry out his household chores, while he, Hei, stands by stoically. Odd.

A beggar and his son live in a broken down car; the man daydreams of living in a great mansion, while the son perishes slowly from leukemia. Wild. Mad.

A girl is raped by her uncle, and impregnated, while the guy flees. Out of her mind with confusion the girl accosts a young man who works in a liquor store. She stabs him. Happy go lucky? Noooooo...

The final vignette, and perhaps most profound, is canny and introduces us to a chasework silversmith who is wise and throws a wisdom cloak back over the previous examples. Now we're talking high professional skill. Discipline. The work of an ancient art going back to prehistory, and including, for example, the face mask on the tomb of Tutankamon. Tanba is a wise and meticulous character, of whom we learn that he has once disarmed a knife bearing youth by persuasion and that on another occasion he has allowed himself to be burglarized rather than start a fight.

In reviewing this synopsis it is hard to think you are doing it justice. One goes through the list of scenes without being able to indicate the sense in which the scenes occurring here are all temporal events occurring simultaneously. The music of history, with all its polyphonic and polychromatic richness, is stripped from it by a listing, like the above, of events without the ability to indicate their own interrelations to one another. Even the filmic presentation, of the above list with all its in the act bravoura of sight and sound, can to some extent compensate for the deficiencies of a bloodless catalogue.

## CHARACTERS

Rukuchan.	The trolley car boy. The trolley lines are his world.
Rukuchan's mom.	The loving cook for her and her son.
Taro.	A hairbrush maker with many children.
Masuda and Kawaguchi;	Two day-laborers, wife swappers.
Hei.	A Stoic bleak man.
Shima.	A man with a tic, forever defending his very unattractive wife.
Beggar and his son, living in their car:	
Father	daydreams of a great mansion; severely ill son, dying of leukemia.
Girl,	raped by alcoholic uncle; stabs boy in liquor store.
Tanba. Chasework silversmith.	Man of wisdom and good sense.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

There are no full bodied characters in the film. For it is, if anything, a film about life in an urban dump. If any character is there as a full person it must be Rukuchan, the trolley car boy. He lives in a fantasy world, like the beggar who lives in a broken down Citroen with his seriously ill son, and who dreams the fantasy of living in a great mansion. But like many *fantaisistes* Rukuchan has made a full time systematic hobby out of fantasy, scheduling, driving, and securing his one rail trolley. In the end we are not sure whether to feel sorry for this young man, or envy the exuberant life track the guy has discovered for himself. As for the remaining characters, they are for the most part survivors or misfits, for whom the dump provides a home.

## THEMES

**Poverty** is the name of the game, and is the milieu in which life exists in this community. People fantasize wealth or a mansion. but that is fantasy wealth, except for the world of the silversmith, who has much to do with beauty and elegance. But then he stands out in many ways.

**Fantasy** Fantasy s a recourse for several residents of the dump. The trolley car driver and scheduler, Rakuchan, lives in fantasy in the sense that he lives the reality he creates for himself, but not in the sense

that he makes up that reality. It is there. It is real. The fantasy world of the beggar in the broken down Citroen is different. It is purely in the imagination, the mansion he fantasizes. It has no rails or schedules.

**Sexuality** In the dump we find everything from casual wife swapping through extravagant defense of one's wife, to the brutal sexuality of the girl who is raped and impregnated, then uses a knife to take her desperation out on a teen age boy who is soft on her. There are no uniform behavioral patterns, in this jungle which thrives under the surface of urban society. Sexuality takes its own head and drives the dirty caravan straight ahead.

**Violence** There is a limit to violence in the present vignettes. The girl Katsuko, whose uncle rapes and impregnates her before fleeing, is an example of the victim of violence--she is a cruel instance of an individual driven into an unbalanced frenzy by the violence done to her. Herself an assaulted victim, she loses all chance for a legal support base, as her offending uncle escapes Scott free. Gone is any thought that her uncle should have to 'pay for his violence.'

**Distances** There is a recurring scene (two times) in the film in which we leave the claustrophobic atmosphere of the city dump and join two lonely individuals in a pre storm encounter. They talk briefly and we surmise romance. An assignation is made--or perhaps not-- but all that is surmise; at scene's end the two figures go off on their separate ways. The vast landscape closes behind them and we crawl back empty into the warrens of the dump.

## SCENES

- 1 We open with a spreading purview of the suburban shantytown in which the dump of this drama occupies the central place. Kurosawa sharpens his skills against the roughness of urban landscape, pulling back at nothing.
- 2 Rokuchan is caught in the fantasy of being a trolley conductor. He loyally drives his jerry built trolley up and down the reconstructed rails of shanty town, stopping at all the proper stops. He is a precisionist, who forms his existence in the midst of messiness.
- 3 Taro, a hairbrush maker; gladly puts up with his uxorious wife and her philandering. He cares unreservedly for their kids, indifferent to whether or not he sired them. He is one more instance of the importance of resilience.
- 4 Two day laborers are neighbors, and regularly wife swap. On the days when they are with their own wives it is as though nothing had ever happened. It's business as usual.
- 5 Hei is regularly visited by his ex wife, who continues to do Hei's domestic chores for him. He stands on impassively.
- 6 Shima is a fervent defender of his wife. Whenever she is criticized, he rises in defense of her. It will be noticed, among these man-woman interaction studies, that Kurosawa has a fine ear for the mutuality of the two genders, even in the dump.
- 7 A beggar who knows how to dream lives in a broken d0wn Citroen, from within which he fantasizes a splendid mansion as his true home. While he goes on creating pie in the sky, his son, who is living in the car with him, sinks slowly into the fatal disease which is taking the place of his life.
- 8 A girl, Katsuko, joins the community of garbage dwellers. She only a young teen ager, but destiny has already kicked her around. Raped and impregnated by her uncle, who has gotten out of town fast, she is left in a confused condition of terror and rage.
- 9 Tanba, the silversmith, is the last figure discovered in the dump world, and one of the richest personalities. As a silversmith he has perused fine works of craft, and can see what standards humans

can create for themselves. He has disciplined himself to the point where he can let another man rob him, rather than fighting to the death over a few coins.

10. In the end we return again to Rokuchan, driving his trolley car punctiliously through the trash, along the reconstructed rails.