

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Hidden Fortress (1958)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

The present film breaks with the usual model of the Kurosawa film, startling the viewer with an opening that borders on slapstick, on the European picaresque tradition, even, the American viewer might note, on the TV traditions of Abbott and Costello or the films of Charley Chaplin. Two peasant guys, shirtless and smelly, appear plodding across the gusty plain, distant mountains bespeaking already the world of mountain passes, tribal borders, and delayed goal searches, which will inevitably lead the two guys, richer but older, back to their starting point. Our concluding phonemes may sound like 'yeah, and so?' but as a matter of fact, because we have been in the hands of a master director, the answer may well be 'darned if I know, but we sure as hell went somewhere.' Worth noting that the film was a supporting influence on the 1977 American hit, *Star Wars*.

Auteur Kurosawa works here, as in most of his films, with a team--the Kurosawa-*gumi*, the Kurosawa team--over whom and whose work he exercised a constant collegial control. (He was the ultimate hands on director.) This Kurosawa team was responsible for every aspect of film production: music; composition, input from many of the moment's outstanding composers; cinematographers, experts in the technical aspects of camera uses, for which Kurosawa exercised especially close attention; artists, who were noted for their particular attention to issues like domestic interiors, tailoring, architecture; script writers, experts in the rapidly evolving stylistics of sharply punctuated work texts; production crew, responsible for the overall supervision of the development of a film.; the actors themselves, many of whom played in multiple films--and a broad array of supporting actors, who became familiar fixtures in Kurosawa cinema. That such a rich array of talents was put to work in order to stage a Kurosawa film reminds us freshly of the vast generic distance separating mankind's large scale aesthetic creations from, say, the work of the dramatic poem or the lyric. Some punsters might opine, that a one off like E. M. Forster's 'only connect' contains enough wisdom for life as a whole, but that seems to be pulling the thought elastic too thin.

Historical background The film, created in tohoscope, a widescreen method the director would use from this point on, was first released in 1958, and proved highly successful at the box office. Opinions of the film, which after all bear much of the meaning of the film itself, varied widely, from Bosley Crowther's '*Kurosawa, for all his talent, is as prone to pot boiling as anyone else*' to David Ehrenstein's '*One of the greatest action-adventure films ever made.*'

These squibs of divergent opinion befit descriptions of an unfailingly strong auteur, who leaves his distinctive tread wherever he goes.

SYNOPSIS

Two bedraggled peasants--we are in the High Middle Ages, that Japanese feudal period to which Kurosawa often has recourse, when seeking a clean window of time in which to deploy his fascination with flamboyant colors and wide open imaginative vistas--have left their homes, hoping to make money by serving in a private army, that of the feudal Yamana clan. They are captured instead by warriors of the Yamana tribe, who force them to dig for caches of gold; they escape and make their ways to a nearby river--events which the reader must absorb as classically foreordained. (We do little to vet the legitimacy of the ongoing event sequence any more than we might do with a canto of Lautreamont. Kurosawa advances from start to finish with magisterial confidence). While they are resting, the peasants discover gold in a hollow log they are using to build a fire; the gold is stamped with; the symbol of the Akizuki clan. It is evident that there is a fortune lying somewhere nearby.

While the hicks are resting, and admiring their gold piece, they are approached by a virile and princely looking man who shows them a second piece of gold, then leads them to a highway in the mountains where a cache of gold is hidden. (This mystery man is the renowned Akizuki general Rukurota, who will be a close associate, for the remainder of the tale, to the questing yokels who are, by an upending of convention, the guiding figures of the whole tale.) At this point the trio, joined by Princess Yuki--her identity allegedly that of a deaf mute, to help conceal her identity--on an arduous mountain trip back to the royals' home in *the* further mountains, *the* home of the Akizuki. The two yokels, who are being shown the way home by way of Akizuki, acquire a wagon to carry the gold; unfortunately, though, they are taken prisoner by the Yamana, in fear of whom, and out of desperation, they throw their gold away in the midst of the celebration of the Fire Festival. Bedraggled and exhausted, the four fleers, carrying only vestiges of their gold, make it back over the border of the Akizuki. The prince and princess, who have by now revealed their identity to the yokels, send them back to their own home territory, where we last see them chortling with glee at the money they have brought with them. They are to the last framed into a different picture from the other participants.

CHARACTERS

General Rokoruta Military figure who intervenes on the two peasant main figures

Tahei One of the two peasants who open the film onto their search for money and a new life.

Mataschichi The sidekick and buddy of Tahei. The two figures, in fact, are essentially twins

General Tadekoro Old rival of General Rokoruta, meets him again.

Princess Yuki The royal daughter of the Akizuki clan. She feigns being a deaf mute.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

General Rokoruta--tall, dark and handsome-- is the action hero par excellence. He is a perfect foil against the comedic peasants, whom he has taken under his wing, as carriers of the treasured gold of the Akizuki royals.

Tahei and Mataschichi are the two yokels whom we meet at both the beginning and end of the film. They are in part slapstick yokels, thus setting a Sancho Panza tone for the film. Their passion is for money, and in the end they get it.

As an action film *The Hidden Fortress* generates very little character depth. The characters are brought out as the action--quest for gold--demands. What defines the action, as far as that goes, is the role reversal of good guy and bad guy. In this instance the poor, under privileged and greedy take center stage, while the royal general builds his handsome profile into the story generated by the two peasant.

THEMES

Classes Our original cicerones are two loser types, from the peasant class. They have no distinctive status, and seem perfectly content to bum along the road hoping to slurp up money. Their social opposite is General Rokoruta, who breathes noble and confident upbringing.

Money Money is where the film opens, and where it ends. We might say that money is the primal substance of the world of this film. From the moment when the two comedians first appear on screen their quest is for money, and it becomes the driving goal of their life. The brilliance of the gold the two men cart through the mountain passes, on their way to Akizuki, entrances them.

Sexual power The chief bearer of sexual power, among the conflicting forces, is the princess Yuki of Akizuki. She is first met making her way back to Akizuki, under the protection of General Rokoruta, and makes it clear, by her dominatrix treatment of the two peasants, that she appreciates men who snap complacently to attention at her commands.

The brevity of life On the journey of the peasants, with Yuki and General Rokoruta, their route takes them into the territory of a hostile clan, which is in the process of celebrating their annual Festival of Fire. The message of this Festival is that life is perilously brief. Princess Yuki is deeply impressed with the subtlety by which this theme is extracted from the glistening dance of the flames. If any Central Theme belongs to this film, it is the message of the Festival of Fire.

Wild nature Kurosawa was known for his sensitivity to nature and, in his directorial role, for his fastidiousness in matching action to natural environment. In the present film the trek of the General, Princess Yuki, and two two peasants, through the craggy mountains separating one clan from another, forms a symphony of matching mood tones which is nothing short of symphonic.

Macho valor By contrast with the two peasants, General Rokoruta exudes an air of spic and span muscularity. He is a true action figure, would do justice to the staunchest classic western Sheriff.

The comic One does not usually associate comedy with the work of Kurosawa--perhaps the grotesquerie of the living garbage dump in *Dodeskaken* or the hand in hand merriness of the doctor with his teen age friend at the conclusion of *Drunken Angel* The slapstick behavior of the two peasants, in *The Hidden Fortress*, betokens an hilarity, or at least an irony, which refuses to let the life picture grow somber.

SCENES

Two oafs cross a dusty plain, someplace and sometime in mediaeval Japan. They are cuffing each other and bantering, feeling their oats on the open road.

The wanderers are captured by a neighboring tribe, Yamanas, who force them to dig for gold. They are used to labor, and fit right into the situation.

The peasant laborers are approached, as they are laboring, by an elegantly dressed, very macho general of the Akizuki tribe, who leads them along toward his homeland. The peasants make no protest, and follow along.

Kurosawa spares no energy in the vivid depiction of landscape. The journey through the high mountain passes intensely difficult and dangerous territory, and we watch breathlessly as the peasants clatter up the rocky slopes of the mountain passes,

On the way General Rokoruta leads his peasant followers into an area flush with gold to be mined. The peasants have never seen anything like this. They discover a way to conceal gold inside hollow sticks, and to serve as transporters. For the rest of the journey the peasants will serve as muleteers, driving beasts of burden loaded with gold filled logs.

Traveling across a roadside village, the General comes upon a traditional swordsman antagonist of his, with whom he is drawn into a life and death duel. The General prevails, showing both his power and his mercy, and the trek continues northward.

At this point we become acquainted with Princess Yuki, who is travelling back to her royal home in Akizuki. Under protection of the accompanying general, she behaves herself skittishly, like a pampered royal.

The travelling group are sidetracked into the territory of another clan, which is holding its annual Fire Festival. The message of the Festival is that life is short and soon over, with little meaning, Princess Yuki feels a deep meaning in this Festival, which emerges as an adage for the entire film.

Upon arrival in Akizuki, the General and Yuki reveal their royal identities to the two peasants, who are astonished, but in their raw way cool. Their pockets greased, their spirits high, they set out for their home province.

The last we see of our friends, the peasants, is precisely the kind of scene in which we saw them in the first shots of the film. They are horsing around with one another, scuffling and punching and having fun. They are cut ups against a stark desert;