

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

The Sengoku era--fifteenth and sixteenth centuries--was transitional from the High Mediaeval Japanese pathway of culture into the nascent modernity of the Sengoku, in which regional power was replacing centralized monarchy, foreign travelers were beginning to appear, commerce was growing more market oriented, and cultural developments like Zen were beginning to infiltrate hearts and minds. (Kurosawa was a careful custodian of his national history). The present film introduces us directly into this turbulent period. Nor is it the first time we have followed this director into that panorama of visible history, to which he is drawn. We can think of *Seven Samurai*, *Throne of Blood*, or now *Kagemusha*, in all of which vast space, immense welling forth battles, and virtually drunken feasts for the senses cow us into astonishment.

Auteur Kurosawa is an entertainer, a student of history, a philosopher of human nature, and of course, and from the outset, a painter. This last disposition, to express himself vividly and personally on canvas, led Kurosawa to design many of the poster boards and sets of his early color films, at a time in his twenties when he was considering painting as his career. His autobiography, *Something Like an Autobiography*, anatomised fascinatingly his discovery of the limits of his painterly imagination, but in innumerable traits he follows that imagination into his largest scale--one might say his hyper dramatic stages of visual imagining; In his own painting he gravitates to broad strokes, thick colors, Van Gogh or Cezanne like washes of sky, but in the end he complains that the main directions of the painting of his time had already been fully exploited.

Film An illustrative history attaches to the present film, and one that throws light both on Kurosawa's passion to create and onto his international weight. The present film--nearly four hours of watching and that at a relentless action pace--called on all of the director's powers, and a lot of the studio's, pocket book, so much of the latter in fact that international lending forces had to be called in. George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, salient figures in American film at the time, are credited, at the end of the film, with being executive producers of the international version. (They--Coppola and Kurosawa-- helped greatly with attracting funds for the support of Kurosawa's company. Suntory whiskey tv appearances were widely appreciated as they displayed the mellow male couple enjoying a sip).

Historical Background Many Kurosawa films--*Kagemusha*, *Seven Samurai*, *The Hidden Fortress*, *Rashomon*--spring from a keen interest in Japanese history. It is a special kind of 'interest.' The director seems to experience human history in terms of broad movements, gusts of energy that sweep us along with them. Kurosawa for example, is not a miniaturist of history who will read the culture of an era from interior decors, or from the minutiae of dress--the kinds of micro analysis which bear such fruit in the literary analyses of Erich Auerbach or Theodor Adorno. The horse, consequently, is for Kurosawa a powerful symbol of the energy of history, latent and trembling, forever transporting messages of power from one power figure to another. Mail--flashing in the light-- or brilliantly gleaming long swords--the insignia of samurai--are the agents of historical change, not, for example, the defenestration of the envoys at Prague or the niceties of Pericles' funeral oration, which so profoundly shaped the Athenians' conception of their democracy.

PLOT

Kurosawa typically entangles the origins of his plots in complex historical soil, and the present film is no exception. We are in 1571 and with the daimyo of the Takeda clan, when he meets a thief whom his brother had saved from crucifixion--and who bears such an absolute resemblance to his brother that the

daimyo hits on a strategic plan. He knows his brother for a risking military man, readily endangering himself in battle, and arranges that if his brother is killed in battle the thief will be called in as a *kagemusha*, or political decoy, who will govern the clan for three years, holding the clan's power intact, and keeping the leader's death unknown to his enemies, though of course he will be known to the power elite of the Takeda clan. (One sees here the seeds of discord and chaos for the Takeda clan.) The three chief clan rivals of the *kagemusha* will be left to devise their own explanations of the absence of the Takeda clan from the field of battle. And Nobukado, brother of the deceased king, will present the thief to the deceased king's brothers, with the proposal that he should impersonate Shingen Takeda full time.

As it happens Takeda Shingen is killed, the skeleton body of Shingen is discovered, and spies for the Shingen camp report the fact to their bosses; at just this point the thief proposes that he should in fact serve alongside the army of the Takeda clan. (He is of course mistaken for the true old ruler of the clan). A stupendous battle ensues, in which the army of Shingen is defeated, amidst a devastating destruction of horses and men. The meaning of this disastrous conclusion is swallowed up in a sea of gore, which leaves us questioning, fruitfully, the 'meaning' of the entire film.

Raising this last point we move into the question of meaning in Kurosawa's cinema. Is demonstrative pageantry, like that of this director, a product of thought and analysis, or is it rather an expressive testimony to life's power, brevity and color? Kurosawa, to my opinion, is not a philosophic creator, in the fashion of his great admirer Ingmar Bergman, or a great secularist like Truffaut, who wades into the lesser tragedies of daily life. Kurosawa's epic dramas are often superhuman flashpoints, operatic in their self-display, voracious for vast and compelling scenes of nature. What then, in every respect, distinguishes his work from that of epic romances (Indian grand scale romance and battle epics), or from John Wayne's grand opera on the American frontier? There are several answers. First is the acting.. Kurosawa finds and sticks with superb and loyal actors like Toshiro Mifune, who starred in all of Kurosawa's best known films. Second is that Kurosawa worked night and day on his films, currying and editing each film. Finally there is the intelligence of Kurosawa's imagination. In the present film, for example, the dilemmas of Takeda Shingen's ministers after his death, left as they were with a fake king as their only source of support, are established by innumerable subtle strokes.

CHARACTERS

The thief who is drawn into the high stakes machinations of the Takeda clan.

Takeda Shingen, head of his dominant clan in central Japan.

Takeda Nabukado, Shingen's younger brother and his co-designer of the plan

Takeda Katsuyari, Shingen's son and heir.

Yamagata Masakaga; Shingen's top general.

Nobunaga, one of Shingen's top rivals for control of Japan.

Tokugawa Ieyasu, Nobunaga's strongest ally.

Uesugi Kenshin, Chief rival of Shingen

Various generals and concubines

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Takeda Shingen is the chief of the Takeda clan, the most powerful in Japan. It is he whose thinking dominates and guides the execution and events of this historical film. Knowing that he is imperiled by powerful rivals, he establishes his game plan, after conferring with his generals and one of his brothers. His plan involves a thief whom his brother has spared from crucifixion, who is accordingly indebted to him, Shingen, his savior. The plan is that the brother, in case of his own death or near death, will be replaced in power by the thief, who is *an absolute look alike* for Takeda Shingen, the *daimyo* of his clan. By this arrangement the clan will continue to be steadily ruled by its familiar power structure, and the illness of its present head will go unnoticed. The look alike *political decoy*, the *kagemusha* will assure the continuing function of government. This political decoy strategy, though rooted in ancient Japanese cultures, is the brainchild of Takeda Shingen, whose Machiavellian thinking is designed to keep his lineage in power as long as possible.

THEMES

Anticipation Anticipation was the thinking of Takeda Shingen, who looks ahead to his sooner-or-later death in battle, and 'can't endure' the possibility that his 'administration' will fall apart. He imagines that his rule is, or should be, eternal, and for this reason he holds tight to the belief in the *kagemusha* ploy. This kind of insurance policy in the mind is a universal instance of the way human beings surround themselves with false immortalities.

Illusion The film turns around the complexities of illusion. Takeda Shingen is deeply concerned about the continuous power of his kingdom, and afraid for its continuity if he himself were to be killed. It occurs to him that a certain thief, whom his brother has spared from execution, is a look alike for himself, and could stand in as a political decoy in the instance of his own death. Hence the idea of decoy-illusion is introduced into the film from the outset, and with it the field of the double or the illusory.

Haunting The theme of haunting, which pervades world imagination, courses fiercely through this film. The *kagemusha* is haunted by the spectral memories of his past, and Kurosawa depicts these haunting forces as spectral looming figures that fill the sky with terror. Kurosawa brings his painterly imagination into full play in the depiction of these spirits.

Empty Death As in many tales of extravagant striving, for security against death, against temporal corrosion, the current large scale effort of the two clans, to fend off time's corrosion, is of no avail. Takeda Shingen perishes, as finally do both the *kagemusha* and Takeda's own son. The battlefield scene which caps the nightmarish death struggle between the clans spills over into a macabre painting of the thrashing corpses of men and horses intertwined. The *danse macabre* of life and death is the oldest theme in literature.

SCENES

Takeda Shingen and his brother meet to concoct the *kagemusha* plan which is intended to keep the clan's power intact. The luck of absolute resemblance, between a certain thief and Shingen, generates the plan to conscript the thief as a *kagemusha*.

Takeda is shot to death while listening to flute music, in the course of an assault on an enemy castle. He orders his forces to withdraw. His commanders are ordered to keep his death a secret for three years, while the *kagemusha* takes over the reins of power.

Takeda's rivals, unaware of his death, withdraw to their castles perplexed by the absence of events. The stalling technique is working.

The thief, though not yet knowing the full *kagemusha* plan, nor knowing of the death of Takeda Shingen, discovers the corpse of Takeda in a burial jar. The generals conclude that the thief is a loose cannon, and send him away. He already knows too much--but he will return.

Spies report the death of Takeda to his enemies; the thief goes to Takeda's generals, and offers to serve them as a *kagemusha* in what promises to become a major war. He now covets this dangerous role.

The *kagemusha* is of course undyingly loyal to the deceased Takeda Shingen, his savior from execution. We recognize his personal sense of confidence. If any character can be said to grow through the film it will be the *kagemusha*.

Deployed behind wooden stockades the enemy slaughter Takeda's cavalry.

The scene of destroyed men and horses, who writhe together in their death throes, is uniquely gory and disastrous.

In the end the *kagamusha* throws himself against the invaders, accumulates mortal wounds, and is swept away in the current of the river. He has served as a temporary stop gap, for the Takeda clan, but his role was inherently fragile.

The final scene of post destruction apocalypse, seems to encase the entire film in a mood of final bitterness which bathes the *kagemusha* experience in tragedy,