

Humanities Institute
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Scandal (1950)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Kurosawa is drawn to moral issues, even when, as in his flashiest stallions and mail hyperdramas--Throne of Blood, Seven Samurai, The Hidden Fortress, Kagemusha--he seems to be contenting himself with pure pageantry. In each of those films the stakes of right and wrong are tightly woven into the meaning of the action. A number of Kurosawa films, however, are precisely cut jewels of ethical analysis. We come here to a special category of film in which moral choice is under the spotlight: these are films like *Red Beard*, *Drunken Angel*, *High and Low*, perhaps *Dodeskaden*, and the present *Scandal*. In these moral choice films, with the exception of the last named, the moral choice is not presented as a stark either/or, but rather as an alignment within possible stances. In the present early Kurosawa film the consequences of doing evil are particularly apparent. We are looking at evil as part of a systemic social question.

Film The present film not only enters the field of moral decision but enters at the point planted square in history. The postwar period in Japan was a moment of cascading technical growth, renaissance into the skills of its time, but also into the new self-expressive skills of large scale commercial exploitation. A shining example of this is the new--we might now call it yellow dog--journalism that was pushing its way into the front of Japanese culture. (The origins of Japanese commercial television go back to 1953, only a short time before the present film.) Kurosawa saw deeply, and with alarm, into this fresh kind of threat to vital society. Yellow journalism was growing into a preferred weapon for extortion of bribes and paybacks. With a little dirt on a celeb--for the celeb business was just starting to thrive too--one could make or break the career of a star. That is just the kind of importunate mode that the well-known classical singer Saijo faces in the current film. It is the kind of precautionary material that has shed its influences onto recent American politics.

Auteur The auteur of the present film is deeply though anonymously present to the present film. In his anonymity, Kurosawa is intently present to the actors as if he knew them inside their roles. This in fact appears to be a psychological trait, of the director, that he projects strongly through the details into a variety of filmic settings and outcomes without implicating his independence. In fact his independent voice only sharpens with the abundance of the details he frees to replace him. In the literary world one might think of the similarly grand opus of Honore de Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*. The more intimately he works from inside himself, the more fertile the world that spreads out around him. The same principle works for Kurosawa, who seems to move so effortlessly from, say, crime thriller to historical panache to intimate kasutori culture life portraits like *Ikiru*.

Historical setting The period in question here, directly after the war--the period of so-called kasutori culture--from the immediate postwar world--is known for libertarian lifestyles, cheap alcohol and cheap journalism. In both cultures--Japanese and American--the détente after the sharp pressures of war time society gave way to a pent up longing for 'fun.' The cheap journalism of the present script, is expressed fully in the vulgar, leering faces of the photographers, as they drive by the Saijo-Aoye pair as they make their ways back to the hotel in which both of them, by pure coincidence, are staying.

PLOT

The drama opens onto a mysterious scene in the Japanese mountains. Four or five country walkers have gathered around a handsome bearded man who has set up his easel directly across from a snowcapped mountain range. The small group is knotted together, considering a painter's strokes. It's as though the group is working together as a single mind, to solve a strategic problem. In the midst of this conference a

young woman comes up, announces that she has just missed her bus, and joining the group in conversation and reflection.

This scene rapidly grows idyllic, and dissolves only when two of the principals, the singer and the painter, both realize that it is time to get back to their lodging--it turns out they are both booked in the same hotel. Aoye offers Saijo a ride back to his hotel on the motorcycle. Little do they suspect that as they are returning to the hotel they are spotted by a roving van of reporters, from a large scandal hungry Tokyo newspaper. What those guys want, of course, is some good shots of the two artistes together, a pretext for an insinuation of an affair between the two. (The fact is, of course, that the two have never met each other before. The script's entire development turns around this fabricated affair, The absurdity of the truth being invented here beggars the imagination and yet includes within itself the germ of the whole contemporary sense of 'the news.')

On the way back to their hotel, Saijo is asked by the reporters for an interview, for the scandal magazine *Amour*, and as she refuses the reporters vow to take vengeance. Aoye, furious, vows to sue the magazine, an act which sets off the following media circus. In the next days Aoye finds himself increasingly angry at the reporters' invasion of his privacy. Out of the blue a seedy down and out lawyer enters and agrees to take on the case. He claims to share Aoye's values in the present case, and to be as furious as is the painter. Aoye hires the lawyer Hiruta--the name means 'leech-field.' The lawyer, however, takes the case because he is desperate for money, to provide medical expenses for his terminally ill daughter. And thanks to this consideration, the lawyer takes a bribe from *Amour*, the scandal magazine, and throws the trial. The results are disastrous for Saijo and Aoye. Hiruta himself feels crushed by shame at the goodness of Aoye and Saijo in their behavior toward his terminally ill daughter Masako. In the end, despite the touching generousities of Saijo and Aoye, Masako dies. The trial is shown to be fake, the editors of *Amour* phonies, but nothing is left for Aoye and Saijo from their initial bitter encounter in the mountains.

CHARACTERS

Aoye, the week end painter, is not --like Saijo--an artistic sensation who brings journalistic profiteering to the minds of *Amour* photographers and journalists. He is a cool sophisticated middle classer, a Sunday painter, who is not into the present situation for either romance or profit. Like Saijo he is simply beleaguered by the *Amour* journalists.

Saijo, the popular singer of classical Japanese music, is a sufficiently hot item, on the Tokyo serious music scene, that *Amour's* editors would love to trap her in a romantic engagement. She is a purely accidental target of this kind of salacious invasion of privacy and it infuriates her.

Attorney Hiruta, the sleazy lawyer who volunteers to take the case against the editors of *Amour*. He is a sentimental non professional, who is primarily concerned with his terminally ill daughter. In the end he puts what he sees as his daughter's interest first, taking a bribe from the editors of *Amour*. He throws the case in order to gain some more money for his daughter. The most crushing shame, for this impoverished loser, is that Saijo and Aoye are in the end the only ones who bring joy into his daughter's life, by taking her to the amusement park, and out into town.

Masako, Hiruta's daughter. Terminally ill but radiantly responsive to any acts of kindness. Unfortunately she is reduced to being a pawn in Hiruta's quest for money.

Masao Shimizu, the judge at the trial of the *Amour* paper. He, and the courtroom over which he presides, is formal and crisp, cuts a sharp contrast to the blubbery perspectives of lawyer Hiruta.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The most distinctive player in this script is arguably the lawyer Hiruta. His own dilemma--urgent need for cash-- drives his behavior and drives our need to feel pity for him. He is in fact an old fashioned figure of

melodramatic pathos, unable to deal with the pressures life is laying upon him. He loves his daughter but in an unfocussed way.

THEMES

The arts. The appreciation of the arts as a commodity enriching to its society is an appreciation new even in modern days, The arts as commodities sprang from a new understanding of the aesthetic, whereby art conveyed the cachet of new mind and personal styles and Inner constructions of the world. Underneath the crass materialism of the Amour aesthetic, hides a crafty sense of the power of art.

The News Historically speaking it will have been during the Renaissance that papers were printed and distributed regularly in local communities, recounting the news of the day. These texts were frequently expressive of official viewpoints and served as sounding boards for the local. It was not until our own time that the dubious purveying of scandal invaded the news giving function of the 'papers.'

Yellow Journalism The events of the present script evolve into yellow journalism, which is a ready outcome of various communicative systems. Wherever there is social communication there will be a corporate updrive of passion and desire.

Pathos. The down and out lawyer, Hiruta, who takes over the case against Amour. Is like a Dickensian figure out of Victorian England, schmalzy, on the rocks, idealistic, and hopelessly fond of his dying daughter. We see in him the explosion of an historical stereotype, in this instance beautifully balanced against the almost unreal virtuous couple at the center of the drama.

Human weakness The vulgarity of the journalists spills from their avid faces, as they drive past the couple who are returning to their hotel. Human weakness is the grotesque name of the game, for these crass historical newcomers. This theme is emblematic for Kurosawa, who is alert to the presentation of the universally human.

Courage and Dignity The Theme of the virtuous wronged but upstanding, the characterization of Aoye and Saijo, pops up constantly in the ongoing narration. The manner in which they bring order into Masako's life is exemplary.

SCENES

An artist and a well-known classical singer meet in the mountains, where he is painting and she is taking a walk. He offers her a ride on his motorcycle back to the mountain hotel at which they are both staying,

En route to the hotel a crew of photographers spots and photographs them, laughing with pleasure at the photo graphic write up they will be able to make of this new (false) affair. The painter and the singer have no romantic relationship at all.

The reporters ask Saijo for an interview but she refuses them and immediately they begin to plot against her. They make up a love story, 'The Love Story of Miyako Saijo,' and print it up for circulation.

Aoye is furious, sues Amour, and is ready to strike, when a down and out lawyer, claiming to share their fury, offers them his services. Aoye hires the lawyer but without realizing one important aspect of the case.

The lawyer desperately needs money, to pay the medical bills of his terminally ill daughter, and will accept a bribe, from Amour, in exchange for throwing the case.

Hiruta, the lawyer, is crushed with guilt, reviewing the kindness of Aoye and Saijo toward his daughter.

Masako dies. On the last day of court the lawyer confesses to have taken a bribe. The case is over. Amour loses. The two principals are left with little to hold onto.