

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RAN (1985)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Kurosawa was a magically versatile film maker, perhaps because he had come onto film from the direction of painting, from which art he exercised his sense of the flexibility of eye hand work. (The painter is close up and personal to the brushstrokes he defines himself by, He moves personally, one might say physically, through the colors and directions his physicality makes on the canvas. Consequently a life apprenticeship in painting prepares the film maker for dexterity in handling the equipmental aspects of film, the bulky cameras and the awkwardly material lighting systems of the cinema floor. Kurosawa brought to the grandeur of his epic historical films—he wrote three that typified the genre, the present *Ran*, based on *King Lear*, *Throne of Blood* (1957) based on *MacBeth*, *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), based on *Hamlet*—and lavished on them the time, money, and extravagant imagination he valued among his highest skills. It is remarkable that he addressed his creative skills to these three massive undertakings, but in close proximity was able to work though such touching or gentle films as *Dodeskaden*, *What a Wonderful Sunday*, or *The Silent Duel*. In all of those films Kurosawa subtly pursues the ins and outs of social-moral behavior. He can change gears from epic to pastoral then return to home base, to a pastorally flavored morality like *Red Beard*.

AUTEUR

The obvious wants saying first, that Kurosawa created the present film near the end of his career, and three decades after his other two epic adventure dramas, with a strong underground of Shakespeare's own foundation. So much for the unity and date of birth of the three master films in question. There is, however, another, and quite particular—not chronological-- bond among the later Shakespeare based films under consideration here. What theme joins the three cinemas? All three 'Shakespearean' films in question, like their Japanese counterparts, deal with a central Shakespearean theme which will go on to dominate and substantiate the particular film in question. The themes in question are: *Throne of Blood* (1955) —bloodletting between father and his kingdom; *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) --- revenge of a young man on the stepfather who has married his mom; *Ran* (1985)-- the calamitous decision of a father, to divide his kingdom among his three sons. It can be seen that a preoccupation with fatherhood and its dangerous powers dominates these master epics of Kurosawa.

FILM

Kurosawa first fell for the idea of *Ran* in 1970, when he read about the Sengoku era warrior, Mori Motonari, who had three sons who were exceptionally good. Kurosawa was intrigued by the interplay between the story of Moto Motonari and that of King Lear, and in the following years—until 1985—he let the thought of the present script 'sleep.' The chief content of this 'sleeping' was that Kurosawa began to reflect on how it would have worked out if Motonari's sons had been 'bad.' More than one critic has thought that Kurosawa was carrying out a discourse about himself, as he fabricated this film. Kurosawa has said that Hidetora, the grand old warlord of the film, who comes to face bad sons, 'is me.' The backdrop to this bitterness may well have been the 'world bitterness' that Kurosawa had been coming to feel in this later period of his life when the fates seemed to be against him. What was happening to him? For one thing he was low on money, because he spent to the max to make every film as fully realized as possible. As a result he had constantly to turn to foreign producers for support. For another he was plagued by ill health so intensely that he turned to an attempted suicide. (After *Redbeard*, 1965, Kurosawa's work had begun to seem old-fashioned, because the trends of Japanese culture were against him.) He was gradually building his sense of the relevance of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, to what he was

creating into, and by the time *Ran* started filming, in 1983, Kurosawa had a rich ferment of historical and personal bitterness out of which to create his last mega film.

Acting and Music

Kurosawa was a perfectionist director. (More than one studio found him too perfectionist to support. And refused to continue doing so.) In the present epic, as in his various epic tending films, Kurosawa integrates elements of traditional Noh theater acting, highly stylized, tending to substitute gesture for speech, and within the gesture realm changes of stance. prone to sudden moves and brusque transitions of extended silence. (In the present film two characters in particular—Hidetora and Lady Kaede—particularly reflect this Noh tradition.) The heightening of intensity, carried through in abrupt silences, sharply concentrates the audience's attention.

The stylization of acting paralleled the remarkable stylization of *Ran's* music, on which the brilliant Toru Takemitsu had contracted, already in 1976, to collaborate. This agreement was of high importance to Kurosawa, who laid great significance on the music of his cinema. Through years of working on the pan harmonic features of the present film, Kurosawa and Takemitsu passed from one ruling concept to another, which was almost its opposite: from the dominance of a 'shrill voice' chant style, to a Mahleresque fullness. The film as it stands upon release is as deep chested and in-flow as its pulsating action seems to allow. If all this collateral richness of the film seems almost to exceed what one observant watcher could deal with, it is worth letting ourselves backward into the depth of Kurosawa's own imagination. Of the many relevant details here—the number of horses, the number of tailor made coats, the number of mail armories—it is almost the most telling that Kurosawa spent more than a decade creating the storyboards for *Ran*, before the release of the film; which has to mean that this director, who had opened his career as a director, entered the present filming process with a multi layered, and astonishingly rich, composite of the entire film in his mind, a modest simulacrum of the creative process which will have engendered our universe.

PLOT

Kurosawa takes us into the meaning of the madness which seems to characterize the present film, itself based on the madness of King Lear, the central mover of the King Lear of Shakespeare's tragedy of that name. In each drama a titular King of yet unchallenged authority tires of his monarchy, and determines to give away his kingdom to his descendants, Shakespeare's Lear to his three daughters, Kurosawa's Hidetora to his three sons. One is given little, in either case, to fathom the motives of these seminal decisions. In Kurosawa's treatment each of the sons receives one of three castles, the First Castle going to Taro, the eldest, the second to Jiro, the third to Sanburo, who is, however sent into exile for criticizing the lecture, on the essential importance of unity, which Hidetora has given the three men. Anything but unity unfolds from this point, in fact something much more like chaos, the sense of the term 'Ran' which Kurosawa gave to this film.

The next significant break in unity occurs when Taro, spurred on by his vengeful wife, begins an action to drive out his father. Driven from his castle, Hidetora betakes himself to Jiro's castle, but in fact only discovers that his son wants him gone. As Hidetora and his retinue wander farther, the Old King learns that Taro has put out a curse on anyone who aids his father. Hidetora proceeds with his retinue to the castle that was initially given to Saburo, and which now lies unoccupied. When that castle is set on fire, Hidetora strides off alone onto a lava plain, his madness growing. Saburo and Jiro scatter in search of the old man, while skirmishing against one another. Saburo and Hidetora reconcile, but at this point Saburo is shot dead by a long shot from Jiro's forces. At this point the old man, Hidetora, dies of grief. The film ends with more of the chaos and disorder which have driven the sons into murderous interrelations with one another. Chaos prevails.

CHARACTERS

Hidetora. *Hidetora* is the founder of the action of the script and film. While in this sense he is parallel to King Lear, he is profoundly different as a personality, a brutal warlord where Lear was at worst a fool.

Hidetora is quite capable of murder, blinding, and arson in the name of his lands, and, as we see in the end, reaps little warmth or friendship. Koami the court jester is arguably the only friend of Hidetora. The Grand Old Man whose decision to divide his kingdom among his three sons generates the chaos which ultimately the film becomes. In the end he dies of grief at the death of his son, Saburo.

Taro, eldest son of Hidetora. He inherits the First Castle. He becomes head of the Ichimonji clan.

Jiro. Second son of Hidetora, inheritor of the Second Castle.

Saburo, Third son of Hidetora, sent into exile for criticizing his father's attitude toward unity.

Lady Kaede, wife of Taro, and bitter enemy of Hidetora, who had witnessed the murder and blinding.

Lady Sue, wife of Taro.

Tsurumaru. Brother of Lady Sue.

Kurugane. Killer of Lady Sue.

Kyoami. The court fool.

Tango. Hidetora's servant. Sent into exile with Saburo.

THEMES

Old Age. Hidetora, like his counterpart King Lear, is from the outset of the film well into the mental instability we associate with advanced age. He rules over his sons as though they were children, and he lectures them on the basic principles of unity. He can deal with the sharpest blows—his children's turning against him—but only by wandering farther out onto the plain with his retinue.

Chaos. Kurosawa was to remark that the present film was simply a metaphor for nuclear assault, thus the maximum degree of chaos and confusion. What else do we discover, by the end of the film, with the death of Hidetora? Unity of purpose has been scattered to the winds, and no directionality remains.

Warfare. Conflict leading to warfare is inevitable and normal in this mediaeval cultural setting. The military actions of the time have recently been reinforced by the introduction, from the West, by a potent new weapon, the arquebus, which brought with it new horizons of power and conquest.

Unity. Unity is the ideal toward which Hidetora strives, from the outset of the film, when he shows his sons how difficult it is to break apart three bound-together sticks. The entire film, however, seems devoted to the rule of chaos over unity.

Power. By turning over his kingdom to his three sons, Hidetora turns over to them his own Power. In different hands, different powers assume new forms. From Hidetora's death are already emerging several new centers of power. Is power a thing or an idea?