

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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I Live in Fear (1955)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Three decades before this film the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought an end to a World War, brought suffering and horror to hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens, and brought the stark global realization that mankind was fully able to destroy itself. It was now widely understood that only brutal destruction would force an end to the jungle rapacity of mankind. The movie before us deals with one fictional Japanese man and his family, and the fallout left by the atomic bomb in their deeply impacted family. Should this persistence of global war history sound exaggerated, we might review the recent cinematographic success of the film *Oppenheimer* (2023), which managed to become a crashing success, entering with high care into the complex and awesome details of the atomic energy assault on Japan, and the technological as well as human and moral issues which were involved in staging the brutal finale of World War Two.

Auteur The extremities of dread, to which innumerable Japanese found themselves consigned in the post-Hiroshima era, are not hard to appreciate, given the continuity of cruelty and suffering which marks our global culture today. We have become used to public behavior which crushes the individual.—carpet bombing of innocent populations, school shootings on all sides, drones filling the skies, pager attacks, all the way to an indifference to human values which amounts to indifference to the human condition altogether. Can we detect a similar degradation in the portrayal of human behavior in Kurosawa's work, There is a readiness for physical brutality in the Sanshiro boxing episodes, for criminal violence under the guise of kidnapping, the most heartless of crimes, for vast and destructive military maneuvers, as in *Throne of Blood*; a familiarity with brutality is there, in Kurosawa's work palette. It is in Kurosawa's vein to interrelate with the whole human condition, though in the end, if we can put this fine point on it, Kurosawa is far from the belly laughing Falstaff for whom all the world's a stage.

Film The present film is the last on which Kurosawa worked with the musician Fumio Hayasaka, who died of tuberculosis in 1955; their first previous film together was *Drunken Angel* (1948). Fumio was a close friend of Kurosawa. The two men thought together, collaborating together on the 'oppositional relation between music and theater.' It was Kurosawa's opinion that in cinema music should be used as a physical image counterpoint to the visual image. This discovery was of trademark importance for Kurosawa, and the results pervade his entire opus. He recalls that he hit on the theme of the present film, *I Live in Fear*, while discussing this musicological topic with Fumio. Kurosawa's angle of vision was still loose, at this point, but without doubt he was reaching for a view point from which he could again addresses the widest possible purview of his film. Kurosawa's trademark was this kind of breadth, and music widened his sense of the breadth of the visual image. Fumio contributed greatly to this growth in Kurosawa's breadth of vision.

Historical background The gruesome aftermath of the bomb dropping, over Japan, so far exceeds any cinematographic gift for representation that more than critic has questioned whether the impact of such an event can truly be captured in art. Kurosawa does his best with the resources available to him. Mifune's brilliant but manic fan waving may seem extravagant as does, perhaps, the whole idea of a refuge in Brazil, and a swap with the Japanese farmer currently living on the land. One might go further, in questioning the verisimilitude of the present film, though not in the spirit of cavil, but rather in the interest of sizing up Kurosawa's range. How convinced are we by the furious family struggles over the question of inheritance? Does the deep conflict evinced in the courtroom slide into the narrative on the same level as the world changing dimensions of the bombing over Hiroshima? To complete this range of critical thoughts, turn back to Kurosawa's early film *Scandal*. One has to feel discomfort here. The

courtroom scene which exonerates the singer/painter duo carves out an almost Dickensian slice of early modern 'realism,' which takes a toll on the mytho-narrative of the whole film. Cinema has its limits in depicting the absolute music of the whole.

PLOT

The overall theme of *I Live in Fear* is simple, but strays from the normally successful narrative line of Kurosawa's work. It is neither an urban *film noir*, a samurai grounded historical struggle, nor a growing up tough film like *Drunken Angels* or *Yojimbo*. *I Live in Fear* is one of Kurosawa's few films to deal with acting out in contemporary reality. This director is a master—of giving us the feeling of being here now in an urban city center; urban décor; criss crossing of traffic patterns; industrial transportation blending with pedestrians.

The plot is built directly into this turmoil, which is so familiar we take it for the essence of reality. The film builds with a cast of co-workers—the musician and composer Fumio Hayasaka, who was the lifetime collaborator with Kurosawa, and who died in the course of the present filming; the brilliant actor Toshiro Mifune, who is by this time a staple of the landmark Kurosawa film. And it goes this way.

Kiichi Nakajima—an aging and wealthy foundry owner, played by Mifune—is haunted by the memory of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and by the devastating dread that he, and his beloved family, will be destroyed by an imminent return of such a nuclear disaster. Kiichi decides that the safest and kindest way to protect his family is to get them out of the area of danger. He decides that the safest plan is to take the whole bunch to refuge in Brazil, where they will be free from nuclear danger. This emphasis on safety is foremost for the old man, and his intentions toward the security of his kith and kin is of total interest to him. Unfortunately the larger family is extensive—two surviving mistresses, three illegitimate children, along with his wife and their four children. Kiichi's intention is benign, if questionable, but like all patriarchies that of the old man does not pass without challenge.

Kiichi's three oldest children are preoccupied with questions of inheritance and what they see themselves as standing to lose by the move to Brazil. They convince Kiichi's wife to have her husband declared incompetent, so that he will not be able to waste his family's inheritance on the move to Brazil. At this point Kurosawa introduces a telling plot turn. Kiichi is brought before a three person arbitration panel, designed to adjudicate family conflicts. One of the members of that arbitration committee is a dentist who volunteers his time to the committee and who is destined to become a significant friend of the wealthy old man. Dr. Harada will soon play an important role in the life of the foundry owner. For the moment, however, we need only to know that the committee, with the one dissenting voice of Dr Harada, has voted to find Kiichi incompetent to make ultimate decisions concerning his children's inheritance.

Subsequent events show us the onset of Kiichi's genuine obsession with safety. He is determined to pursue his Brazilian plan, but events and decisions are against him and he begins to lose control of his sanity. Ultimately he hits on a madman's solution, to deprive his family of all source of livelihood in Japan, and thereby to turn their minds toward the advantages of seeking safety in Brazil. What does he do? He burns down his foundry in order to destroy the family's livelihood. Total breakdown takes over. Kiichi is sent to the psychiatric hospital.

Dr. Harada visits Kiichi in the Psychiatric Clinic, and while waiting to talk with the doc he learns that that gentleman believes it may be more insane to ignore the nuclear threat than to let the fear of it dominate your life. Pressing farther with the psychiatrist, Dr. Harada makes the discovery that Kiichi is far deeper than is reasonable into the outer limits of safety search. A critical moment is reached in the meeting between Kiichi and Harada; Kiichi believes he has escaped to another planet; Kiichi grows agitated as he watches the sun shining in though his window; he concludes that the earth is burning.

CHARACTERS

Toshiro Mifune, portrays the wealthy and ultimately insane foundry owner, Kiichi Nakajima.

Dr. Harada, the modest and thoughtful dentist

Jiro Nakajima, Kiichi's second eldest son.

Toyo Nakajima, Kiichi's wife.

Haruko Togo, Kiichi's eldest daughter.

Multiple collateral children and inlaws of Kiichi Nakajima.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kiichi Nakajima is a hyper wealthy foundry owner, in Tokyo, who has been deeply scarred by the memory of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. He is haunted by the dread of a recurrence of this tragedy, and of the destruction it will bring to him and his family. Having eventually been committed, as unfit to make decisive financial moves for his family, his accumulation of dreads and fantasies leads him to burn down his foundry. He is a victim of his own obsessions.

THEMES

Dread. Kiichi is the victim of his way of possessing a dread which will not dissipate, which is rooted in an indissoluble past moment. There is little prospect that dread will 'go away.'

Terror is the sudden onset of horror, and is likely to attack one instantaneously. Terror 'comes and goes.'

Insecurity Is a natural partner to dread. Insecurity is a relatively diffuse partner, will come and go, and cannot be 'thought away.'

Dominance is a deep rooted trait, usually grounding itself in provable power.

Possessiveness. Kiichi believes that he possesses his family, because he gives them orders, and of his own volition, by destroying his foundry, can make them totally dependent on him. It is his way of possessing these people.

Madness lies at the end of dangerously repeated frustrations. When an obsessive industrialist is thwarted definitively by the family he believes he is trying to save, there is no way for him to return into routine life patterns.