

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Drunken Angel 1948

Akira Kurosawa 1910-1998

OVERVIEW

Auteur Akira Kurosawa was born two decades before the outbreak of the Second World War and only one decade before the outbreak of the First World War. In other words his life, as it developed from the beginning to nearly the end of the century, exposed him to wars hot and cold, which left him fully prepared for a directorial career that plunged him deeply into the painful underbellies of social life.

Film Kurosawa directed more than thirty films. His first major breakthrough, after the end of the Second World War, and the capitulation of the Japanese Empire, was *Drunken Angel*, a *film noir* set in just post war Tokyo, and centered around an alcoholic doctor practicing in the city slums. The protagonist of the present film, Toshiro Mifune, had caught the attention of Kurosawa years before, and the two men would go on to make fifteen more films together.

Historical Background The historical background of the present film is not far to look for. A devastating Second World War--truly a *world war*--has just come to an end with the bombing of Hiroshima, and an exhausted nation, Japan, has been temporarily wiped out. The doctor of the film, a medically trained survivor of hell, is not only living as a practicing doctor in the slums, but, in the scenarios into which we are directly plunged, is dealing with the 'poorest of the poor' in the Tokyo suburbs.

SYNOPSIS

Doctor Sanada is a medical doctor practicing in a post war setting of shacks, battered buildings, detritus and a constant back and forth of distracted, shabby, and soulless looking war survivors. Black and white barely does justice to the tone or tint of this dehumanized landscape. In this desolate setting the distracted and frequently wild eyed doctor receives a night patient in great pain from a knife or bullet wound. The person needs quick medical attention which is provided, and after calming down a little manages to fill in his story. He is a *yakuza*, a member of an international crime syndicate, and has been wounded in a knife fight with a rival gang. From the start, then, the present film unrolls on the margins of that criminal subculture which wars frequently spawn as they sputter out.

Doctor Sanada eventually diagnoses the *yakuza* with tuberculosis, and prevails on the guy to accept treatment. The interplay of emotions between the two men invokes the complexity and pathos of the whole film, for neither the doctor's humanity nor the *yakuza*'s reluctance to accept continuing treatment can be fully satisfied, and the two men tussle with this issue while the film opens out onto wider scenes of social decay. An uneasy friendship develops between the two men, with Matsunaga (the *yakusa*) agreeing periodically to submit to the medical care of Doctor Sanada. Something has to intervene between the two men, to break this deadlock between healing and the cultural jungle in which Matsunaga is plunged.

That something is the release from prison of Okada, the brother and gang boss of Matsunaga, who carries with him various resentments. He resents the imperious fashion in which large parts of his gang responsibility have been turned over to Matsunaga. Okada is anxious and belligerent because his ex-girlfriend is working as an assistant to the nurse of Dr. Sanada. While Dr Sanada continues seeing patients, life goes on, the doctor remaining especially conscious of one girl whose TB treatment is going on especially well. We notice her. We will see her later.

The inevitable next stage of violence sets in as Matsunaga finds himself increasingly drawn back into his old orbit of petty crime, drinking and indifference to the quality of his life. One event is crucial. Matsunaga

collapses and passes out in the middle of a dice game, and is taken to Sanada's clinic. There he finds Okada, who has come to find *his* old girl-friend. Okada and Matsunaga clash headlong, Matsunaga finally realizing that Okada and the syndicate are trying to push him out. Okada orders the storeowners in his shake down neighborhood to stop doing business with Matsunaga's henchmen. The two men are at mortal odds.

Matsunaga heads to the Police, to report Okada's behavior, then goes straight to Okada's apartment, where the two men fight each other to the ground. In a mortal fight, Okada stabs Matsunaga to death. Matsunaga's boss refuses to pay for the funeral of his subordinate; the tab for the funeral is picked by a local barmaid who had planned a future with the *yazuka*. The doc is furious with Matsunaga for not having taken care of himself, but is pacified by what he discovers upon returning to the clinic. Miyo shows signs of recovery from her TB. The doctor takes the young lady down the street for a celebratory sweet.

CHARACTERS

Dr Sanada the head of a small clinic on the outskirts of devastated post-war Tokyo. He is a capable doctor, cares for his patients deeply, flies into a rage when his patients disregard his instructions.

Matsunaga. The *yakuza* who bursts into the Doctor's office late at night; a classic punk, sallow and skinny, chain-smoking. And of course tubercular.

Miyo. The doctor's favorite, a young girl on the gradual mend from TB. By the film's end her virtually total recovery has shed a light of joy over the entire film.

Okada. The superior to Matsunaga in the *yakusa* syndicate; a fairly big time criminal. In the end he murders Matsunaga.

Assembled filler characters, color and background providers: punk, guitar player, singer, dancer, flower shop proprietor, schoolgirl.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dr. Sanada

Compassionate. His overriding trait is care for the cure of his patients; his fury is aroused by his patients' refusal, or unwillingness, to follow his medical instructions. As he walks through the mud hole streets of his part of the war torn, he stops to give a small boy essential hygienic advice; as he wrestles and fistfights with Matsunaga, his *yakusa* patient and nemesis, the doctor is both acting out his drunkenness and expressing his deep frustration, that his medical knowledge is not being respected or bearing fruit.

Volatile. Sanada has the alcoholic's instability of temper, and will fly off the handle when Matsunaga crosses him, even at the time when the two men are starting to bond in a friendship.

Unpredictable. t the close of the film the doctor walks off into town with his favorite patient, a young girl who has been following his regimen carefully, and is recovering from her TB. He is buying her a celebratory sweet, to our delight and surprise.

Alcoholic. This by product of volatility and depression is the downer forever threatening the doctor's compassion and idealism.

Matsunaga

Punkish. Matsunaga is a small fry punk belonging to the *yazuka* syndicate, an urban gang infamous in Japan for two centuries for its practices of neighborhood shakedowns. Matsunaga shares the low class

group think, convinced that rough and ready street slugging is a legitimate way to earn your bread and booze.

Terrified. First brought to the doctor's attention through a painful bullet wound the doctor bandages, Matsunaga learns from the doctor that he has tuberculosis. Terrified, the punk begins to form a bond with the doctor, who looks like the only salvation.

Loser. In the end, shortly before he is killed by Okada, Matsunaga realizes that he is being treacherously ousted by his local gang syndicate. His world crumbles.

Okada

Criminal. The real thing. At the end of a serious jail sentence, just released, ready for revenge. He targets an old girlfriend, working for the doctor, and Matsunaga, his syndicate subordinate. His first thought is to get even.

Power driven. Basically faceless, as we see him here, Okada is driving toward the top of the power pyramid, within his *yakuza* syndicate. He treats Matsunaga like shit.

THEMES

Anger. The doctor, as a representative of skill, is deeply pained by human refusal to care for itself, to exercise intelligence on its own behalf. Doctor Sanada grows furious when Matsunaga proves unable to work toward curing himself. A brutal fight follows, between the two men.

Compassion. It is the beauty of Dr Sanada that he wants to cure and care for, wherever he goes a *yakuza* who comes to his office; a little boy standing in the rain and mud, who needs advice. While capable of irrational fury, and sensitive to all the triggers that generate alcoholism, the doctor can return inside himself to a basic level of care for others.

Terror. Though the terrible is everywhere, we see little of it in this film. We do see that Matsunaga is terrified of Tuberculosis, and for a surprising time that terror suffices to make him follow the doctor's orders.

Hope. The element of hope is sharply rationed in this film, but Kurosawa saves it for the end, where it packs the greatest punch. To appreciate this element of hope we need to have been following the curve of the doctor's mind, with its intense devotion to curing. Note how scrupulously he inspects each new x ray handed him. When the young woman he fancies approaches him with a smile on her face, and hands him what is obviously an improved reading, it is obvious that the doctor's heart springs with hope.

Joy. Having seen extraordinary x ray proof, that his small girlfriend is recovering from her disease, the doctor fills with joy, and walks the young lady into town, to enjoy a sweet. Both of them are smiling joyfully. We feel the whole *noir* film burst with life.

Caring. The doctor, who is plying his skill in medicine, in a swamp hole of postwar Tokyo--contemporary readers will have no trouble writing in the bombed out Gaza strip--is contending with a cesspool of diseases, and is the lone representative, in the film, of human training in action

Fighting. The *film noir* is above all an immersion in the darkness of the world. There is in fact little brightness in *Drunken Angel*. The streets are black, the lights are dim or out. When it comes down to person to person confrontation, as between the doctor and Matsunaga, the name of the game is the inarticulate darkness of hand to hand combat.

Destruction. The circumambient scene, inside which this film unfolds, is all decline, breakdown, deep loss. Even light has been assaulted, with barely a glimpse of natural daylight throughout the film.

Addiction. The Tokyo streets, into which the doctor wanders periodically, are full of nightclubs, bars, houses of prostitution, and drinking halls. It is easy to imagine the pull of such appealing dens on a susceptible young hood like Matsunaga. Money comes in through petty crime. And one can lead a life of almost complete anonymity.

Disease. Toxic atmosphere seeps down into the very corners of postwar Tokyo. We feel that Dr. Sanada's small curative enclave is fighting a losing battle, located as it is square in the middle of a muddy swamp.

Healing. The doctor's act of healing arts belongs to his larger healing mindset. While he grows violent, when Matsunaga neglects himself, it is a violence against human stupidity and has love at its base

Criminality. The *yakuza* syndicate, which spreads its influence over the main actions of the film, has its roots in two centuries of Japanese history, and specializes in neighborhood or community shakedown operations. Matsunaga and Okada occupy different rungs on the *yakuza* hierarchy; their bitter conflict springs from their *yakuza* competitiveness.

SCENES

1 War torn streets of Tokyo. The film opens onto the darkness of a bombed over city, war-destroyed Tokyo. We approach the dilapidated area of Dr. Sanada's clinic, moving through stark and sinister music.

2 Matsunaga visits Doctor's Clinic. Wild eyed punk both in terror and defiance. Great cinematic attention to depiction of interior environment; cigarette smoke haze, papers scattered on desk, hectic urban scenes, seen through the window, outside in the street. 3 Doctor Sanada is used to nighttime visits, in his battered area of the capital. The young *yakuza*--neighborhood shakedown ruffian--who bursts in has survived a gun fight; the doctor bandages his arm; great pain. High tension in the room; vengeance may be immediately following in the *yakuza's footsteps*. 4 Doctor suspicious at Matsunaga's coughing? Is it TB? The doctor is a close follower of symptoms, and in the present instance welcomes the opportunity to put the fear of god in his uneasy visitor.

3 Second visit On a later visit of Matsunaga the doctor hears the young punk--the Doctor expresses forthright contempt for this thug syndicate-- coughing, and confirms suspicion of tuberculosis. The talk of such possibility puts Matsunaga in a panic. Doc fights with Matsunaga, who resists taking medical instructions. Awkward and violent fistfight and wrestling match, all over the room. Doc is startlingly violent and agile.

4 Doctor's life From the outside we begin to enter the complex mind of the doctor, who scorns negligent patients, for their self-negligence, but will pursue them angrily if they disregard his medical instructions. With this doctor emotions come quickly to blows, and he tussles like a wildcat. The doc walks through the market. He is cordial and relaxed. We know that he is a multi-sided personality, capable of charm, such as we will note at the end of the film, when he will stroll into town with Miyo to celebrate over a sweet. This is one of the few occasions on which we see the doc outside, let alone with folks in the street, like a 'regular citizen.' Not unusually the doc drops off at the establishment of a local bartender, who has something special to offer him.

5 Matsunaga's life Matsunaga returns to his old ways. Nightclub, dance hall. Peer pressure from tough guy gang members. This tough is made up of cowardice and group think. In the end he has lost even his position in the *yakuza* hierarchy. Matsunaga is a weak character, and though he has temporarily drifted into the friendship orbit of Doctor Sanada he gradually returns to his old ways--booze and women--and loses whatever self-discipline he has acquired. The effect on his body is manifest. Matsunaga passes out during a game of dice. He splats out onto the floor, while his buddies laugh at him. He has lost all honor and dignity.

6 Matsunaga comes back to Dr. Sanada's clinic Matsunaga is taken to Sanada's health clinic, where he is reviled for abandoning his treatment plan. Sanada brings out his characteristically multiple attitude toward this guy, whom he sees both as a son and a buddy.

7 *Okada returns* Freed from prison, Okada arrives at Sanada's clinic. He precedes his arrival with eery riffs on his guitar. He has in the past been a lover of Dr. Sanada's nurse, who as we have learned is still fond of him. Fond and scared. The atmosphere is taut. Eager for vengeance, the freed prisoner returns, playing at his guitar, to the place where he believes he will find his old girlfriend. Matsunaga goes to the Police to report the dangerous behavior of Okada.

8 *Matsunaga and Okada fight* By now--after Okada has squeezed Matsunaga out of his position with the yakusa crime syndicate-- we understand what a life and death struggle confronts the two men. Matsunaga confronts Okada at his apartment, where he is looking for his own old girlfriend. Okada engages his former friend in hand to hand combat, then kills him with a knife slash.

9 After Matsunaga dies The doctor and his nurse, who has always had a soft spot for Okada, bemoan the tragic conclusion of Matsunaga's brief life. A local barmaid, who has in the past been friendly to Matsunaga, is shocked to learn that no one will pay the funeral expenses for the young man. She fills with the same compassion that often comes to life in Doctor Sanada. The lost and lonely grow sweet to her.

10 *Good news* The doc receives the good news that the young girl he treasures, and who is on the mend from Tuberculosis, is getting decisively better. His face is radiant. He banterers with the girl. He helps us to see what a big heart he has, *The doc strolls into town with his patient , ' to buy her a celebratory sweet.* They are both beaming; we have vigorous confirmation that the doctor cares above all for the welfare of his patients, a powerful virtue that overrides his periodic alcoholic violence.