

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Red Beard (1965)

Akira Kurosawa (1910-98)

OVERVIEW

Red Beard is the last film--sixteenth-- that Kurosawa directed with Toshiro Mifune, with whom Kurosawa had for decades formed almost a single mind. It is impossible to separate the growth processes of the two men, so easily do they embody one another's points of view.

The inspiration for the present film was a chance reading of a short story collection by Shogiro Yamamoto, published in 1959. Deep in the background of Kurosawa's imagination lies the present tale which takes place in Kashikawa, a district of Edo (presently Tokyo) during the end of the Tokugawa period (1603-1857), a tale which harvests a rich familiarity of historical reference still unbroken from the earliest periods of modern Japanese history. It is important to add that Kurosawa also read Dostoyevsky into the present story: *Humiliated and Insulted* (1861) works the same territory as *Red Beard*, tracking issues of pain and humiliation in the shaping of a full human personality. We might want to say that both creators, Dostoyevsky and Kurosawa, deepen themes which were central to the Existentialism of their day. Each creator was deeply concerned with issues of social inequality and injustice.

Film The present film, not only the last to be created in collaboration with Mifune, but Kurosawa's last black and white film, touches on issues which spoke deeply to Kurosawa's own historical moment, one in which existential queries--what is mankind's fundamental condition, what kind of action bears most relevance to that condition?--were on every thinking person's mind. It is thus not surprising that Kurosawa's work of this period was highly acclaimed. *Rashomon*, for instance, startled the film world by winning the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice Film Festival. In 1990 Kurosawa received the Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement. After his death he was proclaimed 'Asian of the Century' for Arts, Literature and Culture, by *Asian Week Magazine* and CNN.

SYNOPSIS

A young medical graduate, trained at a Dutch Medical School in Nagasaki, has been assigned to do his initial hands on medical practice at a local clinic, and though the move is below the level he wants, he accepts the assignment, presuming that it will suffice to put him on the fast track for a position as personal physician to the Shogun. This fast track was to be expected by higher ranked medical candidates. However the young man is bitterly disappointed by the clinic he finds, the backwoods atmosphere, and the simple demeanor of the clinic director, Red Beard, who is in fact a wise and compassionate person, who will in the end prove to be the true voice of instruction and healing.

A younger doctor, who is leaving to work in a larger city clinic, commiserates with Yasumoto on his bad luck at the new assignment, and departs abruptly, leaving Yasumoto to fend for himself. The newcomer visits the facility warily. He is visibly troubled by the grotty residents scattered about, and by his own unrecognized status. He suspects the director, Dr. Niide, of wanting to see his, Yamamoto's, medical notes from Nagasaki; he refuses to see patients, which is expected of the staff, and he even refuses to wear his uniform. The course of his wandering about brings him to a 'secret garden,' the hang out corner for a disturbed patient of the Director, an unnerving encounter for Yasumoto. Yasumoto feels and expresses total disdain for his environment and is on the verge of leaving abruptly. Then he gets truly bad news; his fiancée has left him for another man. At this point some drastic redirection of events is required, to bring the new doctor back into the world.

Assigned to patients, Yasumoto is gradually lured into the life of another. Redbeard introduces him to a young woman who has been raped, has knife-murdered her killer, and who in the throes of sexual passion finds herself prepared to murder Yasumoto. (He is saved from an early death by the sudden entry of the wise and experienced Red Beard onto the scene.) In the course of this harrowing and dangerous encounter, in which the director emerges as a kind of salvation figure, Yasumoto learns far more about this modest Red Beard--that (like the doctor figure in *Drunken Angel*-- this medical mind is enlightened and modern, analytical and supportive--and perhaps registers the first cracks in his, Yasumoto's, armor of defiance. A second informative exposure is awaiting our novice. Red Beard introduces Yasumoto to an elderly man dying of cancer. He is in great pain, and, as Red Beard remarks, will not speak. His agony filled profile, staring upward in silence, seems to have words to leave, but leaving none, penetrates the mind of Yasumoto. A third visit takes Yasumoto to the bedside of a man who has killed his wife; she put a dagger into his hand, and in a violent pretend embrace had him hold her 'closer, closer' until he had forced his knife to disembowel her. One might say that in this clinic tour the doctor has unfolded a memento mori drama before his reculant trainee. At this point the worm is about to turn, the response system of Yasumoto to soften; Kurosawa makes one of his bold narrative redirects.

Yasumoto falls ill from strain, tension, and the powerful experiences he is letting himself be put through. Red Beard chooses to put Yasumoto's cure in the hands of a twelve year old girl whom Yasumoto has himself been working with. Otoyō is given this assignment as part of her own healing, when a surprise development intervenes. Masae, the younger sister of Chiguse, the fiancée who had jilted Yasumoto, comes on a visit to the clinic, telling Yasumoto that his mother wants a visit from him. Through his mother, Yasumoto learns that Chiguse has had a child with her new lover. Masae generously makes a kimono for Otoyō, while Yasumoto's mother shows an interest in marriage between her son and Masae. At this point we can just see Yasumoto self-criticizing. His life has become the hub of a deluge of learning experiences. He is mellowing as he sees how much suffering and cruelty there is around him.

The inevitable finale is upon Yasumoto. It is a small event that triggers the climax. A town boy, Chobu, is caught stealing bread from the clinic, and all interested parties are angry with him. Otoyō, however, shows him compassion, sharing out from the compassion she has received from Red Beard and Yasumoto. The madam of the brothel, where Otoyō had been indentured before going to the clinic, comes to reclaim her but the clinic staff refuse to let her be taken. They drive the madam away. When Chobu and his impoverished family try to poison themselves the clinic doctors save them.

Yasumoto is finally offered the job of personal physician to the Shogunate, the position that had driven him into medical studies. He agrees to marry Masae, but at their wedding makes a surprise announcement, that he will not accept the new position of physician to the shogunate, but will instead remain at the clinic and work with the poor, in collaboration with Red Beard. The lessons of cooperation and mutual care are being learned.

CHARACTERS

Dr. Kyojo Niide, a simple and wise regional doctor, Red Beard; adept at martial arts. The Director of the clinic to which Yasumoto is assigned. He is a strong and quiet clinic director, with a rough and ready approach to life. In the end he is the only person able to tame Yasumoto's arrogance.

Noboru Yasumoto, a new doctor at the clinic, fresh off his medical training. Yasumoto is the arrogant young medical appointee who arrives at the clinic full of contempt for its provincial squalor. The film traces the course of this man's one time arrogance as he finds himself immersed in the hard facts of life, death and mutual care.

Sahachi, a patient at the clinic who was widely revered by the locals but who had suffered a terrible loss, tricked by his wife into stabbing her to death. His mental suffering is excruciating.

Otoyō, first patient of Yasumoto. A walking survivor of her life in a nearby brothel. She gives Yasumoto unfamiliar examples of suffering and humbling. It is she who later brings Yasumoto back to health, and later Chobu; she takes pity on the destitute youngster who has stolen food from the clinic.

Rokusuke, dying man who can reveal his painful secrecy only upon the arrival of his desperately unhappy daughter.

Chiguse, unfaithful fiancée of Yasumoto who dumps him for another man. An exemplar of indifference to others.

Masae, younger sister of Choguse, model of the compassion which is deeply catching the attention of Yasumoto, and will lead him to marry her.

Chobu, the starving little boy of the clinic's neighborhood, who steals a loaf of bread from the clinic.

THEMES

Arrogance Yamamoto begins his career path with assumptions about how it will unfold. As a well-trained medical student, formed by a Dutch medical team in Nagasaki, he feels he can expect a smooth ascent through the professional hierarchy to the position of private physician of the shogun, the administrative head of the area. Armed with this confidence and conviction he encounters his first job sadly unprepared for reality, which turns out to hold unpleasant surprises for him. Arrogance has turned out to be a poor training ground for life.

Rejection Yamamoto sets himself up for defeat by his arrogant approach to his career. Rejection faces him--he is too bold and brash. Arrogance turns away those who might otherwise lend a sympathetic ear. Red Beard is confident, quiet, observant, and self-assured, and thus impervious to arrogance. Arrogance is a sign of weakness, and reduces one's combat readiness.

Humbling Humbling is the turning point emotion in the present film. Kurosawa is a master of building up our sense of the transition from arrogance to humility, the emotional course it seems Yasumoto's destiny to experience. This transition is gradual--with each new encounter, under the tutelary guidance of Red Beard,

Wisdom Red Beard himself is the seasoned exemplar of Wisdom. A lesser clinic director, faced with a newcomer like Yasumoto, might well have dismissed the arrogant lad. Instead, Red Beard strategically introduces the newcomer to deep (and even dangerous) examples of human suffering. He knows that the best curative for self-centeredness is immersion in the difficulties of others.

Compassion Compassion is the obverse of arrogance, so that Yasumoto has to learn, gradually, both to care for others and to care for others' impression of him. While he learns harshness from Chiguse's behavior toward him, her sister shows compassion and kindness wherever she goes. Masae it is who shows compassion toward Chobu and his impoverished family, and of course toward the once difficult Yasumoto, whom in the end she marries.

Maturing In the deepest sense this entire film is about maturing, and the steps required to attain it. Yasumoto initially makes little effort truly to recognize the existence of other people. What is it that changes, in the presence of Red Beard, and extracts another dimension from Yasumoto? The display of three rather broken human cases weakens the aggressive sensibility in the young medical student, who to this point in life has little close experience of the dark tales the body tells of the wounds inside it.