

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***High and low* (1963)**

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

We need only to think of films like *Dodeskaden* (1970) or *Drunken Angel* (1948) to grasp Kurosawa's sharp noir understanding of the dark postwar Japanese city. The former film tracks lives set on a big city dump, where the shantytown garbage dumps of the city coagulate into one metaphor of the human condition. *Drunken Angel*, produced just three years after the end of the war, deploys in a clinic on the muddy outskirts of Tokyo, among crowds of individuals battered by years of bombing and overall devastation. In both films the producer follows his life adage--don't turn away from anything--and shows us human society functioning close to its lowest urban depths.

**Auteur** Kurosawa joined the Japanese film industry in 1936, when this new entertainment form was starting to build new tastes and social behaviors throughout the industrialized world. Hollywood had already in the second decade of the century opened western consumer eyes to the delights and revenues of big screen entertainment, while Japanese film was commercially dynamic by the end of the nineteenth century. (It has remained among the top film industries in the world, both for its quality and for its revenues.) We can observe, both in the film ahead of us and in many of Kurosawa's films, as well as in the innovations he introduces, that Kurosawa sees himself as riding the crest of a dynamically growing form: he introduces, everywhere he goes as a director, new ways of doing the job of film making. (The present, popular film is as good a place as any to note kinds of innovation Kurosawa was working: exhaustive and detailed script editing, from the side of the auteur; sometimes never before tried shooting angles--for instance from between the hooves of running horses; unprecedented experiments in creating of authenticity, such as pouring many years worth of tea into cups in order to make them look, and be, authentically stained.

**Film** We have made a hasty effort to suggest the creativity and drive of Kurosawa's version of movie directing. He was in every sense a hands on director, with a growing sense of the technological possibilities of his historically rampant world moment. (In his last films he grew increasingly certain that mankind is being overflooded by the irresistible power of history.) The present film takes its part with other of the *auteur's* works which maintain a precise point in history for their standpoint, and watch the tides of time swirling around it. (Examples would be *Throne of Blood*, set squarely at the peak of the Japanese heroic-samurai period, or *Drunken Angel*, carved from the muddy and exhausted flanks of just post WW 2 Tokyo, beaten and down on its knees).

**Historical background** The American detective film took off, as a genre, in the 1930s, bringing to American, soon to the whole western world, watchers such fictive characters as Nora Charles, Charley Chan, Perry Mason, or Nancy Drew; thus a new kind of cinema-sensitized watching public was being created. This public had grown up through a Depression, only twenty years earlier, which had sensitized it to urban capital movements, to serious white collar crimes, and to the compelling fascination of police work, on the level at which crime entangled itself with major issues of social development and polity. And personal responsibility. The present film of Kurosawa will prove the maturity with which this Japanese genius will have known how to readapt an art form created thirty years earlier by the culture that had just defeated his own.

### SYNOPSIS

The present film is a 1963 police and crime film loosely based on the work of an American thriller writer, Evan Hunter (Ed Mc Bain). The present story, tapping into the new postwar capital world, focuses on a successful Japanese businessman who is on the brink of undertaking some large scale investments, in the shoe business; he is faced with an extremely pressing existential problem. He has available cash to

bankroll his new investment, but this cash would also satisfy the ransom instructions demanded by a kidnapper who has just kidnapped his son--or as turns out the son of the business man's chauffeur. There follow nights of agonized indecision for the businessman, sleepless nights in which Gondo, his wife, and the chauffeur battle it out. Finally Gondo decides to pay the ransom, and the money is thrown to the kidnappers in two small suitcases, thrown from a moving train. With this move Gondo makes himself seriously indebted to his company. The boy is found unharmed, and Gondo turns out to be a kind of national hero.

The police eventually find the hideout where the kidnapper's accomplices had done their work. The corpses of the accomplices are found in the hideout, killed by heavy doses of heroin. The kidnapping effort itself is traced to a medical student. (There is as yet no hard evidence linking the medical student to the killing of the two accomplices.) The police spread a false rumor that the accomplices are still alive, and that the ransom money is still waiting to be used. They manage to retrieve the money; too late, however to save Gondo from having to auction his property.

The kidnapper, at this point, facing a death sentence, wishes to see Gondo, as a visitor to his prison cell. Face to face they meet. The kidnapper at first pretends to apologize. Then gradually he admits to the great jealousy he had so long felt for Gondo and his mansion on the hill. In the end the kidnapper falls down weeping before Gondo, and confesses fully.

## CHARACTERS

*Gondo* The businessman central figure of the film. It is he who carries the weight of the narrative, because it is his son--actually the son of his chauffeur-- who is kidnapped, and he who must make the decision whether or not to pay the ransom.

*Inspector Tokura*, the chief police investigator in the case.

*Kawanishi* Gondo's secretary

*Chief Detective Taguchi* Tokura's partner

*Detective Aral* Detective Nakao: police investigators

*Aoki* Gondo's chauffeur

*Takeuchi Jinjiro* mastermind of the kidnapping action

*Takashi Shimura* Chief of the police investigation bureau

*Susumu Fujita* Manager of Investigations

*Detective Murata*

*Kamiya* National Shoes Publicity Director

*Ishimaru* National Shoes Design Department

*Baba* National Shoes Executive

*Aoki Shinichi* The chauffeur's son, who is kidnapped.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The brilliance of this film lies in the way the plot imposes character on the main performers, not in the fulness or richness of the characters themselves. The plot is spare but forceful, and works itself out after the spare pattern valued by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, in which he prioritizes plot over character. We identify from the beginning with the businessman Gondo, but that is because the dilemma in which he is immersed-- how to handle the ransom note from the kidnappers of his son--becomes the whole of his personality. Everything that follows, in the film, is a byproduct of Gondo's decision either to or not to pay the ransom. Would we say that Gondo wrestles with this problem, in the ways that Oedipus or Hamlet wrestle with the life and death issues facing them? Gondo is a man of business, carrying out a set of calculations over a material which is existential, human. This is true in a sense which transcends all local calculations. The calculations involve the question of whether Gondo should spend the ransom sum on another man's child--as it turns out--and in the process deprive himself of funds which properly belong only to his wife and son-- and to their futures? Gondo understands what compassion is, but has he a reserve of it to call upon in the present crisis? The dilemma he faces--unlike those of Hamlet or Oedipus-- is thus one of the heart, rather than one of duty, and in the end it is hardly more than fate or 'good luck' that Gondo's son turns up unharmed.

## THEMES

**Envy** In the end the kidnapper, as he himself confesses to Gondo in prison, has been driven by envy of Gondo's relatively grand multistory house on the hill, placed where the kidnapper's envious eyes can see it, every day on his way to work. (He is a medical intern, working in a hospital). His envy melds blurringly into a sense that he could himself procure the delights of such a mansion by harvesting some of the bounty created by the mansion's owner.

**Routinization** In the second part of the film, during the police investigation of the kidnapping, we see bureaucracy at work. Inspectors with their techy specialties dissect the elements of the kidnapping, each in his own way illustrating the soulless mode of contemporary society, a society which in the present case is trying to solve a devastatingly private issue. There is much social investigation in the present film. And the outcome of it is to describe the status quo, but without effecting significant change in the described society,

**Compassion** The initial situation, in which Gondo finds himself, is agonizing and evokes our compassion for him. It also invokes his compassion for his son--who in fact is quite ok, and will appear safe and sound in a short time. Compassion is more intense than sympathy, involving a mutual depth of feeling, rather than the unidirectional attention of one person's sympathy for another.

**Dread** Kurosawa makes it clear that kidnapping evokes a terrible dread, among suddenly bereft parents. Kidnapping was Kurosawa's candidate for the most heinous crime, sowing every kind of sense of fundamental loss. The police were exceptionally en garde, lest the kidnapper strike anew. This kind of dread looms over the present film.

**Confession** The kidnapper, aware that a life sentence faces him, breaks down at the end, and confesses to Gondo that he has done the terrible evil. It is too much for him to sustain by himself,

**Dilemma** The deepest decision making falls on Gondo, who from the start is deeply wrapped up in his cash assets, having recently put himself in position for some major consolidations and new investments--the fruits of which moves speak to many new possibilities for his wife and child. At the same time he is being called on to give a large supply of his cash to rescue his son--at this point he still thinks it is a matter of *his* son--from a kidnapper. In the Middle Ages this was the kind of dreaded dilemma that evoked the image of *Herakles at the Crossroads*.

## SCENES

- 1 A wealthy Japanese executive (Gondo) finds himself confronted by a ransom note, demanding cash for the release of his kidnapped son, He has the money, but it is earmarked for an essential business investment, which will bring in substantial advantages for his family.
- 2 Gondo's son appears suddenly, as it turns out that the kidnapper had made a mistake, and kidnapped the son of the businessman's chauffeur.
- 3 The businessman worries extensively over his decision. At first he decides simply not to pay the money, but then his fear of public shaming takes over and he decides to give in to the kidnapper's demands.
- 4 Under pressure from all who are around him, especially his wife, the businessman arranges to have two suitcases of bills dropped from a speeding train at a location stipulated by the ransom note.
- 5 The businessman receives wide acclaim for his generous act, and the kidnapped boy is safely returned.
- 6 Busy police work establishes a cogent theory concerning the drug addiction of the hired thugs who contracted to carry out the kidnapping. The cops close in on the thugs' den.
- 7 Most of the paid ransom money is recovered, but not enough or in time to reactivate the businessman's original investment plan.
- 8 Kidnapper is caught, jailed and tried; given a life sentence.

- 9 Imprisoned kidnapper requests to meet businessman in the prison.
- 10 Kidnapper at first pretends indifference to his actions, but gradually confesses, and dissolves in a flood of weeping. It is as though he is making a general confession to the world.