



KUROSAWA

The Idiot (Hakuchi)

With his central metaphor of snow – the towering drifts that turn streets and houses into blind burrows where dark, scurrying figures, blanketed by the snow that never seems to stop falling, seek and momentarily find each other – Kurosawa instantly captures the essence of Dostoevsky's novel: that sense of people as isolated units reaching helplessly out with their sympathies but unable to tear down the barriers of understanding and intention which separate them from peace of the soul.

He simplifies, of course, reducing most of the secondary characters to a single dimension and necessarily removing all of Dostoevsky's acute social criticism – though some of the simplifications are perhaps explained by the fact that his original cut, never released, ran to 265 minutes – but manages to convey the interlocking despair of human relationships, quite magnificently, through a simple stylistic device: the triangular grouping in which, usually in monologue, one person explains, one listens intently, and the third, marginally excluded, is baffled by the spellbinding emotional waves he cannot quite grasp.

Used repeatedly, this geometrical composition leads almost mathematically to the extraordinary climax of the ice carnival – in itself an extraordinary visual conception with its swirling movement, torches flickering in the darkness and grotesque painted masks, all dominated by the huge ice sculpture of a brooding demon – where all the characters as though summoned by demonic invocation, converge tangentially, at different moments, upon the fixed point of the Idiot.

Yet for all its formality, *The Idiot* seems to lie outside the Japanese visual tradition; indeed, it has been criticised for being neither Russian nor Japanese. Movement and gesture are hieratic and abruptly stylised, certainly (Donald Richie suggests, quite pertinently, that Setsuko Hara's performance was probably modelled on Maria Casarès in *Orphée*), but there is a curious *décalage* between sound and image, almost a feeling that the actors are playing in pantomime accompanied by invisible doubles speaking their lines. The strange almost oneiric effect is of watching a silent film and simultaneously listening to an operatic aria. There is, for instance, a superb moment near the beginning (the first appearance of the triangle) when Kameda and Akama get off the tram and pause by a shop window displaying a huge photograph of Taeko Nasu, on which the camera focuses; at each edge of the frame, reflected in the window as they stare at the photograph, are Kameda and Akama; and off-screen, the measured, hypnotic voice of the Idiot, drawing the camera irresistibly in towards the photograph to fathom the tale of suffering he has drawn from the depths of her eyes.

We are, literally, in a country of the soul, dark and inscrutable, watching these creatures suffering through their dark night in which we, suddenly and mysteriously, are somehow implicated at the end when Kameda returns and asks about Taeko: with Taeko lying dead in the next room Akama does not reply, he simply turns to the camera and stares, accusing, uncomprehending.

The fact that *The Idiot*, apart from being butchered by its producers, has been generally reviled the world over is one more reason for evoking Dreyer's *Gertrud*, which it so oddly resembles. Strange, poetic, clearly very personal to Kurosawa, it is certainly one of his best films.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1974

THE IDIOT (HAKUCHI)

Director: Akira Kurosawa
Production Company: Shochiku Co. Ltd.
Producer: Takashi Koide
Screenplay: Eiji Hisaita, Akira Kurosawa
Based on the Novel by: Fyodor Dostoevsky
Director of Photography: Toshio Ubukata
Editor: Yoshi Sugihara
Art Director: So Matsuyama
Music: Fumio Hayasaka

Cast

Masayuki Mori (Kinji Kameda, the idiot)
Toshiro Mifune (Denkichi Akama)
Setsuko Hara (Taeko Nasu)
Takashi Shimura (Ono)
Yoshiko Kuga (Ayaka Ono)
Chieko Higashiyama (Satoko)
Minoru Chiaki (Mutsuo Kayama)
Eiji Yanagi (Tohata)
Noriko Sengoku (Takako)
Bokuzen Hidari (Karube)
Eiko Miyoshi (Madame Kayama)

Japan 1951
166 mins

KUROSAWA

The Most Beautiful (Ichiban Utsukushiku)

Sun 1 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 18:15

The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail (ora no O Fumu Otokotachi)

Sun 1 Jan 16:20; Wed 11 Jan 17:55

No Regrets for Our Youth (Waga Seishun ni Kuinashi)

Mon 2 Jan 12:45; Tue 10 Jan 20:40

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no Samurai)

Mon 2 Jan 16:50; Thu 5 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 15:30 BFI IMAX

One Wonderful Sunday (Subarashiki Nichiyôbi)

Tue 3 Jan 20:40; Sun 15 Jan 11:50

Scandal (Shûbun)

Tue 10 Jan 17:45; Tue 24 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by season co-curator Ian Haydn Smith)

Kagemusha

Wed 11 Jan 19:35; Tue 31 Jan 19:35

The Idiot (Hakuchi)

Fri 13 Jan 19:45; Sat 21 Jan 16:50

Dodes’ka-den (Dodesukaden)

Sun 15 Jan 18:05; Mon 16 Jan 17:50

Kurosawa Season Introduction

Wed 18 Jan 18:20

High and Low (Tengoku to Jigoku)

Thu 19 Jan 17:45; Sun 29 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by season co-curator Ian Haydn Smith)

The Lower Depths (Donzoku)

Thu 19 Jan 20:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:20

The Hidden Fortress (Kakushi Toride no San-Akunin)

Fri 20 Jan 20:20; Fri 27 Jan 17:45

The Bad Sleep Well (Warui Yatsu hoho Yoku Nemuru)

Sun 22 Jan 18:00; Sun 29 Jan 14:30 (+ intro by season co-curator Ian Haydn Smith)

Sanjuro (Tsubaki Sanjûrô)

Thu 26 Jan 21:00; Tue 31 Jan 17:50

Course: The Kurosawa-Effect

Wed 11 Jan – Wed 22 Feb 18:30

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