



KUROSAWA

High and Low (Tengoku to Jigoku)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Among his collaborators and crew, Akira Kurosawa was known as *kaze-otoko* – ‘wind man’. (The nickname *tenno* – ‘emperor’ – was wished on him by the Japanese press.) It’s not hard to see why. From the scuttering of windblown leaves that provides a dry, mocking ostinato to the dances of death in *Yojimbo* (1961) to the pennants snapping and fluttering above the doomed armies of *Ran* (1985), his characters are buffeted by winds of fate. But it’s not only wind. Throughout his work, weather plays such a determining role it almost becomes a character in its own right. In *Dersu Uzala* (1975) the chief adversary is no human agency, but the vicious Siberian cold that all but kills the inexperienced Russian surveyor; the mists that drift around Cobweb Castle in *Throne of Blood* (1957) seem emanations of the otherworldly forces that lure Lord Washizu (the film’s Macbeth figure) to his downfall. And no Kurosawa movie feels complete without at least one torrential downpour – most unforgettably in the 25-minute battle that climaxes *Seven Samurai* (1954), with the swordsmen skidding and sliding in the mud and slashing wildly at the bandits as they canter by.

Interestingly, the one climatic extreme largely absent from Kurosawa’s period films is intense heat. It’s as though for him the world of the *Jidai-geki* (period drama) operates at a cooler, more remote level. Heat he reserves for his present-day urban stories, presenting it as correlation of the social melt-down of post-1945 Japanese society, with endemic crime and corruption replacing feudal oppression as the country’s besetting disorder.

In three Kurosawa movies in particular, the scope and slant of the action are not just coloured, but virtually defined by an oppressive heatwave. The crime dramas *Stray Dog* (1949) and *High and Low* (1963), and the psychological drama *I Live in Fear* (1955), are all pervaded by images of relentless, inescapable heat. Every character, male and female alike, is constantly dripping with sweat. Shirts stick wetly to backs, foreheads are mopped, hats and newspapers waved in futile quest of a breeze. Outside the sun beats pitilessly down on pedestrians inching along dusty, airless streets, hugging the walls to catch the least sliver of shade. Interiors scenes are nagged by the whine of electric fans, whose ineffectual clamour seems only to fray everyone’s tempers further.

It’s as if the heat in these films was not so much the cause as the end result of human aggression, a form of emotional global warming. Anger is the element in which almost everybody swims, with most of the characters operating somewhere along the scale from irascibility to outright fury. In this shortfused atmosphere, violence is the inevitable outcome, with the killer in the two crime movies an erupting boil on the unhealthy skin of society worse than others in degree, perhaps, but not in kind. In both films the pursuing detective comes to feel a perverse identity with his quarry, seeing him as the man he might all too easily have become.

But Kurosawa takes his heat imagery a stage further. In all three of these films a character makes a descent into hell. In the two crime movies he manages to survive and return; in *I Live in Fear* the protagonist descends into a mental hell

of his own making and ends up trapped there forever, gazing at a nightmare vision of the world on fire.

High and Low, made 14 years after *Straw Dog*, shows us a Japan growing prosperous and – it seems – healed from the wartime wounds. Some have even done well enough to be able to ignore the sweatbath of summer, living high above the urban sprawl of Yokohama in air-conditioned villas, well placed to catch any breezes that blow. One of these privileged individuals is Kingo Gonda (Mifune), a rich industrialist scheming to seize control of the ill-managed company he works for. At the crucial moment an attempt is made to kidnap his son. It's bungled; the kidnappers mistakenly seize the boy's playmate, son of Gonda's chauffeur. But they still demand the same vast ransom, reckoning Gonda's conscience will work in their favour. If he pays up his plans will collapse and his career will be ruined.

This dilemma, though, proves not to be what the film is about; it's even something of a macguffin. Or perhaps a semi-guffin, since it preoccupies the first half of the movie. *High and Low* makes the metaphor of a descent into hell even more explicit; in fact, the film's Japanese title, *Tengoku to Jigoku*, literally means 'heaven and hell', and the action splits between these two locations. The first half of the film plays out in 'Heaven', Gonda's luxurious villa, as he wrestles with his conscience, consults the police and finally decides to pay the money demanded. This section of the film is shot soberly; Kurosawa, foregoing his usual dynamic editing style and oblique angles, films in long, unbroken, meandering takes, giving precedence to the dialogue. We might almost be watching a filmed play.

Once the ransom's paid and his career is ruined, Gonda virtually drops out of the action. The actual handover of the cash, a virtuoso four-minute sequence shot aboard a high-speed train in real time, acts as a midway interlude after which we descend into hell, following the police investigation through the grimy inferno of midsummer Yokohama. This soon becomes a murder hunt, since the kidnapper kills his accomplices to cover his tracks. In this half of the film Kurosawa reverts to the style of filmmaking we expect at this mid-stage of his career – restless, dynamic, fuelled by nervous tension, with a fast mobile camera, insistent cutting and swift horizontal wipes that speed the action and mirror the urgency of the police investigation. Led by Inspector Tokuro (Tatsuya Nakadai, Mifune's chief opponent in *Yojimbo* and later the star of *Kagemusha*, 1981, and *Ran*), the cops penetrate steadily down into the murky depths of society, to the sordid waterfront bars and heroin dens where the killer hunts for fresh victims, a far cry from Gonda's elegant villa.

But we're constantly reminded of that villa, perched high above the city in aloof seclusion. Every so often Kurosawa's camera lifts from whatever grimy back alley the police are raking through, and there it sits, cool and white and far beyond the reach of the sweltering masses below. It's precisely that contrast, in fact, that first impelled the kidnapper, an impoverished young intern, towards his crime – as he tells Gonda when they at last come face to face. 'Your house looked like heaven,' he says accusingly. 'Hate made my life worth living.'

Here, as in *Stray Dog*, the cops find they're starting to align themselves with the criminal, to share his viewpoint. 'That house makes you angry,' growls one of them, dusty and sweating, gesturing at Gonda's villa, 'as if it's looking down on you.' Once more it's a moot point whether the soaring temperatures are the cause or the outcome of so much festering social resentment.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, February 2002

HIGH AND LOW (TENGOKU TO JIGOKU)

Director: Akira Kurosawa

Production Companies: Kurosawa Productions, Toho Co., Ltd.

Producers: Tomoyuki Tanaka, Ryuzo Kikushima

Production Supervisor: Hiroshi Nezu

Production Assistant: Shigeru Kishima

Chief Assistant Director: Shiro Moritani

Assistant Directors: Masanobu Deme, Yoichi Matsue, Kenjiro Omori

Script Supervisor: Teruyo Nogami

Casting: Yuichi Yoshitake

Screenplay: Hideo Oguni, Ryuzo Kikushima, Eijiro Hisaita, Akira Kurosawa

Based on the novel King's Ransom by: Ed McBain

Director of Photography: Asakazu Nakai

Photography: Takao Saito

Lighting: Hiromitsu Mori, Ichiro Inohara

Assistant Camera: Kazutami Hara

Assistant Lighting: Fukahiro Akike

Stills Photography: Masao Fukuda

Assistant Editor: Reiko Kaneko

Art Director: Yoshiro Muraki

Assistant Art Director: Jun Sakuma

Costumes: Miyuki Suzuki

Hair: Yoshiko Matsumoto, Junjiro Yamada

Music: Masaru Sato

Sound: Fumio Yanoguchi

Sound Assistant: Jin Sashida

Sound Mixing: Hisashi Shimonaga

Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Transportation: Ginzo Osumi

Cast

Toshiro Mifune (*Kingo Gondo*)

Kyôko Kagawa (*Reiko Gondo*)

Tatsuya Mihashi (*Kawanishi, Reiko's brother*)

Yutaka Sada (*Aoki, the chauffeur*)

Tatsuya Nakadai (*Inspector Tokuro*)

Takashi Shimura (*director*)

Susumu Fujita (*commissioner*)

Kenjirô Ishiyama (*Detective Taguchi*)

Ko Kimura (*Detective Arai*)

Takeshi Kato (*Detective Nakao*)

Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Detective Murata*)

Hiroshi Unayama (*Detective Shimada*)

Koji Mitsui (*newspaperman*)

Tsutomu Yamazaki (*Ginji Takeuchi, the kidnapper*)

Jun Tazaki (*Kamiya*)

Nobuo Nakamura (*Ishimaru*)

Yunosuke Ito (*Baba*)

Minoru Chiaki (*first reporter*)

Eijiro Tono (*National Shoes factory worker*)

Masao Shimizu (*prison warden*)

Masahiko Shimazu (*Shinichi Aoki*)

Toshio Egi (*Jun Gondo*)

Kyu Sazanka (*first creditor*)

Kamatari Fujiwara (*cook at the junkyard*)

Kazuo Kitamura (*third reporter*)

Gen Shimizu (*chief physician*)

Akira Nagoya (*Detective Yamamoto*)

Jun Hamamura (*second creditor*)

Masao Orita (*first executor at tax office*)

Kô Nishimura (*third creditor*)

Yoshibumi Tajima (*chief prison officer*)

Koji Shimizu (*fish market office worker*)

Yoshisuke Makino (*Detective Takahashi*)

Jun Kondo (*detective*)

Tomo Suzuki (*Detective Koike*)

Senkichi Omura (*'patient' who gives kidnapper note*)

Kazuo Kato (*worker at identification centre*)

Iki Sawamura (*trolley man at Yokohama station*)

Kin Sugai (*woman drug addict*)

Keiko Tomita (*murder victim*)

Isamu Onada (*male drug addict*)

Seiichi Taguchi (*Detective Nakamura*)

Takeo Matsushita (*second executor at tax office*)

Kiyoshi Yamamoto (*Detective Ueno*)

Kenji Kodama (*Detective Hara*)

Minoru Ito (*detective*)

Kazuo Suzuki (*detective disguised as drug addict*)

Kozo Nomura (*detective*)

Japan 1963

143 mins

In partnership with



Promotional partner



KUROSAWA

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 Idiot (Hakuchi)

Sat 21 Jan 16:50

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)

Scandal (Shûbun)

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

Sanjuro (Tsubaki Sanjûrô)

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

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no Samurai)

Sat 28 Jan 15:30 BFI IMAX

Kagemusha

Tue 31 Jan 19:35

Course: The Kurosawa-Effect

Wed 11 Jan – Wed 22 Feb 18:30

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