KUROSAWA

Drunken Angel (Yoidore tenshi)

Kurosawa on 'Drunken Angel'

In this picture I finally discovered myself. It was my picture: I was doing it and no one else. Part of this was thanks to Mifune. Shimura played the doctor beautifully, but I found that I could not control Mifune. When I saw this, I let him do as he wanted, let him play the part freely. I did not want to smother that vitality. In the end, although the title refers to the doctor, it is Mifune that everyone remembers.

His reactions are extraordinarily swift. If I say one thing, he understands ten. He reacts very quickly to the director's intentions. Most Japanese actors are the opposite of this and so I wanted Mifune to cultivate this gift.

One of the reasons for the extreme popularity of this film at the time was that there was no competition – no other films showed an equal interest in people. We had difficulty with one of the characters: that of the doctor himself. Uekusa Jin and I rewrote his part over and over again. Still, he wasn't interesting. We had almost given up when it occurred to me that he was just too good to be true – he needed a defect, a vice. This is why we made him an alcoholic. At that time most film characters were shining white or blackest black. We made the doctor grey.

***Sight and Sound*, Summer 1964**

Japan's decisive defeat in World War II led to a radical transformation of Japanese society – a transformation that was as strikingly apparent in the country's cinema as it was in the broader changes to political institutions and social mores. And among the most obvious cinematic changes were ones pertaining to genre. In particular, the late 1940s saw the eclipse of the *jidai-geki* or period film, which during the 1930s had made up half of all film production in Japan. While the period film was not banned as such, prohibitions by the Allied occupying authorities of films 'showing revenge as a legitimate motive', 'portraying feudal loyalty or contempt of life as desirable and honourable', 'approving suicide either directly or indirectly' or 'distorting historical facts' all helped make many of Japan's traditional period narratives untenable, with the result that in 1946, period-film production was down to single figures.

These restrictions on Japan's traditional action genre brought other action genres to the fore in the late 1940s. As Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie wrote in their seminal 1959 study *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, 'The Occupation, in its avowed intention of stamping out the period film, had acted as willing midwife to the gangster film.' Partly as a consequence of strict censorship codes, thrillers with contemporary settings had been rare in the years of militarism; ironically, they now became increasingly numerous as a consequence of another strict censorship regime.

Among the most distinguished crime films to emerge during the Occupation era were two extraordinary early works by Akira Kurosawa: *Drunken Angel* and *Stray Dog*. Each of these remarkable films stars two actors who were to work regularly for the director: Toshiro Mifune and Takashi Shimura. *Drunken Angel* follows the relationship between Shimura's alcoholic doctor Sanada and Mifune's tubercular gangster Matsunaga.

Each of these films was profoundly shaped by its cultural and historical context, reflecting the traumas and tensions of this crucial era of post-war Japanese history. The project of the post-war Occupation was an ambitious one: the transformation of a formerly militaristic empire into a peaceful, liberal, democratic nation. Japan's 1947 constitution repudiated militarist values, introducing new guarantees of individual rights, promoting sexual equality and renouncing war. Cinema was to be one of the instruments for inculcating these new values. In addition to banning subjects that might promote militarist sentiments, the Occupation also encouraged films advocating liberal values; among these was Kurosawa's early post-war film *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), a trenchant account of the suffering of liberals during the era of militarism. While *Drunken Angel* and *Stray Dog* are less explicitly political, they also engage with the experience of Japan emerging from the era of militarism into the post-war settlement.

At a time when Japan's society and politics were being reshaped by a Western power, Kurosawa was arguably especially well-suited to analysing these changes, since he was himself steeped in Western culture. Kurosawa acknowledged the influence of Dostoevsky on *Drunken Angel*, an influence visible in what the academic James Goodwin has called 'the intimacy between contrasting personalities': the alcoholic doctor and the ailing gangster are unwillingly bound together in a fashion that recalls the link between Raskolnikov and Inspector Petrovich in *Crime and Punishment* (although the doctor, doggedly seeking the gangster's salvation, might almost be read as his Sonya).

In addition to this literary influence, *Drunken Angel* also displays some of the stylistic trappings of the contemporary American urban thriller. The meticulous but stylised sets of *Drunken Angel* and the striking contrasts between light and dark visible in images of shadows cast by slatted blinds recall the expressionist-influenced look of film noir.

It is of course appropriate that these Western influences should be discernible in *Drunken Angel* and *Stray Dog*, because both films were the products of an era when the West exerted a profound and direct influence on Japan. In fact Kurosawa's 1940s thrillers can be interpreted in part as interrogations of the Occupation itself. Both unfold in a milieu characterised by the visible influence of Western culture, in which characters wear a mixture of Western and Japanese dress, and in which dance halls, cabaret theatres and bars bear Western names – 'No. 1', 'Blue Bird' – and are decorated with Western imagery such as playing cards. Western-style music is prominent in both films, such as the dramatic 'Jungle Boogie' number to which the gangsters dance in *Drunken Angel*, thus, in Brian Eggert's words, seeming 'to emulate the American hoodlum pop-culture.' But Western music is not confined to the specifically Westernised milieus of bars and clubs. Owing to the expense of music rights, Kurosawa's hope of using excerpts from Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* in *Drunken Angel* went unfulfilled, but the film still makes telling use of Western music. The scene in which Matsunaga wanders desolately through the black market after learning that his boss is waiting for him to die is ironically counterpointed by a light-hearted piece of classical music, J.E. Jonasson's 'Cuckoo Waltz', playing over a nearby loudspeaker.

In short, Kurosawa presents a Japan saturated by Western culture; this can surely be taken as a metaphor for the presence of a foreign occupying force, to which Allied censorship forbade direct reference. The Occupation may be invisible on screen in *Drunken Angel*, but the film repeatedly allude to that alien presence.

Given this indirect approach, Kurosawa's precise attitude to the Occupation inevitably remains equivocal. The films associate criminality ambiguously with both Japan and the West. For instance the villain of *Drunken Angel*, the gangster Okada, is implicitly related to Japan's militarist past: he has just been released from prison after three years, which means (since this is 1948) that he was sentenced the year Japan lost the war. His criminal activity, then, was a wartime phenomenon; Okada may thus be taken metaphorically as a representative of the wartime militarists. In this light, it's significant that the gang boss who promises Okada he will have Matsunaga's territory after the doomed gangster's anticipated demise inhabits an old-fashioned wooden house with a traditionally landscaped Japanese garden containing neatly pruned vegetation and a stone lantern.

Yet Okada moves between the traditional milieu inhabited by his boss and the Westernised dance hall where the younger gangsters hang out. Like Matsunaga, he spends much of the film dressed in a Western-style suit; on his first appearance in the film, just after his release from jail, he signals his presence in the slum milieu by playing a tune on a Western instrument, the guitar. The fact that his criminality is associated in part with the West may explain why film distributor Joseph Burstyn hesitated to show *Drunken Angel* to US audiences after his advisors 'detected too disturbing an anti-American note in some sequences of the film'.

Alexander Jacoby, *Sight and Sound*, July 2010

DRUNKEN ANGEL (YOIDORE TENSHI)
Director: Akira Kurosawa
Production Company: Toho Co. Ltd.
Producer: Sojiro Motoki
Assistant Director: Tsuneo Kobayashi
Screenplay: Keinosuke Uekusa, Akira Kurosawa
Director of Photography: Takeo Ito
Lighting: Kinzo Yoshizawa
Editor: Akikazu Kono
Art Director: So Matsuyama
Music: Fumio Hayasaka
The song 'Janguru bugi' by: Ryoichi Hattori
Lyrics to the song 'Janguru bugi' by: Akira Kurosawa
Sound Recording: Wataru Konuma
Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Cast
Takashi Shimura *(Dr Sanada)*
Toshiro Mifune *(Matsunaga, the gangster)*
Reisaburo Yamamoto *(Okada, the gang-boss)*
Michiyo Kogure *(Nanae, Matsunaga's girlfriend)*
Noriko Sengoku *(Gin, girl in bar)*
Chôko Iida *(old maid)*
Eitarô Shindô *(Takahama)*
Yoshiko Kuga *(student)*
Chieko Nakakita *(Miyo, the nurse)*
Shizuko Kasagi *(cabaret singer)*
Taiji Tonoyama *(shop owner)*
Katao Kawasaki *(flower shop manager)*
Ko Ubukata *(hoodlum)*
Masao Shimizu *(boss)*
Sumire Shiroki *(Anego)*

Japan 1948
93 mins

KUROSAWA

Stray Dog (Nora Inu)
Wed 1 Feb 20:35; Mon 13 Feb 18:10
Drunken Angel (Yoidore Tenshi)
Thu 2 Feb 18:20; Fri 10 Feb 20:40
The Silent Duel (Shizukanaru Kettô)
Thu 2 Feb 20:40; Sat 11 Feb 18:40
Sanshiro Sugata (Sugata Sanshirô)
Fri 3 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Sun 12 Feb 15:50
Sanshiro Sugata Part Two (Zoku Sugata Sanshirô)
Fri 3 Feb 20:45; Sun 12 Feb 18:20
The Gathering Storm: Kurosawa Study Day
Sat 4 Feb 12:00
Living (Ikiru)
Sat 4 Feb 17:50; Wed 15 Feb 20:15
Kurosawa and Shakespeare, Adaptation and Reinvention: An illustrated talk by Adrian Wootton
Sun 5 Feb 15:15
Ran
Sun 5 Feb 17:30 (+ intro by Adrian Wooton, CEO of Film London and film curator); Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Sat 25 Feb 17:20
I Live in Fear (Ikimono no Kiroku)
Mon 6 Feb 18:10; Mon 13 Feb 20:40
Dreams (Yume)
Wed 8 Feb 20:30; Sun 26 Feb 15:30
Red Beard (Akahige)
Sat 11 Feb 15:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn S Sun 26 Feb 17:25mith, season co-curator);
Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)
Sun 12 Feb 13:00; Fri 17 Feb 20:40; Tue 21 Feb 18:10
Dersu Uzala
Thu 16 Feb 18:10 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Mon 27 Feb 20:10 (+ intro by Doug Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager)
Yojimbo (Yôjinbô)
Sat 18 Feb 20:45; Thu 23 Feb 20:15 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia, season co-curator)
Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no Kyoshikoku)
Sun 19 Feb 18:30; Sat 25 Feb 12:40
Mâdadayo
Mon 20 Feb 20:20; Tue 28 Feb 18:00
Philosophical Screens: Throne of Blood
Tue 21 Feb 20:10
A.K.
Wed 22 Feb 20:50; Sat 25 Feb 20:45

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