

Akira Kurosawa's *Lear*: *Ran* and the Failure of the Samurai Ethic

"Cineaste: You mentioned in an interview in a Japanese magazine that in *Ran* you wanted to depict a man's karma from a "heavenly" viewpoint. Will you elaborate?"

Akira Kurosawa: I did not exactly say that. Japanese reporters always misunderstand or conveniently summarize what I really say. What I meant was that some of the essential scenes of this film are based on my wondering how God and Buddha, if they actually exist, perceive this human life, this mankind stuck in the same absurd behavior patterns. *Kagemusha* is made from the viewpoint of one of *Kagemusha* [shadow warrior—ed.] who sees the specific battles which he is involved in, and moreover the civil war period in general, from a very circumscribed point of view. This time, in *Ran*, I wanted to suggest a larger viewpoint . . . more objectively. I did not mean that I wanted to see through the eyes of a heavenly being. . . .

I believe that the world would not change even if I made a direct statement: do this and do that. Moreover, the world will not change unless we steadily change human nature itself and our very way of thinking. We have to exorcise the essential evil in human nature, rather than presenting concrete solutions to problems or directly depicting social problems. Therefore, my films might have become more philosophical."

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Just as Kurosawa reworked Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in his *Throne of Blood* and reworked the main themes and characters of *Hamlet* in *The Bad Sleep Well*, Kurosawa in the last phase of his career chose to rework *King Lear* in his film *Ran* (or "Chaos"). One of the interesting questions is whether the Shakespearean original survives in its translation into a Japanese and cinematic context, or even whether it should. *King Lear* is sometimes performed and interpreted as a nihilistic response to life and death and even a theodicy of sorts. *Ran* certainly takes these potential readings of Shakespeare's play and puts them front and center in the film. Kurosawa transports the story of Lear and his three daughters to the Warring States period in Japan and by doing so, must make several essential changes—Lear's three daughters become Hidetora's three sons, and while some of the character traits of the daughters are taken up by the sons, other aspects are taken on by the wives of the first and second sons, especially Kaede.

Kurosawa also keeps the figure of the Fool and the loyal servant Kent (Tango). However, Kurosawa removes the subplot of Gloucester and his two sons. In their place, he offers no actual parallel but instead introduces the blind brother of one of the wives to help explore the themes of blindness, physical and moral. Taken together, the film not only asks questions of nihilism and theodicy but also allows these to explore the limits of the samurai tradition, even to the point of watching it self-destruct.

In the unit involving the Samurai as Hero, we looked at some of the following traits of the bushido ideal:

- *Bushi ho-ichi gon*: the way of the warrior: saving face and moral rectitude.
- *Yamato-damashi*: rational, even god-like moral superiority
- *Giri*: right or justice, including justice of revenge for one's superior
- *Ninjo*: natural conscience, instinct, or inclination
- *Seppuku*, *Hara-kiri*: ritual suicide
- The way of the sword, sword schools
- *Musha-shugyo*: Training through hardship

How do these values self-destruct in *Ran*? Why do they do so? Is Kurosawa throwing away the samurai ideal as unworkable? Why and/or why not?

Key Passages

What do the following reveal about the dilemmas of the film's world?

"This is a world where men's evil, cruel instincts are exposed, where you cannot live unless you throw aside your humanity and all noble feelings! . . . You have spilled so much human blood you cannot measure it. You have lived without mercy or pity. But Father, we too are children of this degraded age of strife; you do not know what we may be thinking—*my dear children*, you think. To me, Father, you are none other than a madman—a senile old madman."—Saburo to Hidetora

"The Buddha again? There are no Buddhas in today's world. This is a degraded age, when the Buddha's guardians, Bonten and Taishaku, have been routed by the raging Asuras. It is not a world where we can rely on the Buddha's compassion."—Hidetora to Sué

"I tried hard to follow my sister's teachings, to pray to the Buddha and rid myself of hatred. But not one day have I failed to remember, and not one night have I been able to forget and to sleep peacefully."—Tsurumaru to Hidetora

"Man is born crying. He cries, he cries, then he dies."—Kyoami to Hidetora

"Why am I still serving such a crazy old man? If the rock upon which you are seated starts to roll down a slope, you must jump off. Otherwise you will be crushed together with the rock. Only fools remain on a falling rock."—Kyoami

"Human beings are always lost. Human beings have walked the same way again and again from earliest times. If you prefer not to do it, jump from this wall."—Kyoami to Hidetora

"Kyoami. You must not call back his soul. You must not let him wander in this hellish world any longer."—Tango after Hidetora dies.

"Is there no God or Buddha in this world? Damnation! God and the Buddha are nothing but mischievous urchins! Are they so bored in heaven that they enjoy watching men die like worms? Damn God! Is it so amusing to see and hear human beings cry and scream?"—Kyoami to Heaven

"Enough! Do not slander God or the Buddha! They are the ones who are crying! The evil of human beings, the stupidity of the sinful creatures, who believe their survival depends on killing others, repeated again and again throughout all time. . . Even God or the Buddha cannot save us from it. . . . Do not cry! This is nothing unusual in this mortal world. Human beings seek sorrow, not happiness, and prefer suffering to peace. Look at the First Castle! Those stupid people are fighting for sorrow and suffering, reveling in murder and bloodshed!"—Tango in response to Kyoami



Other Discussion Questions

1. How does color play a formative role in the film
2. How does the musical score, especially the noh flute, operate within the film?
3. Are heroes possible in the chaos of the film's world? why and/or why not?
4. Why role does the violence serve in the film? Is it necessary for the film to accomplish its ends?
5. Is forgiveness possible in such a world?
6. Is the chaotic world of the film insane?
7. What does the ending of the film suggest about the world?

