

JUMP CUT

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Dodes' Ka-Den Illusions

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“Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it.”—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Akira Kurosawa's *DODES' KA-DEN* came to the United States last fall; it is a deceptively beautiful film about life in a Tokyo slum. We watch the evolution of the lives of many small groups within this community in a series of successful cycles. We see a young man who has the illusion/ delusion of running a trolley car, a father and son subsisting on scraps, a small family that makes dolls for a living, etc.. Then each group returns and their stories move forward, or more often, downward.

There are beautiful, often surreal, colors and sets, exquisite faces, gestures and mime. But the beauty, the aesthetic illusion, Kurosawa makes stands in stark contradiction to (and is a defensive barrier against) the poverty and oppression of the people in his film. One could not find a better film for teaching the distinction between form and content. Kurosawa's vision is sympathetic but sentimental. It is a paradigm of the delusions which he has embodied in most of his characters. The film discloses the psychological and social binds of its characters, and it discloses the contradictions between their delusions and stark reality. But at the same time that Kurosawa exposes the personal contradictions of his characters, he has created yet more in his own work. He does not show us how his characters become oppressed, or who is oppressing them, or how people struggle to be free. There is very little context or perspective.

Some of the characters might have been artists—actors or architects—had they been born into more affluent classes. These characters have visions that Kurosawa makes concrete and visible to us. We become sympathetic to these visions and appreciate their beauty. Yet we also see that the visions are illusory; they are very inadequate substitutes for material reality. Psychologically, the characters' illusions run from neurotic to psychotic, but whatever we term them, the problem remains the same. There is a confusion between concrete reality and imagination or fantasy. And from a political point of view, the illusions are naive, sentimental idealizations.

Take, for example, the trolley-crazy boy. He lives with his mother in a house bordered by a trolley line in the front. In the back there's a long stretch of rubble extending to the slum and connected to it by a clear path which once may have been another trolley run. On the inside of their shack there are hundreds of colorful childlike drawings of trolleys. Mother and son apparently

exist on the mother's cooking, sold from a front window—the film gives us only a vague hint about this. The boy “travels” on the path between his house and the slum on his illusory trolley as he rhythmically chants *dodes' ka-den*—the sound of a trolley.

The boy perceives his trolley run as his job. It is here that Kurosawa's art comes out, in concert with the excellent mime of the boy, Yoshitaka Zushi. Before the trolley run starts, the boy inspects the car, and as he does so we hear the clangs of doors. We enter the illusion by watching this dance. We might enjoy it, were it not taking place where it is. In addition to the material context, there is a disturbing personal context—mother and son. The mother, seen praying in the opening scene of the film, is clearly upset by her son, and more so by the crude graffiti on the house and the taunts made by young children. We leave this mother and son with a sense of the mother's complete personal powerlessness to do anything but survive.

Another central focus is a beggar and his young son. They live inside a stripped out car and subsist on scraps that the young boy collects from restaurant kitchens. (It's during one trip that we get one of the few glimpses of life outside the slum since we see shiny new cars.) The father fantasizes; he builds a house in his imagination, beginning with the gate and fence. Each time the film revolves back to him there is some change or addition being made—a new porch, a new color. Kurosawa lets us in on these imaginings. He gives us the various gates, fences, and versions of the cubistic house as it changes in accordance with the father's whim. Magic. Yet the contradiction between the ideal construct (bourgeois though it is) and the very real dilapidated car stands out, as does the contradiction between the father's active imagination and his physical and personal passivity. He is unable to face reality. When his son becomes sick from eating bad food, he simply believes all will be well and doesn't take the help offered to him by an elder of the slum. He is an impotent man with an omnipotent imagination. When the child's cremated remains are in the grave, the father looks down and we see what he sees—a gigantic swimming pool, the final touch to his imagined house. The magic of madness. Life, struggle, and death have no place in his illusions, only fantasies of bourgeois material goods.

There are other characters in the film who make concrete objects under different kinds of oppressive circumstances. Each has his/her own way of dealing with or avoiding despair. Concrete reality is turned into illusion or is repressed. A young girl makes paper flowers to be sold in the city. Because her aunt, who “maintains” her, is in the hospital, she must work twice as hard in order to keep the household together and to pay the bills. Her step-uncle rapes the girl, getting her pregnant. In the rape scene we run into another problem—an act of malicious exploitation is presented as a beautiful pre-raphaelite painting. The girl has passed out from long hours of very tedious labor, her long skirt is drawn up around her thighs and she lies back on a bed of scarlet paper flowers. The camera focuses on this tableau; it is quiet and lovely, but soon the uncle's presence disturbs it.

Kurosawa seems to show us this peaceful vignette of the girl in order for us to “empathize” with the rapist, to “understand” his lust. This is totally backwards, regressive. A film that asks, or manipulates us into, identifying with the oppressor is not very progressive. There are repercussions as well. In an irrational moment the girl almost kills a peddler of sake—a young boy who has been the only person in the film who shows any concern for her. She explains to him (in the only moment of this sequence that she talks) that she was actually trying to commit suicide, and that she struck out at him instead, in a moment of rage and confusion. The boy displays no anger, nor does he know

what to do. He offers her something to eat, as he has at other moments, and rides off on his bike—communication doesn't go very far. Kurosawa portrays monetary and sexual exploitation. He shows us the anger, confusion and despair of an oppressed woman. At the same time, he stops woefully short. The young girl is left essentially alone. No positive relationship or communication supplants the negative ones, and the powerless remain powerless.

The theme of evading reality through wishful thinking is displayed again in the family of a beautiful Buddha-like man who makes dolls—another household industry. His wife is unfaithful to him, and so his six or so children are not his. He makes dolls, not children. When the children ask him if he is their father, he says that they are if they love him best and believe that he is. They acclaim that they do love him best. It is a touching moment, but one which evades reality, fails to ask questions.

Yet another mode of evasion is seen in the drinking and sexuality of two laborers who are married. The two men are perpetually drunk, and in their stupors they periodically switch wives—an activity that provides the community with much gossip. These couples are often humorous with their Chaplinesque drunkenness, colorful bandannas, vivid gestures and funny misunderstandings. But the comedy and the color cover up the pains that must originate in the steamy factory, of which we get one brief inside glimpse.

To live in such a way that one has only dreams, fantasies and delusions as a means of escaping or dealing with intolerable realities is psychologically destructive and politically regressive. Yet a promotion poster for the film proudly talks about the film's "affirmation of life and its belief that man can overcome any adversity so long as he has his dreams for escape and hope." Kurosawa has taken a despairing reality and covered it with a veneer of aesthetics. He has made the urban poor into artists who create imaginative worlds and beautiful objects, but who have been so devastated by the material world that they cannot deal with it. He has romanticized the imagination of the urban poor. But he's failed to give them credit for their potential for perception and struggle. The film becomes a paradigm of the problem it somewhat unconsciously depicts. Thus, the cinematic experience becomes the bourgeois imaginative or delusive equivalent to the psychological delusions of the poor.

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