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realize that we are the "judge" (detective) to whom the witnesses are speaking. The fact that this sequence is a mindscreen develops into a dialectical relationship with the idea of the camera's fealty to reality. The single-take technique of this sequence combines with the direct-address of the witnesses to give the feel of reality. This sequence serves merely as a means of introducing the third section, that of the crime. Therefore, we are not expected to call the "truth" of this section into question, just as we are never expected to doubt the veracity of the framing story of the men at the gate. However, if the stories-within-the-flashbacks are called into doubt, we are left uncertain about whose mindscreen is relating the supposedly real story at the gate.

This second section is denatured as well. The very flat feel of space, a long horizontal white wall against which witnesses awaiting their turn sit, and the harsh white light, place this section in a nebulous context.

The third (and most famous) section of the film is more obviously mindscreen, four of them in fact: the bandit, the wife, the husband, and the woodcutter. This section is filmed in still a third cinematic style, one of bravura techniques. Nature in this section, even more than the first, occupies a primary place. As the bandit himself says, if it had not been for a cool breeze the whole thing never would have happened.

The bandit's own tale is the most frenetic, but also the one in which nature is allowed to dominate. The bandit is thus linked most clearly with nature and his actions, instinctual, undisciplined and energetic, underscore this. This link with nature is made explicit in Kurosawa's famous story in which he relates how he told Mifune to imitate the actions of a caged tiger. The bandit, in his own mindscreen, is first seen lying under a tree in a densely wooded forest. As a Samurai and his new bride ride by, a breeze awakens the bandit in time to see this same breeze stir the bridal veils around the woman's face. He then quickly plots a way to have her.

In order to get his way he decides to trick the samurai into following him through the woods, thus putting the samurai on the bandit's home ground. The bandit lures the samurai away from his journey with the promise of treasure, i.e., valuable cultural artifacts. To get to the treasure, though, requires, without wishing to stretch the analogy too far, a journey through a "heart of darkness." As they walk, the sun's rays come pouring through the dense overgrowth; the camera tracks with them as their pace quickens. A sense of disorientation overcomes the samurai in this combination of speed, shifting graphic patterns and winding woods. Kurosawa's camera movements and editing patterns, or as Burch calls it, his "rough hewn geometry,"³² dehumanize his subjects. Paradoxically, both nature, in the form of the lush, overgrown forest, and culture, in the form of Kurosawa's cinematic tools, overwhelm the situation. Man is here at the mercy of both nature and culture, an uncomfortable position but not one unfamiliar to avant-garde artists in America and Europe.

Kurosawa fragments the manner in which the three stories are related to the audience. The three men meet at the gate; we shift to the trial in flashback; we shift to the "mindcreens" of the witnesses in a flashback-within-a-flashback; we return to the gate and begin the process again. The dialectic between *mono no aware* and existential *angst*, between objectivity and subjectivity, between fact and fabulation, are thus constantly reintroduced and reinforced. The differentiation between the cinematic styles used to relate the three planes of action further deny us any certainty. We never know "the truth" of the crime; but we do learn the truth about human nature in the final sequence. You take what you can get in an uncertain world.

There is a great paradox about Kurosawa's "masterpiece" *Throne of Blood*. On the one hand, it is unique in the Japanese cinema, standing outside of Japan's mainstream even more forthrightly than *Rashomon*. If the Japanese mainstream is a relatively amorphous mass, it still reveals a constancy, and that is that its stories are grounded in social contexts. From the feminist tracts of Mizoguchi, to the family comedies of Ozu, to the anti-feudal exposes of Kobayashi, even to the seemingly eccentric and unique *Woman in the Dunes*, the Japanese cinema proceeds from a structure of Man in a context. *Throne of Blood* does not.

On the other hand, *Throne of Blood* is a film that clearly only a Japanese director could have fashioned. Its insistent emphasis on graphic patterning, the deliberate foregrounding of its artifice, its bold intermingling of cinematic styles, all bespeak of a consciousness rooted in Japanese aesthetics.

Throne of Blood is, in my opinion, disproportionately studied compared to other films in Kurosawa's oeuvre. Much of this critical over-attention relates back to a statement made earlier (in Chapter I), namely, that much of the attraction of the Japanese cinema in the West is formal. Indeed, Noel Burch claims that *Throne of Blood* is Kurosawa's best film solely on formalistic evidence when he says, "*Cobweb Castle* [i.e., *Throne of Blood*]... is indisputably Kurosawa's finest achievement, largely because it carries furthest the rationalization process of his geometry."³³ Yet one wonders if that is what contributes to greatness. Although Burch's statement is underlaid by an attempt to redress the emphasis placed upon narrative by the preceding generation of film critics, it leads to further problems. What Burch has done here is to carry the implicit argument which structures his book a bit too far. In trying to liberate film from its ties to an anterior reality, Burch may have strayed too far on the formalistic side, for if film does possess a strictly formal dimension, one culturally derived and understood, it also possesses a humanistic plane, more universal in appeal. *Throne of Blood* may be an example of film functioning spectacularly on a purely formal plane, but the human element is lacking.

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The formalistic elements of *Throne of Blood* stem from its roots in the stylistic of the Nō theatre. In fact, the film owes as much to the Nō as it does to *Macbeth*. The use of many devices traditional in the Nō is a good index of Kurosawa's willingness to ground his film on the aesthetic plane. As Kurosawa has said, "I like the Nō drama. I like it because it is the real heart, the core of all Japanese drama. Its degree of compression is extreme, and it is full of symbols. . . ." ³⁴ The Nō is indeed a paradigmatic case of a Japanese aesthetic system which, as we have seen, does not begin from a "representational" or mimetic impulse. The Nō theatre is a presentational, deliberately theatrical mode; a mode of metaphor, poetry, and ellipsis. The clearest (and most frequently noted) influence from the Nō can be seen in the character of Lady Asaji, with the stark white make-up on her face and her ritualistically-oriented movements. However, *Throne of Blood* has even more fundamental links to the form.

The narrative of *Throne of Blood* is similar to the "narrative" of the Nō. The Nō theatre presents the relation of events, not their reproduction. The Nō theatre offers us a *fait accompli* in the sense that there is no mystery to the unfolding of the plot. *Throne of Blood* similarly offers up a relation of a tale not its unfolding. The film opens on an image of a gravestone with a ruined castle in the background. A chorus of voices chants, in the style of the Nō, the events we are about to witness. And if the Nō theatre relates action through the medium of the chants, so too, as Burch points out, much of the action of the film takes place offscreen. ³⁵

What one is presented with in the Nō theatre, and in *Throne of Blood*, is a symbolic reaction to events. The highly formalized, stylized movements of the Nō *replace* action. So too in the film. For instance, the planning of Miki's murder is followed by a cut to a horse neighing. The next time Miki appears he is a ghost. The horse's neigh meant the murder; it did not foreshadow its presentation, it was its presentation.

The narrative mode employed by *Throne of Blood* combined with its presentational mode of action points up what is, at heart, the problem with the film. If Nō is an abstract form, a form of symbols which substitute for action, the cinema is concrete. If Nō shows the essence of allusion, "film shows the substance, it cannot *show* the essence. . . ." ³⁶ Whether or not film is tied, as Bazin might wish, to an anterior reality, there is a certain *phenomenological* ontology to the film image. Nō tries to remove the concrete from its presentation through a variety of formal means. Although Nō uses human actors, these actors are abstracted by the wearing of symbolic masks. Nō relies on specific dance movements to substitute for action while a variety of chants and music accompanies the presentation, not as a background but literally in the foreground. Kurosawa tries to use the concrete nature of the cinema in similarly abstract ways.

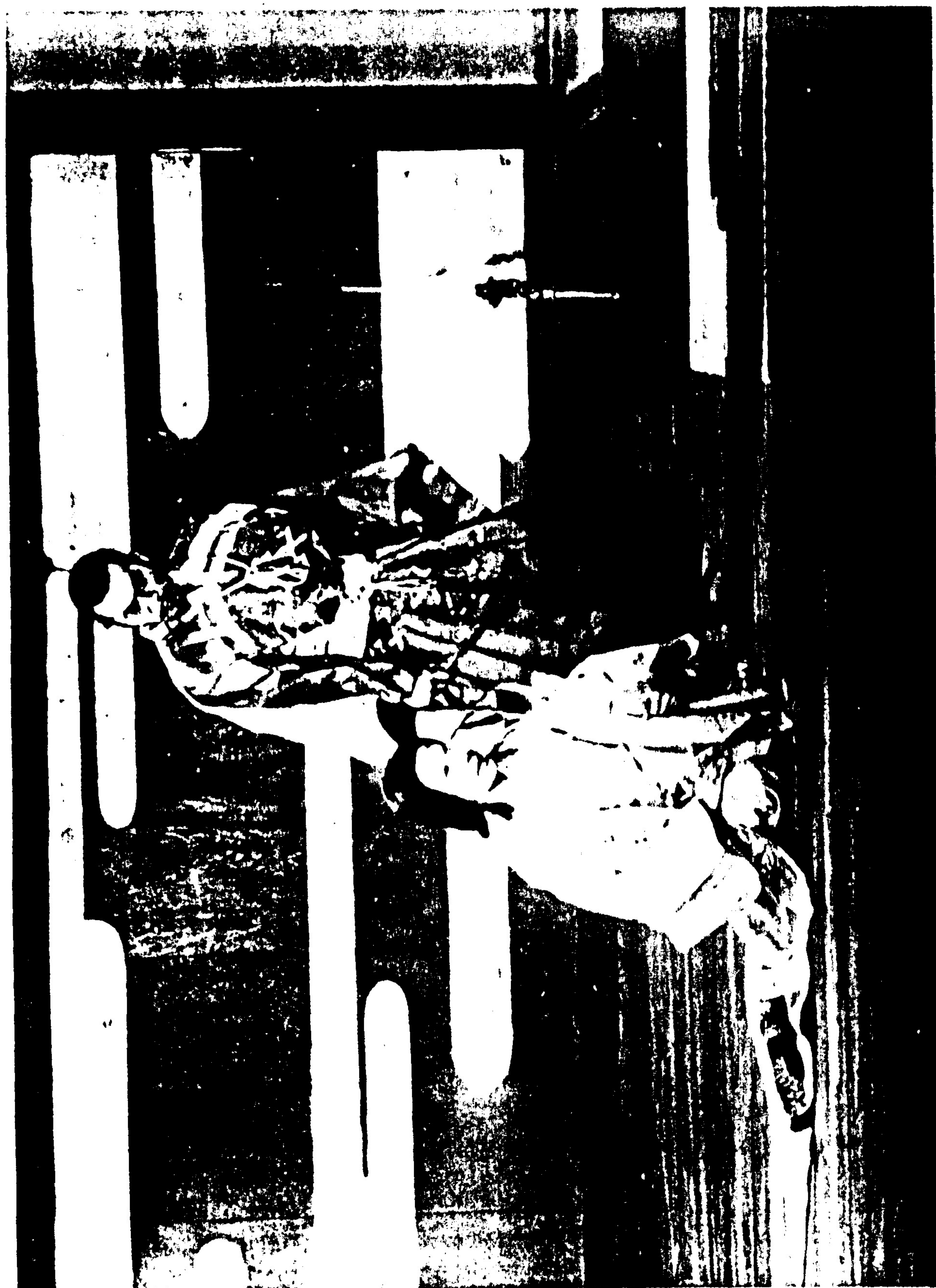
Kurosawa attempts, in *Throne of Blood*, to duplicate the symbology of the Nō theatre through a substitution of nature for humanity. In the film, Nature and Man are not simply linked; rather a metonymical substitution occurs. There is a constant attempt to let Nature make all the statements here, to let the action occur in Nature. Nature associations are primary to the film beginning with the Japanese title "*Kumonosu-Jo*," or "Castle of the Spider's Web." This title is understood denotatively as well. The castle is a spider's web; it is a confusing yet beautiful maze which arises naturally.

The links with nature are typically more formal than metaphorical, however. The first shot in the film combines a gravestone, which is man-made, with mist and mountain (Mt. Fuji, in fact). The things of man are conjoined, inseparably on the formal plane, with the things of nature. This occurs again in the second sequence of the film. Two mounted warriors, Washizu and Miki, ride through a dense forest. Their first introduction is therefore an introduction with nature-associations (a pattern which continues throughout the film as for instance, Miki's horse connoting Miki's murder). The two riders come upon a spirit which can easily be construed to mean the "spirit of the forest," so that it is nature which clouds their minds through a combination of mystery and awe. Too, the textural handling of the horses and the forest imbues the nature with greater life than the human beings in the film. The stiff and formal performance delivered by Toshiro Mifune in the lead role is in marked contrast to his lively efforts in the rest of the Kurosawa canon.

In point of fact, all of the significant action of the film, except for the rebellion of Washizu's men, utilizes this metonymical substitution. Crows invade the castle portending doom; when the situation is hopeless, rats flee the castle. The most significant action in the film, the "Birnam Wood" scene, is a literal transformation of men into a forest. These substitutions, we must constantly remember, are not metaphorical as in a work like *Animal Farm*. They are metonymical on the level of function. Human interaction is eliminated. The humans become equal to any other "object," for other objects take on meaning on the human plane. When this occurs, humanity is deemphasized; form is all.

In the final sequence, people are allowed, finally, to act, and act on the literal level. However, the handling of the scene, the extremity of its violence and the obvious cinematic "trick," still reduce the central figure to an object. Washizu's men rebel and turn on him, firing their arrows with deadly accuracy. Washizu becomes little more than a semi-mobile pincushion, with dozens of arrows sticking out of him. Finally, in a shot surpassed in Kurosawa's works only by the incredible "fountain of blood" in *Sanjuro* (a shot whose graphic implications are far different), Washizu is halted as an arrow passes through his throat. Whatever irony such a shot might have possessed in an English-language version of *Macbeth* is denied, for Washizu,

Photo from *Throne of Blood*



in keeping with his animal-like links, has surely not been a man of words. The arrow through his throat is striking and memorable only on the formal level.

On the narrative level, there is a similar deemphasis of humanity via the removal of free will. If a fundamental paradox of Greek tragedy is the illusion of free will in a universe ruled by fate, the fundamental problem with *Throne of Blood* is the total absence of even this illusion. It is important to note that this is not a specific structuring of the *giri/ninjo* conflict. Free will, either in the form of choosing to obey a feudal lord or choosing to obey the spirit within the human soul is for the most part absent. In *Throne of Blood*, mankind does not seem to exist in communities, at least not established communities with specific laws. There is no central authority, nor is there a narrative movement to form one. Washizu's ambitions are not quite so specific. Indeed, to speak of "ambition" as the driving force behind his character would be entirely stretching things.

The lack of humanity, especially vis-a-vis the *giri/ninjo* conflict is essentially why *Throne of Blood* is not at its core a Japanese film. The lack of societal references prevents the film from taking on structural meaning beyond its admittedly impressive formal patterning. Although the film begins promisingly with its pictorially rich and seemingly significant opening shot, by the time the events have played out we have received only what we have been told we would.

We might compare, for instance, the opening and closing shots of *Throne of Blood* with those of *Hara-Kiri*, Masaki Kobayashi's masterpiece of anti-feudal passion. Both films open with a tracking shot accompanied by voice-over; both films close with the same shot with which they open. Yet in *Throne of Blood* the final shot serves as a formal closure, nothing more. The events we have been told we will witness have played out in the manner in which we were forewarned. The final shot gives the impression merely that the events will somehow always play out in this fashion. In *Hara-Kiri*, on the other hand, the closing shot functions as irony, as a bitter conclusion to a filmed narrative that contradicts the information the shot delivers. Certain Japanese beliefs and traditions have been revealed to be hollow and false in *Hara-Kiri* as the events related between the opening and closing shots reveal. By implication, Kobayashi explores the nature of myth and legend and the manner in which cinema aids their construction. Kurosawa, in this case, does not offer contradictory evidence, but rather formal revelation of known events. He relates myth and legend without either elucidating the manner in which it arose or the way it may be redefined. (He will do just that in *Kagemusha*.)

The feeling of *mono no aware* engendered in the opening shot of *Hira-Kiri*, by virtue of the sonorous chanting, the gracefully mobile camera and the appeal to antiquity, lull us into a certain frame of mind. This feeling will be rudely and ruthlessly destroyed, slowly but surely, until all traces are

obliterated by the climactic battle. When the shot is then repeated at the end, what initially produced *mono no aware* now produces irony and bitterness.

The opening shot of *Throne of Blood* similarly calls forth the feeling of *mono no aware* through its formal linking of timelessness (the mountains and the mist) with the mortality of man (the grave-stone implying that quite clearly). The second time the shot appears, similarly following a spectacular, action-filled climax, it may still call forth *mono no aware*, but this time it will be free of greater associations.

Ultimately, *Throne of Blood* may be seen as not so much adaptation of *Macbeth*, but a transliteration of its basic narrative pattern. If *Macbeth* is separated from its roots in formula by its poetry (with all that the term "poetry" implies), *Throne of Blood* is divorced from genre by its form. But in borrowing the narrative pattern without a corresponding thematic enrichment (even through the formal plane), Kurosawa has borrowed the bones of tragedy without the heart. Humanity has not simply been undervalued, it has been put aside. *Throne of Blood*, a film Kurosawa did not initially intend to direct,¹⁷ marks the last time he would forget that the heart of the cinema is the revelation of the human condition.

The Samurai Films

The films I will be dealing with in this section are the true Samurai films. These are the films most typically thought of as "Western," a statement not without much justification but one which demands close examination. These are Kurosawa's genre films, films which despite their Western influence have their roots firmly within the Japanese *Jidai-geki* and *chambara* traditions. For Kurosawa to transcend genre, as he so clearly has, to explode the formula (or to implode them as well) he begins with generic patterns. In this manner, Kurosawa truly shares a commonality with Americans John Ford and Howard Hawks. And like these American masters Kurosawa has made his most personal and revealing statements while trying to hide behind the mask of formula.

Working within formula boundaries, Kurosawa has also found the paradoxical freedom to experiment. He has used this freedom much like Samuel Fuller; his influence can similarly be seen on Sam Peckinpah and many of the various "New Wave" directors of France and Germany. This "modernist" aspect of Kurosawa, alluded to in *Rashomon* (which is, after all, a fairly obvious example) distinguishes him from virtually all of the directors who have worked in the period drama, just as his work in the period form distinguishes him from Japan's own New Wave. Only Masahiro Shinoda, the most "conservative" New Wave director, has produced formula films which work as genre and transcend genre simultaneously. (Kon Ichikawa produced

one film, *The Wanderers*, which is also a modernist film, but which is never intended to be taken as a genre work. His recent forays into formula are curiously non-modernist.)

The Samurai films of Akira Kurosawa are all concerned with swordsmen who exist in an ambiguous moral universe. Theirs is a world of uncertainty. There is no established authority in these films; it has yet to arise or it is in the process of breaking down. Of the four true Samurai films, two—*Seven Samurai* and *The Hidden Fortress*—are situated in the pre-Tokugawa era, the era of civil wars, and two—*Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*, although the era is not crucial—are stated to take place in the late Tokugawa era, the time of the *bakufu*'s decline. Kurosawa's Samurai films thus take place at a frontier, a frontier whose boundaries are not so much physical as moral.

The lack of a traditional authority places the moral/ethical stance within the realm of the individual. The individual in Kurosawa's films is faced with choices, a responsibility that places the individual consciousness at the center of the film's "moral universe," a reversal of the traditional Japanese film. The typical Japanese film finds the individual to be a social product, taught a set of social codes. The schism that arises between these social codes and the individual's developing sense of a human-self, determines the drama. When the individual resigns himself to the split, we find the Nostalgic Samurai drama; when the split causes a reexamination of the feudal foundations, we have the Anti-Feudal Drama, and when the split is transformed into a religious quest which ignores the society, we have the Zen Swordsman. Society in Kurosawa, however, is a social compact that does not exist a priori. Ethics and morals are not imposed upon but are established between individuals. The *giri/ninjo* conflict is in this manner elevated beyond society and its impositions upon the individual. Goodness is a product of the individual self, a much more existential position.

When this existential positing combines with certain of the motifs and characters introduced in *They Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* and *Rashomon*, we can understand Kurosawa's transcendence of genre into the realm of modernity. Modernist figures and techniques which appear in *The Hidden Fortress*, *Yojimbo*, and *Sanjuro* must be related to both the traditional formulas and Western influences. A self-reflexive stance demands acknowledgment, so that Kurosawa speaks through formula and beyond it. There is another dialectic thus apparent, that of a combination of tradition with the avant-garde.

Basically, Kurosawa works in two of the four sub-genres isolated in Chapter 2. The films produced in the 1950s are basically Nostalgic Samurai Dramas; the two of the early 1960s are Sword Films. Naturally, each of the films works perfectly well within these bounds, yet each transcends them. Like the films of any great filmmaker, Kurosawa's works are deceptively simple and