

Document Citation

Title	High and low
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Source	<i>Seventh Art, The</i>
Date	1964
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	17
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Tengoku to jigoku (High and low), Kurosawa, Akira, 1963

HIGH AND LOW

High and Low, Ikiru notwithstanding, is probably Akira Kurosawa's most successful film in a modern setting. The plot is simplicity itself, which is one reason it is successful—it gives him room to swing. An industrialist (Toshiro Mifune), mortgaged to the ears in order to close a stock deal that will give him control of his company, learns that his son has been kidnapped. Paying the ransom means business ruin, but of course he doesn't hesitate to accept the kidnapper's offer. Then he learns that it is his chauffeur's son who has been kidnapped by mistake; the kidnapper demands the ransom anyway, or he'll kill the boy. After much moral hairsplitting and haggling, the industrialist pays, the boy is returned, and the chase is on.

The last four words of the above sentence embody the whole, exciting, brilliant second half of the film. The first half is somewhat slow; Kurosawa loves to worry moral problems like a dog with an old shoe, and here he has a dilly. He falls prey to quite a bit of talkiness, but not quite too much. The problem is argued and resolved in the industrialist's living room, which is too constricted a place for a director like Kurosawa, who, with his penchant for wipes and roving camerawork, can't develop the tension that would make this part as exciting as the rest.

Once the moral problem is resolved, though, the story swings into high gear. The payment of the ransom, the recovery of the chauffeur's son, the manhunt—these are *action*, and Kurosawa's camera is always in there following it, elbowing through Yokohama's urban sprawl like a native New Yorker in the subways.

The purpose of the film is ostensibly to protest Japan's lax kidnapping laws; a kidnapper there is subject to only five to fifteen years imprisonment. Kurosawa lets the social protest present itself by osmosis instead of soapbox oration. He comes out unequivocally in favor of capital punishment, refreshingly, if barbarically, bucking the current trend. One of the reasons the manhunt is so successful is his variation on the pattern: Once the police know who the kidnapper is, they don't arrest him; he has committed two murders and, since the kidnapping rap would be so light, they make a determined effort with the murder raps (his victims were his heroin-addicted accomplices and everyone feels they got what was coming to them anyway). Thus, the tension builds strongly, smoothly and naturally to the climax; the government will hang the villain for murder, but Kurosawa is hanging him for kidnapping.

For melodrama, *High and Low* is short on melodramatics. All the characters emerge as real people, particularly Mifune, who develops a complex, mature character shrewdly and wisely. Irrelevant asides and touches enrich but don't slow the film. (At one point Mifune comments that he has been

with the company all his life—"Except during the war," said with a wry grin.) During one sequence we are taken on a dreamlike tour of a dope-den; it is a frightening, intense, unforgettable commentary on drug addiction—and related wholly to the plot. Finally, the pace is slower and the running time longer (two hours, twenty-three minutes) than purists have led us to believe a melodrama should be.

High and Low is in the tradition of many American social protest-crime semi-documentaries of the 1940's (*Boomerang*, *Call Northside 777*, *Brute Force*), but with several significant differences. The points Kurosawa wants to make are *dramatized*, not told to us by Reed Hadley; the film's impact is not softened by superficial, reflex-action humanism; and the roving, exciting camera and the keen, mordant intellect behind it makes most of them look calcified. If anyone had any doubt that Kurosawa could make a good film in a modern setting, he should have none now.

— Brian St. Pierre