

Drunken Angel

Part of The Kurosawa Project

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Drunken Angel, a stylish, bold, very dark noir, was Kurosawa's first film to directly engage specific problems of the post-war era¹. Because of this, the film, released in 1948, is widely regarded as Kurosawa's first true masterpiece, and the first picture to bear the undeniable stamp of the auteur on it. Particularly in Japan, *Drunken Angel* is considered a watershed work, of equal importance to Japanese cinema as *The Bicycle Thief* was to European cinema². The film also marked the emergence of Toshiro Mifune as an undeniable cinematic force and instant star in the Japanese scene, with a cultural impact similar to that Brando had in the United States³.

Kurosawa himself called *Drunken Angel* the first film of which he felt in complete control⁴. His wartime pictures were subject to censure from Japanese authorities, while his first two post-war films were subject not only to Occupation censors – as was *Drunken Angel* – but also internal review by script committees at Toho studios.

Interestingly, as film scholar Lars-Martin Sorensen points out in *Kurosawa and the Censors*, his short documentary on censorship and *Drunken Angel*, while the script for the film was heavily censored by Occupation authorities, the final film was released without a thorough review by these same censors. More likely than not, Kurosawa would have run into numerous problems had the censors decided to focus on *Drunken Angel*, given the film's violence and blatant criticism of the Occupation presence; luckily, for the director, the censorship office was overburdened and understaffed, and Kurosawa's picture slipped into theaters untouched.

Whether or not the film actually was Kurosawa's first picture as an auteur is subject to some debate – *Sanshiro Sugata*, his first film, displays nearly all of the thematic and stylistic hallmarks associated with the Kurosawa brand, as does his wartime semi-documentary portrait of female workers in an optics factory, *The Most Beautiful*. The obscurity of these films, particularly in the West, however, positioned *Drunken Angel* perfectly for audiences and critics unfamiliar with AK's early works.

Also, more so than *Sanshiro Sugata* and *The Most Beautiful*, *Drunken Angel* exhibits a violence and darkness commonly associated with Kurosawa, and stars Toshiro Mifune and Takashi Shimura, two actors who dominated Kurosawa's most critically acclaimed and well known films.

Narratively, *Drunken Angel* is a very simple film. It focuses on the relationship between Sanada (Shimura), an alcoholic, middle-aged doctor, and Matsunaga (Mifune), a volatile young yakuza with tuberculosis. The two live in the same neighborhood, a teeming slum erected in a low lying neighborhood of post-war Tokyo, that is packed with people and waste.

Matsunaga visits Sanada in the film's first scene because he has been shot in the hand. Sanada instantly

1 Prince – see Bibliography for info on all cited texts

2 Richie

3 Galbraith

4 Kurosawa

recognizes the symptoms of tuberculosis in the young yakuza and brusquely encourages Mastunaga to get x-rays of his lungs, while berating his yakuza lifestyle.

The relationship between these characters is almost always antagonistic. Sanada becomes increasingly frustrated with Matsunaga's behavior. Matsunaga, meanwhile, struggles with giving up violence, alcohol, gambling, and sex in order to heal – he fails to understand why the doctor cares about his fate, and claims that he'd rather die living the high life than live like a commoner.

Spoilers all over the place past this point

Various other plot strands come into play throughout the film. Matsunaga's yakuza mentor and former boss, Okada, is released from prison, returning to claim his neighborhood from Matsunaga. Meanwhile, Miyo, a young woman who lives under Sanada's protection and serves as his assistant, turns out to be Okada's former “woman.” Okada's desire to reclaim Miyo from Sanada leads to a confrontation between Matsunaga and Okada, the former taking to violence as a means of redeeming himself and paying Sanada back for his kindness. Interspersed sporadically throughout this milieu is another tubercular patient of Sanda's, a teenage girl, and Nanae, a woman whose affections are available to the alpha dog of the neighborhood.

While *Drunken Angel* is blessed by the enormous presence of a young Toshiro Mifune, some critics argue that the actor's presence upsets the balance and point of the picture. Sanada is ultimately the protagonist of the film; he is the titular character, the one with the most dramatic need and want, and the character whose story we follow most closely.

Yet Mifune completely dominates the film, shifting our focus away from Sanada's efforts to cure disease, and toward the tragic story of the dying yakuza and his futile attempts to conform. By shifting the focus of the film, Mifune centralizes the relationship between Sanada and Matsunaga, giving this tension precedence over much of the film's social commentary.

The Yakuza

Drunken Angel was conceptualized to directly confront the problem of yakuza in post-war Japan. Kurosawa set out to examine the predatory nature of the criminal organization, its negative impact on Japanese society, and the way in which the presence of the yakuza impeded social progress in post-war Japan⁵. The film was pointedly topical upon its release in 1948, during which time the yakuza were integrating themselves into the economic and political structure of post-war Japan in ways that would greatly affect the course of the country's economic and political development.

5 Kurosawa

Before moving forward, it's important to understand that yakuza is a generic term. It refers to all the organized gangs/families in the Japanese criminal underworld. It may also refer to individual members of those organizations. And, because the Japanese language has no plural forms of words, yakuza could refer to multiple groups or individuals simultaneously.

Debate and uncertainty surround the origins of the yakuza. The yakuza themselves claim that the organization arose from groups called machi yakko. The machi yakko were civil servants who, according to folk tradition, protected towns from the threat of roving bands of ronin (masterless samurai) and other potentially threatening forces during times of chaos. They were protectors of the people, historical underdogs fighting for Japanese commoners. Critics of the yakuza, on the other hand, trace their origins to the ronin themselves. According to this more critical genealogy, the modern yakuza arose from the kabuki mono, or crazy ones. The crazy ones were particularly wild, violent samurai, with especially long swords and their own crass vernacular. As the need for samurai diminished, the crazy ones turned to crime.⁶

Regardless of the historical origins of the yakuza, the criminal organizations exerted no real force on mainstream Japanese society until the mid Edo Period (1603 – 1868). Yakuza emerged from two social groups, the tekiya and the bakuto. The tekiya were street vendors who peddled stolen and illicit goods from carts or stalls. The bakuto ran gambling operations. Eventually, the bakuto and tekiya organized themselves according to traditional Japanese familial and social hierarchies.⁷

The increasing legitimization of the tekiya and bakuto as social groups gave rise to a third classification of yakuza, the gurentai, or hoodlums. The gurentai were hired thugs who protected the tekiya and bakuto from thieves, bullying, and other forms of intervention.⁸

The development of the yakuza continued through the Edo Period and into Meiji (1868 – 1912) and Taisho (1912 – 1926) periods. By the time of the Second World War, the yakuza were fully exploiting the conditions of the home front by stealing and selling food and other goods rationed by the government, while also dealing in prostitution and other criminal activities.⁹

The full integration of the yakuza into the social fabric and criminal activities of Japan during the war set the organizations up perfectly for the continuation of these practices during the post-war years. The policies of the Occupation, meanwhile, played directly into yakuza hands.

6 Gragert

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

The Occupation rationed nearly all essential goods in the post-war years, including the most essential of all, rice. As the basis of every Japanese diet, rice was often the only food that people ate on a daily basis during the post-war years, and it was highly controlled, and rationed on card system.¹⁰

The yakuza, through theft and backdoor dealings with Occupation personnel, obtained a steady supply of rice, and sold it at exorbitant prices for enormous profits. Alcohol was another highly controlled substance during the post-war years, used both as a beverage and medicinally. Again, through theft and dealing, the yakuza obtained a steady supply of alcohol, which was both sold at exorbitant prices to the Japanese, and also stocked in yakuza-run bars catering to Occupation soldiers.¹¹

In addition to alcohol, the yakuza stocked their clubs catering to foreign military personnel with prostitutes. Prostitutes who worked exclusively with American and other Occupation soldiers were known as “pan pan” girls, “pan pan” being a Japanization of “pom pom.” Pan pan girls dressed in American fashions, and did their hair in American styles.¹²

A number of goods not rationed by the Occupation were very difficult to come by in post-war Japan. Such goods included everything from certain types of metals and goods made from metal, to clothes and weapons. The yakuza had all of these things, and sold them to anyone with the financial means to purchase them. All of the money and social standing the yakuza earned during the post-war years through the black market and economic and political dealings with the Occupation were parlayed into legitimate businesses and political organizations as Japan continued to develop. Kurosawa addressed the connections between organized crime, business, and politics both literally and allegorically in a series of later pictures, including *The Bad Sleep Well*, *Yojimbo*, *Sanjuro*, and *High & Low*.

The post-war yakuza, who controlled black markets in Tokyo and dealt directly with the Occupation forces, are the subject of *Drunken Angel*. The film is littered with clues as to the direct connection between the Occupation and the yakuza, as we'll explore in subsequent sections of this chapter.

The Perpetuation of Feudal Values

Kurosawa was a vocal opponent of traditional Japanese feudal values throughout his entire life and career. As Sanada himself voices in *Drunken Angel*, “Drop the feudalistic loyalty crap, it makes me sick.” With *Drunken Angel*, Kurosawa makes the case that feudal Japanese values of unquestioning loyalty, absurd hierarchical

10 Gerteis + George

11 Prince

12 Martin-Sorensen

relationships, and blind allegiance are detrimental to the future of Japan. The film employs a number of tools to this end, including the use of costumes, character relationships, irony, and violence.

Though ultimately very complex, the Japanese feudal code can be explained pretty simply. Essentially, the code demands complete respect for and subservience to those with a higher social standing than the self. Social standing traditionally comes from birth, though can also be accrued through amassing wealth or political and social power.¹³ The feudal values system is commonly linked directly to Japanese militarism.

The character of Okada is central to all of *Drunken Angels*' criticism of feudal values, and the character himself embodies these values.

We first see Okada the night he arrives back in his old stomping grounds, fresh from prison. His outfit is bizarre, an obvious contrivance of the film – he wears a fedora, a kimono, and Western-style linen pants. Already, he is linked to traditional Japanese values, through his kimono. He is also, however, linked to the Western hedonism invading Tokyo, and the presence of the Occupation, through his hat and pants. And, not long after his arrival, he takes up an acoustic guitar – a Western instrument – and plays an American-style song called “Killer's Anthem.” Nothing subtle about that.

Not long after, Okada bumps into Matsunaga. At this point in the story, Matsunaga, a younger man than Okada and member of the post-war generation, has decided to withdraw from his hedonistic life style and focus on recovering from tuberculosis – he'll give up drinking, smoking, sex, the whole nine yards.

As Matsunaga stands staring into the sump – more on this later, but basically a big fetid swamp/lake thing in the middle of the neighborhood – holding a flower and thinking about his new life, Okada comes up behind him. They share a brief greeting and Okada invites Matsunaga to hang out. Before they leave, Matsunaga throws his flower into the fetid sump. Again with the heavy-handed symbolism, but it works well for the characters and the film.

Though Matsunaga at first refuses to drink with Okada, he eventually gives in. The night goes from bad to worse, as Matsunaga becomes incredibly drunk, goes on a gambling rampage, vomits blood and passes out. His two underlings, reliable comic presences throughout the film, take Matsunaga home and summon the doctor, but this sequence is, ultimately, the beginning of the end for his character. His code of loyalty leads him to drink with Okada, and the night takes a catastrophic toll, one from which he never completely recovers.

Matsunaga's loyalty is certainly an admirable quality, but Kurosawa uses his blind allegiance to his yakuza

organization as a means of critiquing feudal Japanese values and the yakuza. After his night out on the town and descent to a near death-like state, Matsunaga decides to repay Sanada for his kindness by talking to “the big boss” – Matsunaga's and Okada's boss – about Miyo, Okada's former woman who lives with Sanada. He believes he can persuade the big boss to instruct Okada to forget about her.

Sanada admonishes Matsunaga for what he sees as a fool's errand. But Matsunaga persists, saying “Our code of honor goes deeper than many” before leaving to confront the big boss.

Upon arriving at the big boss' place, Matsunaga hears the boss and Okada speaking through a door. The boss tells Sanada that Matsunaga is a man to be valued. Matsunaga smiles – he was right, honor and loyalty is important to these guys. However, the big boss goes on to explain that when turf wars arise, mid-level thugs with late-stage tuberculosis are great to have around, because they're loose cannons, willing to fight wildly and die without reservation.

This little speech from the boss is ironic in two ways. First, and most obviously, it's ironic that Matsunaga makes a big speech about the loyalty of the yakuza right before finding out that they don't really care about him at all – he's just another cog in the machine, to be used and discarded as the big boss sees fit.

Secondly, it plays on something Matsunaga says earlier in the film – “You really gain face when you put your life on the line.” Obviously, this isn't true at all. Rather, the big boss, himself a nefarious, hardened, old-school criminal, doesn't give two hoots about the reputation of Matsunaga, he just wants to exploit the qualities in his underlings that benefit his cause.

Kurosawa makes the case that organized crime in post-war Japan is nothing but a system of the powerful exploiting the dispossessed throughout *Drunken Angel*. This relationship is seen mostly clearly in the primary female characters in the film, and in the relationships between the pre-war and post-war generations.

The two main female characters in *Drunken Angel* are Miyo and Nanae, the latter a sultry vixen who sulks around the “No. 1 Cabaret” club at which Matsunaga, Okada, and their underlings hang out. Through the relationships these women maintain with Okada, Kurosawa' criticizes feudal Japanese values.

Miyo is Okada's former woman and lives in under the protection of Sanada. When Okada is released from prison, Miyo considers visiting him to see if he's reformed. Sanada, as is his usual approach, loudly admonishes her foolishness, telling her that Okada is still the same scoundrel and will continue to treat her like dirt. “Stop thinking like a slave,” he shouts at her.

This interaction directly criticizes traditional feudal gender relationships, in which a woman is more or less the possession of a man, with little to no ability to decide her own fate. By keeping Miyo away from Okada, Sanada encourages her to make her own life for herself, her own decisions. To decide her own fate and future. Through this, we see the film encouraging the women of post-war Japan to do the same, to take an active role in the development of a new Japan in the wake of the war.

Nanae is something of a doppelganger for Miyo, much as the criminal and cop are doppelgangers in *Stray Dog* (1949). Unlike Miyo, Nanae, who is Matsunaga's woman at the start of the film and Okada's by the end of it, attaches herself to the most powerful yakuza she can get her hands on. She plays the game, and is richly rewarded with fine clothes, alcohol, and the rest.

She is, however, a miserable and duplicitous woman, hopping from man to man, untrustworthy and untrusting. She is paranoid, violent, hysterical, and obviously unhappy, despite her successful relationships with a series of high rolling yakuza. As an interesting aside, in 1947, the year in which *Drunken Angel* was made, the Japanese ratified a new post-war constitution, which provided for gender equality¹⁴.

The relationship between pre-war and post-war yakuza is seen mostly clearly in the relationship between Matsunaga and Okada. Matsunaga is clearly young enough to have come of age in the latest stages of the war. Okada, on the other hand, went into prison at the height of the war, and is released three years after the war's end. Okada, therefore, represents old, pre-war Japan, and Matsunaga the nation's future: he is the new Japan.

Okada is a predatory creature, a hardened, old-school criminal with no remorse. He takes huge sums of Matsunaga's money in a gambling bout between the men, despite the fact that Matsunaga is vomiting blood and drunk to the point of incapacitation. He then steals Matsunaga's woman and takes his territory.

Played in juxtaposition to Okada's true feudal personality, Matsunaga comes across like a lost child. He tries to do the right thing, but in his confusion and hurt turns to a debauched, alcohol-fueled nightlife. We see clearly, when Okada returns from prison, that this is learned behavior, not innate to Matsunaga's personality. Indeed, in a particularly vulnerable moment, Matsunaga even considers tentative plans to run away with a bar maid he's secretly in love with.

Through the relationship between Okada and Matsunaga, *Drunken Angel* makes a case for the future of Japan – the country cannot progress, the film urges, if all the backwards machinations of old Japan, which led to the catastrophe of the Second World War and its aftermath, exert their influence on the vulnerable new generation responsible for rebuilding the country. Rather, this new generation needs positive role models and examples to

14 Jansen

learn from.

In a way, Sanada provides this positive behavior for the post-war generation – particularly Miyo and Matsunaga – but his help is too little, too late for Matsunaga. Sanada even says, at one point, that the only way to fight tuberculosis – and, as we'll see later, tuberculosis is a metaphor for social disease in *Drunken Angel* – is rational thinking. Rational thinking, rather than blind adherence to antiquated feudal values, then proves to be *Drunken Angel's* ultimate solution for the problems facing post-war Japan.

The Occupation

Drunken Angel aims a very critical eye at the presence of American Occupation forces in post-war Japan, and the role the Occupation played in the success of the yakuza in post-war Japan.

As previously mentioned, in the above section on the yakuza, the Occupation's system of rationing all essential goods in post-war Japan allowed the yakuza to broker deals for the black market sale of such goods at exorbitant prices. It also allowed the yakuza to establish night clubs – such as the No 1 Cabaret club seen in *Drunken Angel* – that sold bootleg liquor, featured jazz and blues bands, and catered to American soldiers.

Occupation forces assisted in the expansion and rise to prominence of the post-war yakuza in numerous other ways not already mentioned, including the release from prison of proven war criminals with yakuza ties in order to prevent strikes from labor unions and the potential spread of communism (this is discussed in much greater depth later in the Kurosawa Project).

So, it stands to reason, given the subject matter of *Drunken Angel*, that Kurosawa elected to criticize the Occupation's role in organized crime, rather than ignoring that aspect of the yakuza. However, Japanese filmmakers were forbidden from directly showing Occupation forces in post-war cinema, so Kurosawa had to be sneaky about indicating the presence of the Occupation and their role in organized crime.¹⁵

Obvious indicators of Occupation presence, and particularly American influence, can be found in No 1 Cabaret club. Not only is this an American-style jazz club with high-end liquor for sale – not something you could get in post-war Tokyo if not from Occupation forces – its name is written in the roman alphabet, so foreigners could read it.

According to scholar Lars-Martin Sorensen, the use of the roman alphabet in signage in post-war cinema was forbidden by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) film censorship office. However, Kurosawa snuck roman lettering into a number of his post-war films, as a way of being subtly critical of the

15 Martin-Sorensen

role Occupation forces played in what Kurosawa viewed as the many negative influences of the post-war environment.

Other indications of Occupation presence include western costuming, which is seen on all the yakuza, including Okada, and references to Western styles of dance – blues, tango – and alcohol, mainly whiskey.

In criticizing the Western influence on organized crime in post-war Japan, Kurosawa works up something of a thorny thicket of symbolism. Okada, for instance, is seen wearing both kimono and Western-style suits at various points throughout the film. Through use of costume, then, *Drunken Angel* criticizes both traditional feudal values and Western influence in post-war Japan. In this way, the film seems to suggest that the only way out is building something completely new.

However, it's important to keep in mind when watching films such as *Drunken Angel* or *Stray Dog*, both of which are highly critical of certain aspects of Western influence upon Japan, that Kurosawa is not roundly criticizing any and all Western ideals. What can be seen as the ultimate statement of *Drunken Angel* – rational thinking is required to solve these problems – is born of Western philosophical ideals. And, Kurosawa's ideal hero, the self-sacrificing individual who puts society before the self, is lifted directly from the director's favorite novelist, Dostoyevsky. So, while Kurosawa is openly critical of the negative influence of the ties between organized crime and the Occupation – both systems of exploitation – *Drunken Angel* is not a pure, blind critique of all Western influence in Japan.

The Sump

The sump is central to *Drunken Angel* in multiple ways: it serves as the center of the film's physical layout; it serves as a punctuation mark in the picture's narrative structure; and it provides the basis of the movie's central metaphor. To fully understand the sump, it makes sense to examine the geography of Tokyo in the immediate aftermath of the war, and the way in which the sump plays into the film's metaphorical content.

Simply put, a sump like the one shown in the film is a low lying, recessed area in which liquid collects. Sumps are usually isolated and unnatural, large puddles disconnected from any stream or flow, and formed by man made depressions in the earth; the liquid in a sump never moves. As the sump ages, the liquid within it festers, making it an ideal breeding ground for all kinds of bacteria, disease, and vermin.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Tokyo was a city pock-marked by sumps. On August 6th of 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, a relatively minor port city. Tokyo, the most logical target for mass destruction, devastation, and civilian and military casualties, had long since been destroyed by firebombings. Firebombing is so known because the air in a confined area becomes so hot from the

concentration of bombs dropped that it spontaneously combusts, igniting enormous fires.¹⁶

To quote extensively from an article on United States bombing strategy by Mark Selden, Cornell East Asian studies research associate and coordinator of *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*:

Police cameraman Ishikawa Koyo described the streets of Tokyo as “rivers of fire . . . flaming pieces of furniture exploding in the heat, while the people themselves blazed like ‘matchsticks’ as their wood and paper homes exploded in flames. Under the wind and the gigantic breath of the fire, immense incandescent vortices rose in a number of places, swirling, flattening, sucking whole blocks of houses into their maelstrom of fire.”

The first firebombing raid of Tokyo, conducted in February of 1945, resulted in the destruction of one square mile of the city. Less than a month later, in the early hours of March 10th, a second wave of planes dropped enough bombs (1700 tons worth) to destroy, along with the resultant firestorm, 16 square miles of the city. Estimates for deaths in this one raid range from 85,000 to 120,000 – at either end of the spectrum, more than died in the explosion from either atomic bomb. The United States Airforce Historical Studies Office estimates that this raid decimated approximately 267,000 buildings and destroyed 25 percent of the city.¹⁷

The air raids continued into August of 1945 – the last took place on August 10th, one day after the atom bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Each raid had a specific target, such as the Koizumi and Nakamima aircraft factories. Despite these specific targets, almost all raids had the same secondary target – the urban area. Basically, the Allied plan was to destroy military targets while hammering the general populace, in an attempt to crush the country into submission and force a surrender from the Emperor.¹⁸

After six months of strategic bombing, Tokyo was a leveled city in many sectors – most buildings were destroyed, and the craters left by fires, bombs, and other explosions left the city peppered with holes. When the summer rain of 1945 arrived, many of these holes turned into sumps – fetid swamps in the middle of residential neighborhoods. These sumps collected every liquid washed into low lying areas, which during the bombing raids probably included gasoline, other fuel oils, water, blood, guts, and anything from alcohol to chemicals used in war manufacturing plants.

Drunken Angel takes place in this environment. The sump is the center of a teeming post-war slum. A few old buildings, such as the one out of which Sanada operates, have survived the bomb raids, though most of the area

16 Selden

17 “Combat Chronology of the US Army Air Forces”

18 Selden

around the sump was clearly reduced to rubble. The market bordering the sump is filled with small shacks, most likely built quickly with plywood by vendors. It is here that the yakuza, and Matsunaga, make their home, as well as in the nightclub erected to cater to Occupation soldiers.

In addition to its central role in the geography of the film, the sump serves as a punctuation mark in the narrative structure of *Drunken Angel* – each distinct section within the film starts and ends with a shot of the sump, and is accompanied by an anonymous man in a suit playing blues songs on an acoustic guitar¹⁹.

Everything in the film returns to the sump; all originates and concludes with the sump. Matsunaga finds himself inexplicably drawn to the sump – he stares into it in moments of quiet existential contemplation. Sanada, on the other hand, is in constant conflict with the sump. He yells at a group of children for playing in it, in something of a pulpit moment in which he clearly voices his admonishment of the sump's fetid condition.

As a metaphor, the sump connects to all central themes of the film. In *Drunken Angel*, the sump represents the dangers of the post-war condition. It is central to the lives of the characters living in the post-war slum, and represents a point of fascination for the exploitative yakuza and a point of contention for the morally righteous doctor who wants to heal the social and physical ills of the city. The sump is an empty space, a void filled with all the dangers of the war. It was created by the war, contains the detritus of the war, and gives rise to disease.

In addition to disease, it gives rise to mosquitoes. Mosquitoes are parasites, disease carrying vermin that rise from the sump to feed on the blood of those closest to the sump, and they haunt *Drunken Angel* from the first scene forward, in which we see a pair of hoodlums swatting the parasites away as they stand by the sump waiting for Mastunaga to emerge from Sanada's office. Taking the sump as a metaphor for the worst aspects of the post-war condition, we can assume the mosquitoes represent the yakuza – parasites arisen from the sump and feeding on the blood of the Japanese people.

Taking this one step further, the yakuza are something like the bacteria and disease arisen from the presence of the sump. They are a social disease as much as they are parasites. Here we see manifest a great theme of Kurosawa's post-war work – social problems as social diseases, and a parallel, as we'll explore in the next section, between social disease and physical diseases.

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis is a central element of *Drunken Angel*. Mastunaga, the young yakuza afflicted with the disease, is forced to decide between reforming or continuing his lifestyle of drinking, smoking, gambling, womanizing, and fighting, which will inevitably lead to death by tuberculosis. The disease creates a visceral metaphor, and

19 Yoshimoto

physical manifestation, of the film's central theme, that of the social disease of crime in post-war Japan.

Tuberculosis, known as haibyō, or “lung disease”, in Japan, was the scourge of industrial nations the world over from the 18th Century onward. As countries such as England and, eventually, Japan, began the rapid process of urbanization and industrialization in the wake of the industrial revolution, deplorable living conditions, poor healthy and safety standards, a lack of access to healthcare, working class alcoholism, the popularity of cigarettes, and tremendous amounts of air pollution created the perfect conditions for the germination and proliferation of the disease.²⁰

Alternately known as consumption, tuberculosis causes holes to appear in the lungs. Victims of the disease express increasing difficulty breathing as the affliction worsens. Symptoms of tuberculosis include coughing up large amounts of blood and lung tissue. Though tuberculosis is known to be at least 17,000 years old, it only became a major concern in the 19th century. In 1815, consumption was the cause of 25% of all deaths in England. In 1918, at the end of World War One, the number rose to one of every six deaths.²¹

Improvements in public health programs, and increased awareness of the disease, developments in modern medicine, and various other scientific and social factors leads to an enormous decrease in tuberculosis-related fatalities world-wide by the 1950's, but in post-war Japan, circa 1948, tuberculosis was an enormous problem, and a frighteningly fatal one.

According to a paper published by the American Journal of Public Health²², tuberculosis was a huge problem in pre-war and wartime Japan, and carried over into the post-war years. Statistics published in the paper indicate 146,241 deaths due to tuberculosis in 1947, the year during which *Drunken Angel* was made. What's more, a study of Japanese citizens aged 29 and younger – the post-war generation – showed 70 percent, or 142,250 of 203,500 patients, tested positive for tuberculosis.

The rampant spread of tuberculosis in the post-war years relates directly to post-war conditions, as described above in the section on the sump in *Drunken Angel*. The disease, therefore, serves as the perfect metaphor for the social problems facing Japan as a result of post-war conditions; or, more specifically, the scourge of organized crime upon the people of post-war Tokyo.

Japanese attitudes toward disease tie tuberculosis as a metaphor for the social disease of crime back into the criticism of feudal values in *Drunken Angel*. The traditional Japanese attitude toward disease, particularly in

20 Bynum

21 Bynum

22 Nishimura

masculine men, was to ignore it. We see this in spades in Matsunaga, who, despite his horrible cough, dismisses Sanada as a fool for mentioning that he may have tuberculosis.

Kurosawa saw post-war attitudes toward the problem of crime in Japanese society as corollary to traditional attitudes toward disease – ignore it. The Japanese government made no major efforts to confront the problem, and it simply persisted.

Sanada's suggestion for dealing with tuberculosis, then, is also the film's suggestion for dealing with the social disease of organized crime: confront it rationally, and solve the problem in a logical manner.

Children in *Drunken Angel*

This chapter requires one more small section to adequately address the full scope of social issues presented in *Drunken Angel* – no thorough chapter on the film is complete without a brief discussion of the role children play in the film.

Children really only appear in two instances in *Drunken Angel* – early in the film, a group of kids plays by the sump, rough housing and splashing in the water. When doctor Sanada sees these children mucking about in the sump, he shouts at them, and runs over to admonish them.

“The water will make you sick,” he yells at the children. And the child whom he directly addresses flinches, an obvious indication that the child is acclimated to a feudal code of values in which adults, rather than rationally explain to children why they shouldn't do something – it's dangerous and will make you sick – simply beat on them to get their point across.

The second child to appear in *Drunken Angel* is a high school student with tuberculosis, who is a patient of Sanada's. While Matsunaga succumbs to his disease, this younger, more impressionable, less damaged youth follows the doctor's instructions and recovers. In giving us this character, *Drunken Angel* gives us hope – if children are given models of good behavior at a young enough age, they can overcome the social ills of the post-war condition and provide a positive future for Japan.

Without this character, *Drunken Angel* is essentially a film devoid of hope. While there are certainly a number of critics who dislike this sentimental, optimistic streak in Kurosawa's work – the baby in *Rashomon* is another great example of this – without it, his films would not be able to make the ultimate point Kurosawa wanted to make, that society can progress, can be better, more fair, more equal, with the right set of values – individualism and self-sacrifice for the greater good – and relationships between the young and old that foster these values.

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