

Stray Dog, a Gun, the Individual and Society in Shinji Aoyama's *An Obsession*

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Introduction

Shinji Aoyama is a contemporary Japanese filmmaker born in Kitakyushu, Fukuoka Prefecture on the island of Kyushu in 1964 and director of 14 feature films to date. He has created a number of films that have explored the role of the individual in society. Many of these films deal with alienation and a search for identity among the youths of contemporary Japanese society in films like *Two Punks* (1996) and *The Wildlife* (1997). In fact Aaron Gerow (2002) suggests that to Aoyama politics are the 'struggle to protect the individual as individual.' It is significant to point out that Aoyama was born 54 years after Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998). However, he based his screenplay for the film *An Obsession* (*Tsumetai chi* 1997) on Kurosawa's 1949 film noir *Stray Dog* (*Nora Inu*). This is a testament to Kurosawa's monumental influence on modern Japanese film. *Stray Dog* may seem like an unlikely choice for inspiration from Kurosawa's oeuvre because it is more likely to be considered of secondary importance in the west. Outside of Japan, it has been seen largely as a minor step in the director's development that would be realized in his breakthrough film, *Rashomon* the following year in 1950. That film, subsequently, would win the Golden Lion award as best film at the Venice Film Festival where it would herald in one of the great Japanese directors of film to the world. However, in Japan the film has a greater critical profile. For example, it was ranked number 10 in the 2009 *Kinema Junpo* poll of greatest Japanese films (albeit behind two other Kurosawa films: number 2, *Seven Samurai* (1954) and number 7, *Rashomon*). The themes that Aoyama inherits from Kurosawa allow him to make observations about the individual and contemporary society that would not have been valid at the time of Kurosawa's production in Japan's postwar society.

The Individual and Society in *Stray Dog* and *An Obsession*

It is apparent that *Stray Dog* and *An Obsession* represent different values and different depictions of Japan as well as the sensibilities of two different directors. Kurosawa set out to make a genre film, ala French crime novelist George Simenon, that Kurosawa (1982) saw as largely as a failure to embody the writer's novelistic style. In fact Terrance Rafferty (2004) points out it is really only a failure in the limited scope of the mystery genre, because it is a more rich and complex film due to Kurosawa's interest in the complex aspects of human behavior reflected in the film. Thus, the film depicts several stories in one narrative: a detective "film noir", a doppelganger story of similar protagonist and antagonist in a race against time to stop a killer from killing again, a protégé/mentor story of a rookie cop and seasoned veteran, and a realistic social commentary on postwar Japan.

The film has somewhat of a simple plot that is shaped into a more complex story by Kurosawa's cinematic exposition and exploration of nuances in the script. A young detective named Murakami (played by Kurosawa regular Toshiro Mifune), has his pistol lifted from him on a crowded bus on the hottest day of the year. Murakami is obsessed with recovering his pistol to overcome his carelessness in allowing it to be stolen in the first place. It is revealed that the gun had been borrowed by a desperate army vet named Yusa (played by Isao Kimura). Yusa, uses the gun to for a crime spree in which he robs, injures and murders innocent victims. Murakami under the tutelage of the seasoned mentor detective Sato (Another Kurosawa regular Takashi Shimura) attempts to track down the increasing desperate and violent Yusa. In the end

Yusa is captured and in doing so Kurosawa makes a social commentary on the postwar mentality and morality of people who have survived WWII. Murakami represents the societal hope for a better future, while Yusa represents the individual need for a better life in the present at any cost. In Kurosawa's typical humanist fashion he is also making a critique of capitalism and how it creates a chasm between the classes in a focus on the individual at the cost of society at large in a competitive economic atmosphere in which there are clear winners and losers.

Kurosawa's theme might be simply stated as a question of how to live in the postwar world of struggle and want. Murakami represents the Kurosawa humanism that states the individual is responsible for the improvement of society, which is reflected in his vocation as a policeman whose job is to serve and protect the community. Yusa, who Murakami feels a connection to as a WWII veteran (who also had his knapsack stolen upon returning), has chosen the opposite path in which he pursues his individual desires, which are manifested in consumer culture. Yusa is a nihilist he cannot conceive of working, saving, and scrimping in order to create a stable future. This inability of Yusa to imagine a future creates a sense of alienation and hopelessness. His reaction to hardship and defeat is that of depression, lassitude, and exhaustion. He wants money, food, and drink so that he can create a prosperous future in the present. He is amoral so he will achieve this by any means necessary-theft, murder, whatever-for him the ends justifies the means. So the existential question for Kurosawa lies in the answer of how to live in the postwar society-for society or for oneself.

On the surface, Shinji Aoyama's *An Obsession* is essentially a remake of Kurosawa's *Stray Dog*. A cop loses his gun to a killer, which triggers a search for the killer and the gun. The mentor-protégé aspect of the film is cut out and the police procedural aspect of the film is reduced. In addition, the story in Kurosawa's film takes place during the collective suffering of Japan during the postwar era, while Aoyama's film takes place in the relatively wealthy and struggle free society of the late 90s. At this point in time people's problems are more insular and philosophical than the material struggles for survival faced by the postwar society trying to rebuild their society after defeat and years of war. However, Aoyama mentioned feeling a prevailing sense of violence in Japan in the late 90s after the sarin gas attacks of the cult Aum Shinrinkyo in 1995 to Jasper Sharp (2005) in his commentary of the film. This sense of violence is manifested in the film as the hazmat-suited death squads that intermittently appear in the background throughout *An Obsession* without comment. These feelings of the threat of violence create feelings of hopelessness and loss of direction, not unlike that felt by many in the postwar society of *Stray Dog*.

In *An Obsession*, the detective Saga (Ryo Ishibashi) not only has his gun stolen from him by the nihilistic Shimano (Kazuma Suzuki), but he is also shot by the assassin of a cult leader that he was pursuing. This results in Saga being a "hollow man," since he lost the use of a lung during this incident. After he is shot, his wife Rie (Eiko Nagashima) leaves him since he never paid her any attention as cop dedicated to his career, which makes him questions human relationships after the fact. His pursuit of Shimano brings him in contact with Shimano's ex-girlfriend Kimiko (Kyoko Toyama), who believes that love can only be proved in death. In the end, Shimano and Kimiko opt out of life while Saga and Rie choose life and start over in a relationship of friendship as the basis for continuing on in life.

The main existential question for Aoyama, unlike Kurosawa is not how to live, but rather whether to live or not. In the supplemental interview (2005) to the film on DVD, Aoyama discusses the philosophical underpinnings of the film in which he changes the Shakespearean question of “To be *or* not to be” to “To be *and* not to be.” He says the story is of people who possess not only life, but also death within themselves and have to live life facing death. He suggests that all people possess death within themselves and that it is embedded in society. Thus, death is always with people who are conscious of its existence. Aoyama suggests that people who live by facing crisis’ tend to question the core nature of humanity. In what Aoyama calls his “post existential” film, the characters of Saga and Shimano do not face the same struggles that besieged Murakami and Yusa. This is because Japan has recovered through the economic miracle that resulted in the Bubble economy and the bust that followed and continued in the late 90s, in which the film is set. The characters are at battle with their own demons, rather than those of society. Shimano is from a wealthy family and has plenty of money, so his alienation is not from want of materialistic goods like Yusa, but rather from his terminal leukemia and subsequent lack of identity and meaning in life. Saga is similar in that he does not judge Shimano for his actions and understands his position, because the “hollow” Saga is also searching for identity and meaning in life adrift from his job and wife. This is shocking for his partner who at one point is moved to fight Saga for siding with a criminal.

At one point in the film, Saga admits that he does not disdain people who commit suicide. Furthermore, Saga says that he does not judge Shimano and does not think that he is crazy, because many people live for reasons like desire or greed. In fact, the people Shimano has killed are given little thought by the film nor the characters in it, unlike Kurosawa’s film which explores the repercussions of the crimes that destroy other people’s lives and stifles their ability to create a new future through diligence and hard work. As Gerow (1997) points out that in Aoyama’s cinematic world, people begin life alone and must create their own morals through confrontation with death and the need for maintaining human relationships. Shimano wants to prove his love to Kimiko and feels the best way to do that is to kill and die. He does not interfere when Shimano kills Kimiko and himself in an effort to prove his love. This sequence takes place in an empty baseball stadium, which is homage to Kurosawa’s film, which also contains a key scene in a crowded baseball stadium. In a filmed interview (2005), Aoyama states that suicide is one way of expressing love since the two involved are responsible for each other’s lives and that Shimano and Kimiko believed that there was no other way to prove their love. There is a long tradition of *shinju* (double suicide) in Japanese history as personified in Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s famous 17th century *bunraku* (puppet) play *Shinju Ten no Amijima* (*The Love Suicides at Amijima*). Thus, this should not come across as particularly shocking for Japanese audiences. Saga accepts this as one possible solution to the question of whether to live or not, but also finds his own answer to the question through a renewed friendship with his wife where he can prove his love to her by sharing a lifetime together as friends. In essence, Saga rejects Shimano’s nihilism. He reunites with Rie and takes over the family business.

Conclusion

Just as Kurosawa used the film noir and police thriller framework in order to make observations about life in his contemporary society, so does Aoyama. Although the basic plots of both stories are similar, each respective director has created an original vision of their respective societies at a specific point in history in a manner that also allows for the investigation of personal reactions to each director's moment in time. Kurosawa's moral universe is informed by simple humanism; it is essential to sacrifice and work to improve society collectively. Whereas for Aoyama, it is more important for the individual to work out his or her own reasons for existence in order to find an identity and create meaning in life.

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