

TRANSPOSING THE APOCALYPSE:

KUROSAWA'S *THE IDIOT*

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172 Akira Kurosawa's *The Idiot* (*Hakuchi*, 1951)¹ is a problematic transposition of Dostoevsky's novel into film.² The director's attempt to reproduce his source text as closely as possible while simultaneously transferring the plot into post-World War II Hokkaido has generated a mixed critical reception. Although some commentators praise this relocation of *The Idiot* to a Japanese setting for its defamiliarizing effect,³ others view the recontextualization as unsuccessful due to Kurosawa's inability to distance himself sufficiently from Dostoevsky. Donald Richie, judging the film to be "neither Dostoevsky nor Kurosawa," argues that the director "did nothing at all toward adapting the characters to their Japanese milieu" (81). Stephen Prince, similarly, concludes that Kurosawa merely "translates" Dostoevsky's novel, whereas he "transforms" Shakespeare and Maxim Gorky, respectively, in *Throne of Blood* (his relatively loose transposition of *Macbeth*) and *The Lower Depths* (142).

Even critics who appraise the film negatively, however, note Kurosawa's artistic and philosophical confluence with Dostoevsky's themes and central concerns.⁴ Prince cites, among other shared tendencies, their common interest in cataclysmic events (135-39). The film, indeed, engages the novel largely through a focus on its apocalyptic elements: execution motifs, the use of weather as an agent of catastrophe, and an overall sense of inevitable disaster.

Kurosawa's representation of this material, however, differs from Dostoevsky's in striking ways. He reconfigures *The Idiot* in light of the Japanese defeat in World War II, thereby exploring the novel's uncanny relevance for his society. In doing so, he turns an apocalyptic novel into a post-apocalyptic film. In Bakhtinian terms, he transforms Dostoevsky's chronotope, with its dynamic, frenzied depiction of onrushing catastrophe, into a frozen, static temporal and spatial representation of an exhausted postwar Japan. From this perspective, Kurosawa's changes to the novel

emerge as more radical than they may seem, despite his relatively close reproduction of Dostoevsky's plot.

Kurosawa's film opens similarly to the novel, with Kameda (Myshkin) meeting Akama (Rogozhin) and Karube (Lebedev) on his way home. After introducing himself to the Ono (Epanchin) family, he proposes marriage to Taeko Nasu (Nastasya Filippovna) at her birthday party, only to see her reject him for Akama. As in the novel, he is drawn into love triangles involving Taeko Nasu, Akama, Kayama (Ganya Ivolgin), and Ayako (Aglaya Epanchina). The ending also parallels Dostoevsky's, with Kameda and Akama watching over the murdered Taeko Nasu. Aside from the omission of the novel's secondary plot, with Ippolit Terentiev and his nihilist coterie, Kurosawa's narrative replicates the tragic course of events in what is considered to be Dostoevsky's most overtly apocalyptic narrative.

Part I of the novel draws its Christian subtext primarily from the Gospel. Dostoevsky claimed that he was trying to create a "positively good man" in Myshkin, and portrayed him as a nineteenth-century version of Christ, attempting to redeem a corrupt St. Petersburg society. In addition to his efforts to save Nastasya Filippovna from her own self-destructive behavior, Myshkin recounts an incident where he had similarly defended another fallen woman, significantly named Marie, in Switzerland. He responds to the violent behavior of his rival Rogozhin with brotherhood and Christian forgiveness, exchanging crosses with him. There are many other allusions to the Gospel: Myshkin speaks fondly of the donkey, the animal on which Christ rode into Jerusalem, and at one point intercedes to take a slap in the face that Ganya intends for his sister Varvara. 173

Parts II-IV of *The Idiot*, however, are organized around various references to the Book of Revelation. Dostoevsky links the novel's major crisis, Nastasya Filippovna's death, with railways, horses, execution, and other apocalyptic symbols, as well as inserted mentions of non-fictional contemporary murders, which in turn intimate Russia's larger time of reckoning. David Bethea calls it the first of Dostoevsky's novels where an apprehension of apocalypse is "the prime mover of the plot" (64). Although Dostoevsky's notebooks show that he did not determine the exact ending until long after finishing Part I,⁵ there is a palpable sense of catastrophe throughout the novel. Many critics find the final scene of Myshkin and Rogozhin sitting by the murdered Nastasya Filippovna to be foreshadowed from the opening of the novel, in which the same two characters face each other in a train compartment, or at least from early on in the narrative. George Steiner, for example, claims that Myshkin foretells the murder from the beginning, when he speculates that Rogozhin would marry and murder Nastasya Filippovna in a week (156).⁶ Gary Rosenshield views the protagonists as clearly aware of an onrushing disaster, although unlike Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna, who actively embrace it, Myshkin attempts to avert it (883). The openness of the first chapters undergoes a process of tightening and narrowing of possibilities until, as Bethea remarks, "that which has been dramatically retarded for hundreds of pages is at last accomplished" (101). Dostoevsky, then, paves the way

for a catastrophic end while at the same time leaving room for avoiding it. The novel combines a sense of foreshortening of possibilities with openness and uncertainty.

As Gary Saul Morson demonstrates, the novel's open-ended time, in which every moment could lead to a number of possible outcomes, coexists with a vortex chronotope (135-39). This type of temporal representation, featuring the speeding up of time and a gradual focusing of all narrative elements into a single, concentrated moment, characterizes the descriptions of Myshkin's epileptic seizures, in which the second before the attack consists of a simultaneously painful and ecstatic perception of wholeness and harmony. Myshkin's reporting of the thoughts of the condemned man, whose final five minutes seem to last for an eternity and allow for an amazing number of detailed impressions, similarly involves vortex time. This temporality of execution and epilepsy, Morson points out, is inextricably linked to the Apocalypse. Lebedev, who is studying the Book of Revelation, describes Russians as living in an age of the first signs of temporal acceleration.

174 The theme of execution plays a particularly important role in establishing the centripetal, speeded-up vortex time that is characteristic of the apocalyptic chronotope. Dostoevsky's exploration of this topic, stemming directly from his own near execution in 1849 following his arrest as a member of the radical Petrashevsky circle, is more pervasive in *The Idiot* than in any of his other works. In Part I, while waiting to introduce himself to General Epanchin, Myshkin discusses an execution he had observed in Lyons with a footman. Three chapters later, he brings the topic up twice while Madame Epanchina and her three daughters are interviewing him over lunch. The first description concerns a twenty-seven-year-old political prisoner he had known who was condemned to death and reprieved at the last moment. This account parallels Dostoevsky's own experience extremely closely. Myshkin then describes the execution he witnessed in France again, this time imagining the victim's thoughts in order to describe how the middle daughter, Adelaida, a painter looking for a subject, should depict his face. The novel contains several other references to the topic as well. Ippolit, who is dying of consumption, refers to himself as being condemned to death in his "Essential Explanation." The theme of execution implicitly recalls the Gospel account of the Crucifixion, embodied by Rogozhin's print of Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*.

With its focus on execution and apocalypse, *The Idiot* held special relevance for a twentieth century replete with revolution, genocide, and other totalizing events, not to mention the constant threat of nuclear war. As none of these catastrophes proved to be an ultimate end of ends, much of the second half of the century, following the bloodshed and atrocities of World War II in particular, was spent in a kind of aftermath. Many critics and artists have consequently conceptualized apocalypse in tandem with the post-apocalyptic. In a recent analysis of late twentieth-century post-apocalyptic narratives, James Berger observes that "nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world

represented in the text, and neither does the world itself” (5). Any literary or artistic work about the apocalypse, then, can potentially be seen simultaneously as a post-apocalyptic narrative, since it will of necessity depict both sides of the cataclysm: the “before” and the “after.”

This dual position applies particularly well to Dostoevsky’s novel, which narrates not only a catastrophic event (Rogozhin’s murder of Nastasya Filippovna and Myshkin’s return to idiocy), but also, implicitly, the aftermath of the Gospel account that it reworks. As Michael Holquist points out, Myshkin’s inability to function as a successful redeemer may be seen as a repetition of Christ’s similar failure (104-05). In this sense, *The Idiot* recalls one cataclysmic end even as it anticipates another.

Nevertheless, the novel deals primarily with immanent tragedy; Kurosawa’s film, on the other hand, focuses on the aftermath of disaster. These differing emphases, of course, reflect each artist’s respective personal, historical, and national milieu. Dostoevsky is writing in reaction to an increasingly foreboding atmosphere in late nineteenth-century Russia. In addition to the actual crimes he alludes to in the novel itself, such as V.F. Mazurin’s murder of a jeweler in 1867 and the Zhemarin murders by the student Vitold Gorsky, Dmitry Karakozov’s 1866 assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II and other ominous political developments seemed to forecast revolution and national upheaval. 175

The film, by contrast, is set after a devastating wartime defeat culminating in the nuclear destruction of two cities, and foreign occupation of Japan. Although Kurosawa only fleetingly refers directly to this historical context, he transforms the novel by recounting its tragedy as a past event rather than focusing on future catastrophe. Critics such as Richie and Prince view the film as stranded between two eras and cultures, and therefore lacking in contemporary relevance. However, James Goodwin correctly groups *The Idiot* together with other Kurosawa films from the postwar years, such as *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947), *Drunken Angel* (1948), and *Ikiru* (1952), which also address the aftermath of war and its impact on Japanese society (“Akira Kurosawa and the Atomic Age,” 178). By incorporating aspects of this aftermath into Dostoevsky’s narrative, Kurosawa is indeed able to relate the novel in unexpected ways to postwar Japan.

The film’s transformation from apocalypticism to a post-apocalyptic perspective can be seen directly in the way Kurosawa adapts Myshkin’s past circumstances to the context of postwar Japan. Although Kameda, like Myshkin, is also returning from treatment for epilepsy (in an Okinawa army hospital), the source of his illness is different. Kurosawa’s protagonist is a war prisoner who has mistakenly been sentenced to be shot for treason and freed only at the last moment; the army has reported him officially dead. The shock of nearly dying has stricken him, as he puts it, with “*dementia epilepsia*,” or “idiocy.” The film begins with a scream that rouses an entire shipload of travelers, as Kameda wakes up from a recurring nightmare about his averted execution. In this manner, Kurosawa shapes the narrative even more centrally around the theme of execution than Dostoevsky does. He also imme-

diately connects the novel's preoccupation with catastrophic ends to the themes of mourning and war trauma by adding a concrete historical event – World War II – that considerably alters the presentation of Dostoevsky's apocalyptic theme.

Further, by featuring the episode of near death so prominently, Kurosawa in effect returns to what can be considered a latent text: Dostoevsky's personal circumstances, which the novelist had layered over in an attempt to avoid representing himself too directly in his artistic work. By crossing the boundary separating the novelist's refracted autobiographical material from its initial, experiential source, the film approaches the actual urgency and personal tragedy of the near execution in a way that the novel cannot. As Goodwin notes, Kurosawa locates in this biographical event "the wellspring for Dostoevsky's powers of imagination and spirituality" (*Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, 74). However, the director also reflects Dostoevsky's own trauma over his sham execution through Kameda's repeated accounts. Dostoevsky, it should be noted, recalled his experience time and time again, in letters to friends and family, in conversations with young people desiring to hear of his experience, and in briefer allusions elsewhere in his fiction.⁷

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Myshkin's account to the Epanchins of the twenty-seven-year-old acquaintance whose execution for political crimes is averted at the last moment is of great thematic importance in *The Idiot*, displaying his moral insight and extraordinary ability to empathize with others. Its origins in Dostoevsky's experience, however, are obvious from the minutely detailed reporting. As Steiner remarks, "one wonders whether the rhetorical urgency with which the material is handled... does not stem from the author rather than from the character" (158). Indeed, this urgency surprises his listeners, who are puzzled as to why he has even chosen the topic of execution. Immediately after the account of the political prisoner, Aglaya asks Myshkin: "what did you tell that story for?" (57). In the conversation with the footman, one of Myshkin's comments, on the sensations a condemned man might undergo, blatantly refers to Dostoevsky's averted execution: "Perhaps there is some man who has been sentenced to death, been exposed to this torture, and has been told 'you can go, you are pardoned'" (21). Because such comments so blatantly reflect the author's ordeal, they come across as oddly over-insistent.

If Myshkin's accounts take on an indirect, second-hand quality in *The Idiot*, then Kurosawa departs radically from the novel by transforming them into Kameda's personal experiences. Myshkin cites his observation of an execution in Lyons as one of several formative, life-changing incidents. For Kameda, however, the averted execution represents both the cause of his epilepsy and the premise for his compassionate attitude toward others. Compared to Myshkin's ruminations on the philosophical implications of execution, Kameda's simple longing to behave more kindly and appreciate goodness is more prosaic and concrete. His description of his suffering to one person (Ayako) on a walk, rather than four people during a drawing room "cross-examination," as in the novel, takes on an intimate, conversational quality that contrasts greatly with Myshkin's nearly uninterrupted recitation to the Epanchins.

Moreover, by extending the averted execution experience to other parts of the narrative as well, and showing its reverberations for the protagonist, Kurosawa reshapes it into a trauma from which his hero attempts to recover. Kameda's memory haunts him, directly informing his interactions with other characters. In the charm swap that replaces the novel's exchange of crosses, he gives Akama a stone he had picked up from the ground in a trance while awaiting execution. This alteration emphasizes the role of trauma in Kurosawa's narrative. Kameda in effect brings a symbol of his wartime brush with death across the barrier into the postwar aftermath, connecting his pre- and post-apocalyptic experiences by giving the stone to Akama. Epilepsy is similarly subsumed under the themes of execution and war trauma. While Myshkin's illness has only a vague, unspecified connection with past trauma, Kameda's results directly from the wartime horrors he has experienced. During the epileptic fit precipitated by Akama's attempted murder, Kameda's scream as he crashes into the snow recalls the cry that wakes him from his nightmare of being shot at the beginning of the film. Kurosawa replaces the apocalyptic speeding up of time associated with Myshkin's epileptic fit with a sense of repeating trauma (where Akama's upraised hand, perhaps, symbolizes an executioner's gesture). 177

The transformation of the exchange of crosses also signifies a thorough secularization of Dostoevsky's hero as part of Kurosawa's post-apocalyptic chronotope. Throughout the film, the director replaces Dostoevsky's Christian expectation of an apocalyptic end with an atmosphere of timeless, motionless postwar exhaustion and trauma. He transforms Myshkin, who is at times stridently Orthodox, into a non-believing Kameda. Asked by Akama whether he believes in God, Kameda answers "not especially."⁸ Kurosawa also omits one of Dostoevsky's most apocalyptic scenes, the Epanchins' dinner party in Part IV where Myshkin rants on the evils of Catholicism, socialism, and atheism, the dangers facing Europe, and the ascending role of Russia. This omission in turn underscores Kurosawa's minimization of the role of epilepsy, as he includes only one of the two fits Dostoevsky describes. Even more importantly, he makes no effort to replicate Myshkin's interior monologues about the disease and its spiritual aspect. Kameda's epilepsy lacks this dimension, functioning simply as inspiration for more compassionate behavior towards others.⁹ On one level, this secularization of Dostoevsky's Christ figure reflects Kurosawa's belief that Myshkin's essence can be found in his human goodness rather than in any specifically Orthodox doctrine or mystical revelation. It is also connected, though, to his replacement of Dostoevsky's eschatological point of view with a concentration on wartime trauma.

Kameda's memories consistently orient the viewer toward his personal role in the wartime disaster, forcing the novel's key scenes to be reread in light of the film's historical context. During Taeko Nasu's birthday party, Kameda, asked why he stares so insistently at her, gives another account of his near execution, this time recalling a boy who had been shot ahead of him. He describes the soldiers lined up and the suffering in the boy's eyes as he anticipated the gunfire, followed by a rather grotesque

account of his death: "Then we heard a shot. I looked up quickly but he was already hanging there like a lifeless rag" (Kurosawa, *Complete Works* 43). This recollection, according to Kameda, is inspired by Taeko Nasu's eyes, which resemble those of the boy. And since Kameda adds new details about his near execution in each conversation, his accounts take on the quality of a quasi-therapeutic series of revelations. Berger characterizes this kind of linking of cataclysmic disaster with psychological trauma, and the need to repeat the past to find ways to deal with it, as typical of post-apocalyptic texts. Kameda's personal recollections uncover successively deeper layers of trauma as he reveals harsher, more haunting details each time and volunteers his accounts more readily, as though attempting to overcome his painful experience.

178 Indeed, Kameda's revisiting of his near execution in many ways recalls the repetition compulsion that Freud observes in war trauma victims in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this respect, his recollections differ greatly in tone as well as substance from those of Myshkin, who so often longs for the Swiss idyll of his past. Cathy Caruth, in extending Freud's theory of the death instinct and the compulsive response to trauma, focuses on the aftermath of the catastrophic experience. Traumatic neurosis, for Caruth, is not just a reaction to the initial event, but also "the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival" (60). The continued existence beyond the event itself, and the difficulty comprehending and assimilating it, are themselves unbearable to the trauma victim: "the survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but rather the endless *inherent necessity of repetition*, which ultimately may lead to destruction" (62-63; her italics). Caruth's description is especially apt given the conclusion of the narrative, in which the murderous act of execution that Kameda has been forced to observe is repeated, despite all his attempts to prevent it. Freud's description of trauma as "an unwitting reenactment of an event that one simply cannot leave behind" (2) could apply directly to Kurosawa's narrative, except that Kameda's experience involves passive, helpless observation, rather than the active though unwitting repetition that Freud describes in his example of Tancred's unwitting murder of his lover. In this light, Kameda's retellings testify to a desire to grasp the ineffable moment of contact with death.

This obsession, to be sure, is characteristic of Dostoevsky's narrative as well. Myshkin's choice of execution as a topic of conversation upon meeting the Epanchins displays an attempt to imagine the experience of dying, or nearly dying, in order to enrich his own understanding of life, and how to live well. Further, he shows obvious signs of trauma in reaction to the topic of execution. Myshkin tells the footman that he has dreamed about the execution he witnessed five times, and also mentions to the Epanchins that the condemned man's description of his last five minutes struck him so much that he dreamed about it later. In the film, however, Kurosawa's merging of Dostoevsky with Myshkin recontextualizes this trauma. Like Myshkin, Kameda has observed an execution that continues to haunt him. However, he has also shared Dostoevsky's encounter with seemingly certain death. The traumatic events are therefore both more concrete and more immediate.

Successfully overcoming trauma requires the mastery of one's own survival, and reintegration into society, in order to regain any semblance of emotional health. The difficulty of this task explains the high rate of suicide among victims of war, concentration camps, and other such ordeals. Elie Wiesel, Bruno Bettelheim, and other Holocaust survivors emphasize that liberation from the camps, far from being joyous for the relative few who were saved from extermination, was a time of sorrow and exhaustion, fraught with the hardship of beginning life again. Kameda's accounts are typical of such post-traumatic responses. He undergoes the difficulty of reintegrating himself into society following the horror he has both experienced and witnessed. By grafting the narrative of *The Idiot* onto a postwar situation, Kurosawa's film merges the efforts of Dostoevsky's "positively good man" to have a salutary effect on corrupt individuals with the survivor's unique sense of responsibility. Bettelheim writes: "Being one of the very few who were saved when millions like oneself perished seems to entail a special obligation to justify one's luck and very existence, since it was permitted to continue when that of so many others exactly like oneself was not" (26). He also describes three possible responses to trauma: giving up on reintegration, attempting to simply live the same way as before the event, and fashioning a better life by applying one's experiences to the post-trauma period in a positive way. Regardless of whether Kameda undergoes the survivor's guilt Bettelheim and others describe (it is difficult to tell), he definitely attempts to apply lessons learned from his near execution in his interactions with Akama, Taeko Nasu, Ayako, and Kayama alike.

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Beyond Kameda's individual experience, Kurosawa's modification of Myshkin's premises and his foregrounding of execution as a principal theme resonate with the broader Japanese circumstances of World War II as well. Just as Dostoevsky's apocalypticism reaches beyond the tragedy involving Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna to make a broader statement about Russia's future, Kurosawa's transformation of the hero's circumstances also encompasses his nation as a whole. The specific historical context for Kameda's averted execution is the conviction of war criminals by the International Military Tribunal set up during the Allied occupation of Japan (Marciano 766). And certainly, Kameda and other characters in the film are representative of a shell-shocked society in the wake of war. However, the specific motif of near death bears particular relevance for Japanese postwar society.

Even for a nation that had traditionally glorified ritual suicide, Japan's plan for an "Honorable Death of the Hundred Million" in 1945 was the most dramatic of these gestures.¹⁰ According to this proposal, conceived when Japanese defeat by the Allies was inevitable, all citizens were to commit suicide collectively upon the announcement of the final surrender. In the last year of the war, government officials and the press increasingly urged the Japanese citizenry to consider themselves part of a collective suicide unit (Dower 232-33). Kurosawa recalls that on the day of the surrender, shopkeepers sat outside, staring at the blades of traditional Japanese

swords (*Something Like an Autobiography* 145). Only the Emperor's radio command for the people to lay down their weapons dispelled them from carrying out the plan. Kurosawa's recollection of his rather morbid marriage proposal of that year underscores the import of the situation for him: "It looks as if we are going to lose the war, and if it comes to the point of the Honorable Death of the Hundred Million, we all have to die anyway. It's probably not a bad idea to find out what married life is like before that happens" (138).

In effect, Kurosawa and his society were operating under a death sentence, albeit one imposed by cultural and societal imperatives. These specific historical circumstances notwithstanding, the situation of the Japanese people eerily paralleled Dostoevsky's, since their "execution" was averted at the last moment by the Emperor. The leftist critic Masahito Ara, writing in 1946, even makes this connection to Dostoevsky's sham execution explicit: "what we have just experienced with the Defeat has been in no degree less traumatic or profound than that great Russian writer's experience" (qtd. in Nathan 69-70). A novel such as *The Idiot*, with its concentration on execution and near execution (not to mention suicide and near suicide), would understandably hold great significance for Kurosawa and the Japanese public; it is not surprising that this aspect of the novel figures so prominently in his transposition. Indeed, the theme of an individual's actions in the face of certain death appears elsewhere in Kurosawa's films, such as *Ikiru*, in which the protagonist knows that his cancer allows him only six months to live. Thus Dostoevsky's obsessive interest in narrowly averted death and executions acquires new meaning as Kurosawa reworks it in light of his own and his nation's experiences.

Beyond these connections between Dostoevsky's novel and the specific circumstances of World War II, Kurosawa's spatial representation of the novel also refers symbolically to collective death. The film's Hokkaido setting, along with the omnipresent snow, has received little critical attention. Richie interprets Hokkaido as a "compromise country," noting the various non-Japanese characteristics and customs of its Ainu natives (81). Although Hokkaido, the Japanese island closest to Russia, does function in this liminal fashion, the pervasive, foreboding quality of snow, snowstorms, and icicles in the film indicates that the choice of this island may relate more significantly to the novel's central themes. As Richie also notes, Kurosawa made sure that every scene contained snow and/or snowfall by shooting in Hokkaido during the winter and including snow even in the scenes shot in Tokyo. Moreover, in his near-obsessive use of snow, he departs considerably from the novel, which features snow only in Part I. Kurosawa's transformation of this motif undermines the notion that he was striving exclusively to replicate the novel, and suggests the importance he placed on snow as an expressive element.

Kurosawa essentially expands the winter setting of Dostoevsky's Part I to the rest of the narrative. The entire film takes place from December to February, where Parts II-IV of the novel are set during the summer. The manner in which each artist portrays weather, though, is of even greater importance. In the novel, its significance can

be seen from the very beginning, as Myshkin sits facing Rogozhin on his way back from the relatively temperate climate of Switzerland. Rogozhin addresses a not-so-warmly dressed Myshkin: “[W]ith an indelicate smile, in which satisfaction at the misfortunes of others is sometimes so unceremoniously and casually expressed, he asked: ‘Chilly?’” (4). The cold specifically affects Myshkin, who, unlike Rogozhin, is not protected against the Russian winter. Rogozhin’s slightly malicious reference to Myshkin’s discomfort symbolizes the latter’s lack of preparation for the evil and corruption he is about to face upon his return to St. Petersburg. Weather serves as an agent of Myshkin’s seemingly fated undoing, as though it were personally directed against him.

Elsewhere in the novel, by contrast, heat and hot weather fulfill a similar function. The scandal scene closing Part I culminates with the fire into which Nastasya Filippovna throws Rogozhin’s hundred thousand rubles. Later, in Part II, the external atmosphere itself points to disaster. Myshkin’s thoughts about his illness and his premonitions immediately before Rogozhin’s attempt to murder him are accompanied by a description of threatening weather: “It was sultry and there was a feeling in the air like a foreboding of a thunderstorm in the distance” (219). Indeed, bad weather follows Myshkin around in this entire scene: a storm gathers slowly and rain begins to pour down the moment he approaches Rogozhin’s house. Before he meets Rogozhin at the end of the novel, preceding their vigil over Nastasya Filippovna’s dead body, his sensations of dread are once again reinforced by the weather: “The dusty, stifling atmosphere of Petersburg weighed on him like a press” (585). 181

Kurosawa’s use of snow throughout the film offers a major contrast to these passages. First, he depicts it as a much more pervasive motif than in Dostoevsky’s novel. One of the first images confronting Kameda as he sets foot on Hokkaido is the portrait of Taeko Nasu that he stares at along with Akama under falling snow. The precipitation, accompanying Kameda crying, suggests an association of snow with tears, and thus also the theme of trauma. The picture presumably reminds Kameda of the executed boy, as Taeko Nasu later does in person, and therefore recalls the problem of dealing with the aftermath of disaster.

Further, Kurosawa’s impersonal, non-specific depiction of snow parallels his use of space and interiors in relation to the novel, a topic that Emma Marciano has investigated.¹¹ Since the snow affects and at times literally covers all the characters in the film, it contrasts noticeably with Dostoevsky’s weather descriptions, which generally revolve around his protagonist.¹² This tendency can be seen immediately with the snow falling on both Kameda and Akama as they stare at the photograph of Taeko Nasu, which also appears to be impacted by the snow since it is viewed through transparent glass. Later in the film, after the love triangles and rivalries of Dostoevsky’s narrative have already been set in motion, Kurosawa includes a masked carnival on ice, accompanied by threatening ice sculptures and featuring various characters skating.

In some scenes, of course, the snowfall does revolve around Kameda. A passing vehicle dumps clouds of snow on him as he wanders through the streets lost in

thought after his visit to Akama, for example, at one point completely obscuring his image. During his epileptic fit, he falls backward into a giant snowbank. However, snow just as often affects other characters. After his attempted murder, Akama, frightened, runs off, crashes into a wall and is covered by snow. As Kayama waits for Ayako to read the letter he has entrusted Kameda to give her, he paces outside restlessly as the snow falls down on him. Even indoor scenes are pervaded by this motif. The snowstorm is visible through the glass ceiling of Taeko Nasu's house during her birthday party. And at the very moment the Onos are discussing the possibility of Akama committing murder, a large pile of snow crashes down from the roof, startling the family. During Kameda and Akama's nightlong vigil by the murdered Taeko Nasu, the freezing weather reverses the conditions at the end of the novel. Whereas Myshkin inquires about opening the window because of the heat and stuffiness, Kameda asks whether the stove can be lit.

182 Most importantly, snow in Kurosawa's film submerges the characters, taking on a suffocating quality. It frequently occupies nearly the entire frame, with snowbanks dwarfing characters at several points. Since it plays a crucial role in scenes focusing on epilepsy, obsession, and murder, it represents the same ominous force as the heat weighing on Myshkin in the novel, except that it indiscriminately affects all of the characters. Particularly in the wake of recent wartime death, bombing and total destruction, the snow falling throughout the film reflects a sense of deathliness carried over to peacetime; it thus recalls the idea of execution, and inexorable death. In Kurosawa's film, snow in effect acts as a totalizing instrument of death, or a post-apocalyptic grave, perhaps even symbolic of the atomic residue literally burying Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and their inhabitants.

This symbolism is further reinforced by the traditional Eastern associations of snow (and whiteness in general) with death, burial, and mourning. Kurosawa's use of white, manifested through long close-ups of pale faces as well as the constantly falling snow, is striking in this film. The fact that *The Idiot* is black and white accentuates this feature, as the lack of competing colors other than black and different shades of gray emphasizes the whiteness. East Asian cultures traditionally employ white predominantly in connection with death (through lotus blossoms, graves, and temples, for instance) (Fickeler 99), as opposed to the typical Western use of it to symbolize purity. Although whiteness and specifically snow occasionally represent death in Western art as well,¹³ they function this way more often in Eastern culture.¹⁴ The interchange between Russian and Japanese texts thus allows for an intriguing play between the various signifieds of whiteness, as Kurosawa uses the color to convey tragedy and mourning.

Kurosawa's use of snow therefore plays a key role in his reinterpretation of Dostoevsky's apocalyptic vision, and functions to extend the novel's preoccupation with execution. Snow as a symbol expands the sense of impending apocalypse that pervades much of *The Idiot*. It responds to the critical question of the extent to which the novel's ending is predetermined by interpreting it, in light of the actual Japanese defeat, as inevitable. Tom Milne, calling snow the "central metaphor" of the film,

describes how it persistently accompanies people seeking each other: “Kurosawa captures the essence of [Dostoevsky’s] novel: that sense of people as isolated units, reaching helplessly out with their sympathies but unable to tear down the barriers of understanding and intention which separate them from peace of the soul” (41). However, the snow illuminates not only the characters’ isolation and inability to communicate, but also their helplessness in the face of catastrophe, past and present. Dostoevsky’s climate undergoes a gradual increase from the snow of Part I to the progressively hotter weather in the remaining three parts. In Kurosawa’s film, by contrast, the snow, snowstorms, and icicles, lasting from beginning to end, impart a feeling of stagnancy, as though an impersonal, deathly, inescapable force had descended upon the entire world, engulfing everyone without exception. These symbols enable the director to transform the frenetic uncertainty of Dostoevsky’s narrative into a static, doomed environment typical of the post-apocalyptic chronotope. If the events of the novel signify an impending catastrophe, the film depicts these same events in light of an apocalypse that has already taken place: the tragic events of World War II.

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Kurosawa’s setting of the narrative entirely within Hokkaido, so different from Dostoevsky’s dynamic contrasting of several locales, also works toward this impersonal, static effect. The novel’s alternation between St. Petersburg, Pavlovsk, and the Switzerland of Myshkin’s reminiscences, along with its shifting seasons and weather, yields a sense of movement and fluidity, regardless of the sense of predestined catastrophe. Kurosawa’s use of snow in the film, on the other hand, causes even different interior locations to merge together. The scenes taking place in the houses of the Onos, Akama, and Taeko Nasu alike all contain shots of snow through windows and entranceways. The interiors themselves therefore lose much of their individuality, as do the outdoor locations with their omnipresent snowbanks. All spaces seem covered and submerged, which contributes to the film’s emphasis of tragic aftermath over upcoming catastrophe.

The stagnancy of Kurosawa’s post-apocalyptic perspective has the effect of closing off Dostoevsky’s open time as well. In the novel, the idea of universal, irreversible death, exemplified by the Holbein painting, is challenged. The question of inevitable loss and destruction in relation to the protagonists themselves, similarly, is left somewhat open throughout much of the novel. However, although both Dostoevsky and Kurosawa reveal the ultimate failure of their heroes to exert a beneficial influence on their respective societies, the director, unlike the novelist, inscribes Kameda’s failure in the explanatory titles from the beginning: “This is the tragic story of the ruin of a pure and simple man.” If the novel is characterized by a sense of infinite possibility, or at least a heightening of the illusion that the tragic outcome is not known in advance, then Kurosawa removes any such sense of openness here in one sweeping line.

Kurosawa similarly empties the novel, with its frenetic vortex time, of its sense of urgency. His opening shots of snow and icicles, which establish a symbol that dominates the rest of the film, affect the narrative’s temporality as well. The narrator’s intoning of “Another snowstorm in Hokkaido” as Kameda leaves the train that has

brought him to Sapporo communicates repetition and eternal sameness, implying that the passage of time does not matter. Scenes that contain a sense of onrushing time in the novel, such as the burning of Rogozhin's packet of rubles, lack the same suspense in the film. The long shot of the package in the fire conveys, instead, a sense of gradual decay and stasis that more closely resembles the finale of the novel following the apocalyptic culmination in Nastasya Filippovna's murder. Kurosawa includes various shots of characters occupying similar positions, and standing or sitting motionless. Along with the repeated shots of snowbanks submerging people, his camerawork therefore yields a sense of static time, where every moment is essentially the same. As Goodwin explains, Kurosawa's use of *haragei*, a form of nonverbal communication often found in Japanese culture, manifests itself in an emphasis of gesture over dialogue throughout the film (*Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*, 75-78). The frequent sequences in which Kurosawa shifts from one character's glance to another, without dialogue, along with the extended close-up shots, slow down the action, yielding an impression of time passing slowly. Kurosawa's post-apocalyptic chronotope thereby "freezes" both time and space by creating a static, unchanging environment where individual agency matters little. It is also a chronotope of repetition, as characters, stuck in their past trauma, relive it again and again.

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This mood of doomed repetition stems in part from the historical event of World War II that Kurosawa juxtaposes onto the narrative. All that remains, seemingly, is for this tragedy to extend itself into the domestic sphere, for wartime violence to be transferred to peacetime. Dostoevsky begins by setting himself the ambitious, highly difficult task of describing a "positively good man" healing a violent society. This hope is of course disappointed, as Myshkin and several other characters come to a tragic end. Kurosawa's vision, though, colored by World War II and its aftermath, is fatalistic from the outset. The "positively good man" in this reenactment is destined to fail. The entire film is pervaded by this sense of doom, which may explain Kameda's reaction to Taeko Nasu's portrait, sadder than Myshkin's and lacking the hope that Dostoevsky's hero expresses for Nastasya Filippovna's redemption. Kurosawa reads a combination of debilitation from the war and a pessimistic view of society's ability to heal itself into Dostoevsky's more open-ended novel. The aftermath of the End turns out to be just as tragic as the End itself.

If Kurosawa's transformation of Dostoevsky's novel belies the critique that he does not distance himself sufficiently from his source text, it should not be seen as a gratuitous departure from it either. Kurosawa's version of the narrative completes Dostoevsky's by supplying a possible version of the apocalyptic event that the novel vaguely foretells, albeit not one relating to Russia. The film's post-apocalyptic representation of the events of the novel extends its narrative in the sense that apocalypse itself "demands" post-apocalypse as a logical conclusion: the End must be followed by some sort of aftermath.

All of the qualities Kurosawa emphasizes as part of his chronotope – trauma, connection of present crisis with future disaster, the inevitable repetition of tragedy

– are inherent in Dostoevsky’s narrative. Myshkin’s actual suffering as a mentally ill, incapacitated invalid is left practically unexplored in the novel. It is overshadowed completely by his recollections of Switzerland as an idyllic locale (compared with St. Petersburg), one that allows for the miraculously successful “conversion” of the children reported in his story of Marie (also in contrast to his colossal failure to accomplish similar feats in Russia). By the same token, when one thinks of Dostoevsky’s biographical legend, his triumphant overcoming – in life and art – of his sham execution (and subsequent imprisonment and exile) leaps to mind sooner than the necessary aftermath of this traumatic experience, revealed and perhaps simultaneously cured by his continual literary and non-literary returns to the moment of the catastrophic event itself.

Kurosawa’s transposition fills in these gaps by creatively imagining the human suffering hidden behind the mystical overcoming of it, and in such a way as to make the narrative relevant for a whole new historical setting. In this manner, the director in effect recovers what is implicit but not developed in Dostoevsky’s text. And although Kurosawa never directly says so, his personal attachment to this film, and his difficulty in making it, may have stemmed from his own need to explore the trauma that he experienced following his nation’s brush with potential total destruction. 185

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ENDNOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Daniel Collins, Angelina Ilieva, and Suk-Young Kim for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.
- 2 The film is generally considered one of Kurosawa’s more uneven efforts, and was negatively reviewed in the Japanese press after its release. The Shochiku studio producers reduced the film from 265 to 166 minutes, against Kurosawa’s wishes. These cuts created a great deal of narrative confusion, and necessitated the addition of extensive explanatory titles early in the film.

- 3 The Soviet director Grigorii Kozintsev calls the film “a miraculous transformation of a classic [onto] the screen” (9). Nikita Lary similarly remarks that as a result of Kurosawa’s transfer of the plot to Japan, “the sense of dislocation and the strangeness of Dostoevsky’s world are wonderfully brought out” (115).
- 4 With the possible exception of Robert Bresson, who directed adaptations of *The Meek One* (*Une Femme Douce*, 1969) and *White Nights* (*Quatre nuits d’un rêveur*, 1971), as well as a film loosely based on Crime and Punishment (*Pickpocket*, 1959), Kurosawa is the major director who has worked most extensively with Dostoevsky’s texts. In addition to *The Idiot*, he used *The Insulted and Injured* as a subtext in *Red Beard* (1965), referring to this film, along with *Drunken Angel* (1948) and *Ikiru* (1952), as “films in the Dostoevsky manner” (quoted in Richie 85). He also produced two other transpositions of Russian texts: *The Lower Depths* (1957), after Gorky’s play of the same title, and *Dersu Uzala* (1975), filmed in the Ussuri region of Russia and based on Vladimir Arseniev’s memoirs.
- 5 Gary Saul Morson argues that the narrator’s comments on Myshkin and Rogozhin’s connection in the beginning are too vague to suggest any specific events, and that a large number of outcomes could have resulted from this opening, along with the one that actually does (135–36).
- 6 Nastasya Filippovna similarly predicts the exact circumstances of her death at the hands of Rogozhin.
- 7 In *Notes from the House of the Dead*, for instance, Dostoevsky mentions a convict named Akim Akimych whose death sentence has been commuted to a twelve-year term in Siberia.
- 8 Kameda’s response may reflect Kurosawa’s doubts regarding Dostoevsky’s convictions. In an interview, he makes the following remarks about the novelist: “I don’t think he is very religious deep down in his heart. He appears to be very religious on the surface, however” (Mellen 44).
- 9 This depiction reflects the director’s personal attitude to epilepsy. Although Kurosawa, like Dostoevsky, was an epileptic, he attributes little significance to this condition. In his autobiography, he describes a bent artery in his brain that at times of overexcitement would cut off the flow of oxygen, leading to small seizures and frequent trances (119–20). This coldly scientific description contrasts markedly with that of Dostoevsky, for whom epilepsy, simultaneously a gateway to sublime moments and periods of protracted suffering, took on a decidedly mystical character.
- 10 Elsewhere, the expression *ichioku gyukosai* is translated differently. John Dower renders it as “the shattering of the 100 million like a beautiful jewel” (233).
- 11 Marciano interprets Kurosawa’s approach to space as essentially Japanese, despite the Western appearance of Hokkaido homes. Drawing on studies of Japanese interiors by Roland Barthes and Heinrich Engel, she contrasts the personal ties Dostoevsky creates between characters and their interiors with the impersonality of Japanese houses. Kurosawa’s minimization of objects that adorn the novel’s interiors, for Marciano, diverges greatly from Dostoevsky’s individualized depictions. The portrait of Nastasya Filippovna, which Kurosawa moves from the Epanchin home to the window of a photography studio, exemplifies this transformation. “[I]n his statements about the impersonality and nakedness of the interiors,” Marciano argues, “Kurosawa seems to be functioning – consciously or subliminally – as an interpreter of an Eastern cultural and traditional approach to the living space” (772). Her observations may be extended to explain the function of snow in the film as well.
- 12 It may be objected that the medium dictates this change. Novelistic narrative, arguably, can more easily convey Myshkin’s perception of his surroundings than film. Nevertheless, since Kurosawa pointedly shows the snow affecting all the characters, his lack of focus on Kameda’s point of view is clearly not dictated by any constraints of medium.
- 13 For example, in James Joyce’s “The Dead,” and the “Walpurgis Night” section of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*.
- 14 Other noteworthy Japanese examples of this symbolic use of snow in the twentieth century

include Yasunari Kawabata's novel *Snow Country* (1937), Yukio Mishima's *Spring Snow* (1968), and Masaki Kobayashi's 1964 film *The Woman of the Snow*. Kurosawa's use of snow arguably also reflects a tendency, among East Asian fine artists, to use the type of blank space that snow and whiteness create in order to signify emptiness, and underscore what is absent.