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Envisioning Spaces: Akira Kurosawa's Adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

The influence of Dostoevsky on the work of Akira Kurosawa has been often pointed out, even if the relationship between these two artists remains largely unexamined. On a theoretical level of analysis, as Stephen Prince already noted, the affinities between Kurosawa and Dostoevsky are many and striking. Like Dostoevsky, Kurosawa chose a philosophical approach to art and showed a deep concern for the eschatological. The search-like structure of many of his films, their progress from "despair to hope" (139) as Prince puts it, reflect a pattern common to many of Dostoevsky's stories. Like Dostoevsky, Kurosawa lends a particularly acute hearing to the multivoiced articulation of human discourse, and last, but not least, they share a fascination with criminal psychology.¹

Although Kurosawa long toyed with the idea of making a film of *The House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky's account of prison life in Siberia, the project never materialized. But a Dostoevskian style, and even direct traces from Dostoevsky, are detectable in such films as *Red Beard*, for example, where Kurosawa developed a whole subplot after Dostoevsky's *The Insulted and Injured*,² or *Ikiru*, and *Drunken Angel*, which the director himself defined "films in the Dostoevsky manner" (qtd. in Richie 85).

Hakuchi, for which Kurosawa co-wrote the script, is a problematic rendition of *The Idiot* and represents Kurosawa's only integrated attempt to translate Dostoevsky on screen. Although not Kurosawa's first adaptation of a literary source (*Rashomon*, *They Who Step on the Tiger's Tail*, and *The Quiet Duel* were

1 In his book Prince goes as far as to suggest that the "apocalyptic sensibility" (136) that Kurosawa shares with Dostoevsky may be the result of comparable historical circumstances. Both Kurosawa and Dostoevsky lived in epochs of transition and deep transformations. In Dostoevsky, on the one hand, the Christian ideal and the emergence of a national identity are felt to interfere with the false promises of the European-derived ideas of socialism and capitalism. In Kurosawa, on the other hand, the clash between East and West is present as the effort to recover an understanding of the fundamental role of society, as well as in the attempt to reconstruct a shattered and denied sense of identity after the Holocaust of World War II.

2 Kurosawa had in mind Nelly Volkonskaya as a model for his Ootoyo, and partly modeled the figure of the young doctor Yasumoto after Vanya. Many reverberations from Dostoevsky's *The Insulted and Injured* can be felt by viewing Kurosawa's exploration and treatment of poverty, death, and children's suffering.

also adaptations of literary or theatrical pieces), *The Idiot* is Kurosawa's first effort to adapt a novel for the screen.³ The film was released in 1951, and was almost unanimously received as a failure. To Kurosawa's dismay, the production studio imposed a cut on the film and mutilated it by circa one third, so that the screening time was reduced from an original 265 minutes, to an actual 166. As a result of this, the narrative is at times incoherent, a fact that in itself may justify the poor reception of the film by audience and critics.

Kurosawa made a number of crucial adjustments to the structure of the original in order to give the story a better fit for a contemporary audience. The film is set in post-war Japan. Masyuki Mori, in the role of Prince Myshkin (and re-named Kameda), is presented as a war criminal who, wrongly condemned to death,⁴ is spared at the last minute.⁵ All religious undercurrents and the dense Christological symbolism accompanying the figure of Myshkin are eliminated from the story, and his saint-like nature is secularized. Kameda's seizures have nothing of the spiritual intensity and the aura that infuses Myshkin during the epileptic fit, and the episode in which Myshkin and Rogozhin exchange crosses is presented in the film as an exchange of talismans. A few characters are totally repressed and others are not fully developed. Ippolit (the terminally ill) and Burdovsky (the illegitimate son), for example, do not find a place in the film, while characters such as General Ivolghin and Lebedev — two rather strong personalities in the book — here function more as background figures. Besides these changes, however, the film is a fully recognizable adaptation of Dostoevsky's story, and one which scrupulously seems to follow the book both on the level of plot structure and narrative sequence. Much of the dialogue is "lifted" directly from the novel, and although their names have been changed, the characters are identifiable by their roles.

3 In the years that followed this film, Kurosawa's recourse to literary sources as inspirations for his films increases. His celebrated adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* came in 1957 with *Throne of Blood*, and in the same year he adapted Gorky's play *Na Dne* in *The Lower Depths*. *Snajuro* (1962) and *Red Beard* (1965) are based on stories by Shogoro Yamamoto, and *High and Low* (1963) freely adapts a novel by Edward Mc Bain. On the whole, Kurosawa seems to have been more inspired by dramas than by novels, an element which may partially explain the theatricality that prevails in *The Idiot*.

4 The precise historical reference here is to the conviction of war criminals by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East set up in Tokyo and representing the powers involved in the Pacific War during the period of the American occupation in Japan.

5 Kurosawa is here intertwining a biographeme from Dostoevsky's life. In 1849, accused of having participated in political plots against the tsar, Dostoevsky was condemned to death. He was brought in front of the firing squads, and after the soldier has read the sentence and the priest had given the last sermon, the sentence was commuted to five years of forced labor in Siberia. The horrific memory of this experience haunted Dostoevsky throughout his life, and he reenacted it in his works at various stages of his career. *The Idiot* contains a long passage about this experience.

Donald Richie, possibly Kurosawa's most intelligent Western critic, casts a very severe and uncompromising judgment on this film. In his analysis of the adaptation, he remarks that the actors' performances are mannered and over-wrought, that Prince Myshkin (Masyuki Mori) is contrite and undignified, that Rogozhin (Toshiro Mifune) is primitive and animalesque, that Nastasya Filipovna (Setsuko Hara) has lost her grandeur and is merely hysteric, that Aglaia Epanchina (Yoshiko Kuga) is irascible and childish, and that, in the end, the film as a whole "is neither Kurosawa's nor Dostoevsky's" (82). The real problem with this film, Richie contends, is that it is "too" faithful to the original. Kurosawa, in Richie's view, has not taken the necessary distance from Dostoevsky to properly focus on the artistic material, with the result that the original story is "smothered" at every turn: "Kurosawa's faith in his author was so strong and so blind" Richie writes, "that he seemed to feel that the mere act of photographing scenes from the novel would give the same effect on screen as they do on the page. What occurs, however, is merely devastating simplification" (82). Stephen Pince fully shares Richie's view, and after enumerating all the myriad reasons why Kurosawa could have produced a perfectly attuned adaptation of Dostoevsky, concludes: "Why, then, is his version of *The Idiot* so amazingly bad?" (139).

I will leave to others the task to determine the extent to which "fidelity" promotes or prevents the success of a given film adaptation, and to judge what is "good" or "bad" about this particular film rendition. What I would rather investigate, is *the way* in which the Dostoevskian element is intertwined in Kurosawa's film, and *how*.

Although too harsh in his critique of Kurosawa's film, Richie makes a claim that I think isolates a central point. *Hakuchi*, he writes, is like "a French play in a New York production" (82). The interesting paradoxical quality about this film, in fact, is that it "sounds" exactly like Dostoevsky, but it does not "feel" or "look" anything like it. The reason for this, I am going to argue, has to do with the fact that Kurosawa's film is a highly culturally conditioned representation of *The Idiot* rather than, as Richie claims, an uncritically faithful filming of Dostoevsky's novel.

In *Hakuchi* Kurosawa bets everything on the corporeality and physicality of the actors. There is a noticeable stage-like quality to this film, which derives from the marked emphasis the director places on gestures, actions, and dialogue over descriptive detail. Kurosawa seems to have been particularly receptive to Dostoevsky's melodramatic moments, and to have exploited them in full: the characters laugh abruptly, burst with emotions, and perform with hyperbolic gestures. Like in a melodrama, in this film musical accompaniment has a crucial role: all the changes in emotional tone are recorded by musical variations, and one and the same aerial tune introduces every entrance of Kameda. For this film, Kurosawa is said to have encouraged the actors to act on the spot, rather than on rehearsed emotions, so that the eye of the camera could capture spontaneous

reactions. And indeed, what mostly seems to matter to Kurosawa in this film, is the quality of the gaze. In a long series of medium shots and close-ups, the camera records the slightest changes in facial expressions. One good example of Kurosawa's attention to gestures and expressions is represented by the scene in Ayama's (Ganya's) house before the arrival of Taeko Nasu (Nastasya Filippovna). The scene which, like in the book, culminates in the scandal of physical aggression, is crowded with faces and looks and is followed by a long sequence in which all the actors freeze in their position and look inquisitively at each other's face.⁶ A perfect example of a facial *tour de force* is provided by the scene of the encounter between Taeko Nasu (Nastasya Filippovna) and Ayako (Aglia Epanchina) in Akama's (Rogozhin's) house. In a sequence a little more than a minute long, during which not a single word is uttered, the camera records seven different facial expressions in Ayako's face: from fear and discomfort, to insecurity, curiosity, hate, spite, and aloofness. In these shots, as James Goodwin points out, one clearly sees the relevance that *haragei* — the system of non-verbal communication encoded in Japanese traditional performance and visual arts — had for Kurosawa (76-77). The point however is that, while bodies and faces occupy most of the frames, background space is either anonymously present or blurred. The ambiances are impersonal and indifferent to the unfolding drama, and both interiors and exteriors carry little or nothing of the human emotions that are so overwhelmingly forwarded by the characters. As a whole, it seems as if the *profilmic world* of *Hakuchi* was conceived to be a mere container for the action, and not to carry any diegetic value. The absence of a semiotic analysis of space, however, may have more to do with a culturally interpolated notion of spatiality on Kurosawa's part than, as Richie claims, with the Japanese director's "literal" rendering of Dostoevsky. In order to clarify my point about the value of space in *Hakuchi*, and thus attempt a comparison between Kurosawa's and Dostoevsky's approach to spatial design, let me first briefly point out what I see as the fundamental features of narrative space in Dostoevsky.

Space in Dostoevsky is often a character in its own right. The Russian author heavily relied on the expressive force of ambiances by carefully designing the inhabited space up to minute details, such as illumination and color; he further exploited the communicative capacity and dramatic potential of the environment by inscribing the human element as a direct extension of that environment. Consider for example the following passage, in which Dostoevsky is describing the *iter* to Rogozhin's house:

They passed through a large drawing room with walls of imitation marble, an oak block floor and furniture of the 1820s, crude and heavy, and through several indeterminate little

rooms, zigzagging and turning corners, mounting two or three stairs, then descending as many, until at last they knocked at a door. (2: 224)

There is a somewhat surprising tortuosity about this route, with its "several indeterminate little rooms," the "zigzagging," and the going up and down the stairs; it is quite clear, in fact, that we are not just facing an objective topographical description. The dark (this is the adjective Dostoevsky uses the most in connection with Rogozhin) and labyrinthine structure of this house are so "appropriate" and fit to Rogozhin's personality and life, that on his first visit Prince Myshkin seems to be able to "recognize" it by its looks:

"As I was coming here I guessed that this was your house a hundred paces away," said the Prince.

"How was that?"

"I have no idea. Your house has the look of your whole family, and your whole Rogozhin style of life, but if you ask me why I thought so, I would not be able to explain it." (226-27)

Mikhail Bakhtin first pointed out and thoroughly investigated Dostoevsky's symbolic use of space. One of his most brilliant intuitions was the isolation of what is, indeed, an obsessively recurrent topos in Dostoevsky: the theme of the threshold. Dostoevsky displayed a peculiar fascination with thresholds and other transitional sites and, as Bakhtin aptly remarks, would rather choose to set an action of stairs and stair landings, in corridors, foyers and other "preludic" areas so to speak, than in functionally defined spaces such as drawing or living rooms. Dostoevsky fully exploited the symbolic value of the threshold by metaphorically placing all of his characters *on the edge*. They all live life as a struggle, and whether it is a struggle between faith and atheism, life and death, or sanity and madness, they do all stand right in the middle of the *forking path*.⁷

Many turning points in the narrative of the *The Idiot* are described as actually taking place on thresholds: Myshkin's wait to be introduced to General Epanchin, the first encounter between Ganya and Myshkin, the first encounter between Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna, the exchange of the crosses between Myshkin and Rogozhin, and Ippolit's attempted suicide all happen in passage areas and resonate with tremendous symbolism within the story. But beyond the empathy between characters and environment, there is another dimension to Dostoevsky's space that Bakhtin fails to look into, and that I think is crucial: the presence of objects. If one can rarely find in Dostoevsky examples of pathetic fallacy, i.e., that animation of the objects, which is so pervasive in the pages of Dickens and Gogol, his interiors, on the other hand, are literally *inhabited* by an amazing

6 This scene, faithfully reproduced by Dostoevsky, is probably a Gogolian citation from *The Inspector General*, a play that Kurosawa knew and loved.

7 The reference is to Borges's "The Garden of Forking Path."

mass of old and unnecessary objects. Dostoevsky exploited this component of the *décor* for dramatic purposes.

The presence of old and useless things is actually a common topos of Western literature, especially in the last two centuries. A couple of memorable descriptions come to mind: the dark and dusty room full of things corroded by mice and time, in which Miss Havisham [from *Great Expectations*] has been molding away since the day of her never realized wedding, or the boarding house that opens *Le père Goriot*, with its "various chairs upholstered in a haircloth of alternately dull and shiny stripes" (30-33), with its oil-cloth covered table, its china service, its faded artificial flowers, and with Madame Vauquer as a direct "clue" to that environment. But also the descriptions of interiors by Gogol and Tolstoy, Eliot and Verga, Manzoni, are crowded with all sorts of objects, with trifles, baubles, furnishings, junk, just stuff — and it is almost as if these objects have become a part of our unconscious cultural and literary patrimony, our hereditary memory. The following is one of Dostoevsky's descriptions of Rogozhin's study in *The Idiot*:

Rogozhin's study was a big room, with high ceiling and lightless, filled with all kind of furniture, mostly large office desks, "bureaus," cupboards, in which ledgers and all sorts of papers are kept. A long sofa covered in red marocco apparently served as Rogozhin's bed.... Along the walls hung several oil paintings in tarnished gold frames, dark grimy paintings in which it was very difficult to distinguish anything at all. One full-size length portrait attracted the Prince's attention: it represented a man of fifty in a frock coat of German cut, but quite long, with two medals hanging from his neck, a short very sparse, graying beard, a yellow, wrinkled face and stealthy, suspicious melancholy eyes. (227)

In a recent study, the Italian scholar Francesco Orlando associates the representation of old and obsolete objects in Western literature to a resurfacing of the repressed.⁸ Literature, according to him, would function as some sort of receptacle of everything that is adversed, denied, or suppressed outside of its fictions, and the representation of the old and unnecessary objects would then be explainable as a transgression against the imperatives of "functionality" imposed upon the Western world since the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the economic turn of capitalism. The comprehensive character and systematic ambition of this interpretation has a fascinating feel to it. I wonder however,

8 According to Orlando, the presentation of non-functional objects in literature means that within its imaginary space literature contradicts the logic of functionality or purposefulness that rules the modern world. Literature functions as some sort of permanent negative to real life and therefore, the same way it [literature] welcomes within its space a return of the immoral in contradiction to moral repression, and the same way it welcomes a return of the irrational as a contradiction to rational repression, it is also seen as welcoming a return of the anti-functional and obsolete as in contradiction to the imperatives of functionality (see Orlando).

whether such a radical "functionalization" of the literary objects — the assumption, in other words, that they are nothing more or less than the embodiments of different human transgressions — would not take something fundamental away from them, and that is the nostalgia of time, their legacy with memory. In the Western fetishism of origins and cult of ruins, such objects acquire the status of traces. They are like reliquiae of human memory, yet still engaged with mankind in a mutual relationship of co-dependence: they are defined by whomever owns them and, in turn, define whomever chooses them. And it is not that these objects merely stand to represent a class or social status. They exude life. What I think needs to be emphasized here, in fact, is that there exists an *affective* tie between these objects and human beings. And, whether or not the literary representation of objects is a specific quality of Western world, *some* role must be played by all those somber portraits and pictures, by all that furniture with faded upholstery, by those clocks, stuffed animals and china cups locked behind glass, if one perceives their absence in Kurosawa's film. "Architectural lines have, of course, secrets of their own," it is said in *The Idiot* (224), and Kurosawa must have thought about that when he decided to set the Petersburg story during the snowy season in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island (and the closest point to Russia) where the traditional Japanese ways of living are uncommon. Houses here have a more Westernized look. The typical geometric quality of the traditional residence, defined as it is by standardized measures of room sizes and the rectangular shapes of floor-mats and sliding partitions, is softened here by the use of doors and basic furniture pieces, such as tables and chairs.

It is not as if Dostoevsky's spatial descriptions have escaped Kurosawa's attention because, in fact, in most cases he reproduces even the "sites" of action as indicated in the novel. Thus for instance, Kameda's (Myshkin's) wait to be introduced to Ono (the Epanchins) takes place in an *ante-chambre*, Ayako's (Aglaia's) refusal to accept Akama's (Ganya's) letter is shot on stairs, and the first encounter between Kameda and Taeko Nasu (Nastasya Filippovna) is actually filmed in a hallway. All of these thresholds, however, appear soulless. Kurosawa seems to be making no effort to inscribe the characters in space, except in the case of Akama, who lives in some weird-looking room, which Richie quite appropriately describes as a "Frankenstein-like dungeon" (82).

Among the objects on display in *The Idiot*, paintings play a crucial role. The first acquaintance of Prince Myshkin with Nastasya Filippovna is through a portrait of hers circulating in the house of the Epanchins, and responsible for the first *scandal* at the beginning of the novel. Another pivotal picture is Holbein's painting of the body of Christ after the crucifixion, a motif which, incidentally has influenced much of the criticism of *The Idiot* as a Christological metaphor.⁹

9 See for example Holquist for whom "the plot of *The Idiot* is a series of narrative turns on the structure of Christ's execution" and for whom the painting holds a crucial thematic function as the representation of the novel's "primary metaphysical dilemma" (102-23).

In the a-religious atmosphere created in the film, it is understandable that Kurosawa would eliminate Holbein's painting. What I find revealing, however, is what he chooses to do with the other portrait: the portrait of Nastasya Filippovna.¹⁰ To introduce the story and the face of Nastasya Filippovna, before she actually appears on the scene, Kurosawa devises a peculiar solution. A snowstorm welcomes the arrival of Kameda and Akama in Hokkaido. The two have just met on the train, have exchanged a few words, and are now about to go their separate ways. As they are about to part, their attention is caught by something. Right in the middle of the street, there hangs a big portrait of Taeko Nasu. The picture seems to be suspended in the air. As the camera moves a little closer, we are able to distinguish a structure with a little roof, that protects the picture from the falling snow. This unidentified half-covered structure, we are later told, is the shopwindow of a photographer. Akama and Kameda slowly advance towards the picture; the camera moves to a close-up and frames their glass-reflected images on both sides of Taeko's picture. The composition of the shot is highly suggestive, in that it visually anticipates the triangular relationship between Kameda, Taeko Nasu, and Akama. The intriguing detail here, however, is that Kurosawa does not opt — as a Westerner would have probably done — to place this portrait in a house.

As I have anticipated, an explanation for Kurosawa's treatment of *décor* in this film is probably to be found in a different notion of *habitat*, a non-Western philosophy of space. In fact, in his statements about the impersonality and nakedness of the interiors, Kurosawa seems to be functioning — consciously or subliminally — as an interpreter of an Eastern cultural and traditional approach to the living space.

In his magisterial study of the Japanese house, Heinrich Engel draws attention to the fact that the Western concept of house finds no parallel in Japanese culture. In the Western notion, the "house" is the site of individual expression *par excellence*, it is the place where the individual imprints his/her personality and taste. In Japanese culture, on the other hand, the house is conceived as being beyond any personal influence. Perhaps also congruent with the Buddhist notion of self-effacement, the structure of the Japanese house is not favorable to the unfolding of individual personalities, and is not supposed to carry the imprint of those who live in it. Everything from structure to size is standardized, and the prevailing idea is that of simplicity. The whole notion of *decoration* does not seem to be "additive" as in the West, but "architectural." Engel writes:

10 In the whole film, there seem to be only one picture hanging from the wall that Kurosawa's lens focuses on. It the small picture (a landscape?) which attracts Kameda's attention, when he is first introduced to Kayama (Ganya) in Ono's (the Epanchins) house.

unlike Western art and architecture, in which the elaboration of an idea and its representation in physical form is carried in the best possible completeness, and thereby forces the beholder to assume a passive role, in Japan man himself is an essential component of interior space.... Man himself, not the objects created by him, is the only element that can remove the "horror vacui." (445)

From Engel's exposition on the different conceptualizations of living space in Japan and in the West, there also seems to emerge an important aspect concerning the role that the individual plays within inhabited space. The Western house immobilizes. Camouflaged as it is to endorse the promise of *permanence*, it pacifies its dweller by the presence of those objects that cling to space and hang from walls. By contrast, while its emptiness is supposed to resonate with a sense of the *impermanence* of life, the Japanese house conceives of the human body as the sole and only activating presence. A perhaps less scientific, but certainly highly intuitive and relevant summary of the Western and Japanese outlook on space is given by Roland Barthes in his *Empire of Signs*:

"meuble" in French is a paradoxical word since it generally designates a property anything but mobile: with us, furniture has an immobilizing vocation, whereas in Japan the house, often deconstructed, is scarcely more than a furnishing-mobile element); in the Shikidai gallery, as in the ideal Japanese house, stripped of furniture (or scantily furnished), there is no site which designates the slightest property in the strict sense of the word-ownership: neither seat nor bed nor table out of which the body might constitute itself as the subject (or master) of space: the center is rejected (painful frustration for Western man, everywhere "furnished" with his armchair, his bed, proprietor of a domestic location). Uncentered, space is also reversible: you can turn the Shikidai gallery upside down and nothing would happen, except an inconsequential inversion of top and bottom, of right and left: the content is irretrievably dismissed: whether we pass by, cross it or sit down on the floor (or the ceiling, if you reverse the image), there is nothing to *grasp*. (108-09)

If reviewed in light of these cultural cues, Kurosawa's *Hakuchi* becomes an investigative challenge. As I hope I have made clear, in fact, the relationship that this film entertains with its source is far from being uncritically dependent on Dostoevsky's novel. Both in the emphasis on the actors' performance and in the treatment of the spatial dimension, in fact, Kurosawa follows a narrative and a semantics of human behavior which ultimately refer to a different semiotic universe.

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King Lear's Filmic Adaptation: A Chaos?

Flamejada pelo rastro coruscante de seu Anjo instigador, a tradução criativa, possuída de demonismo, não é piedosa nem memorial: ela intenta, no limite, a rasura da origem: a obliteração do original. Essa desmemória parricida chamarei "translucificação." (Campos 209)¹

A wandering barefoot mad old man, in rags, with fixed eyes, slowly leaves the burning castle carpeted with corpses. In a trance, after having survived miraculously, Hidetora, the Medieval Lord, left alone by his family, divides his sons' troops as Moses had done with the Red Sea. The spectral figure is silently observed. This impressive and almost silent image of hell is explicitly visualized in Akira Kurosawa's film, *Ran* (1985), an actual sign of what its title means in Japanese: chaos. This sequence of scenes, accompanied only by a dirge-like music, but pervaded by incredible violence, had been foreseen by the film author many years before, after the 1923 earthquake that devastated Tokyo. In his autobiography, Kurosawa tells us about "every kind of corpse imaginable amid this expanse of nauseating redness ... corpses charred black, half-burned ... in gutters, ... floating in rivers, ... piled up on bridges, ... blocking off a whole street at an intersection" (52). The same sequence is also described in his screenplay for the film. As a matter of fact, the filmmaker suggests that "a terrible scroll of Hell is shown depicting the fall of the castle" and that "there are no real sounds as the scroll unfolds like a daytime nightmare. It is a scene of human evil-doing, the way the demonic Ashura, as seen by a Buddha in tears" (52). The same image of Buddha is unfolded under the last dark reddish light of dusk, at the end of the film, as if to display Kurosawa's contemporary outlook: a visual discourse about isolation and defeat (Prince 288). To many, the pessimism that permeates the film is a consequence of an even more tragic adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. However, on talking about his film, Kurosawa showed that, by contrast

1 "Enflamed by the glittering trace of its inciting Angel, creative translation — possessed by a demonic force — is neither pious nor memorable: ultimately, it intends to break from the source: it is the obliteration of the original. I call this parricidal dis-memory 'translucification'" (translation R. Delcheva).