

Kurosawa Akira's *Stray Dog* (*Nora inu*) and Cross-Cultural Interpretation

CHAN Edward K.

Faculty of International Communication, Aichi University

Email : echan@vega.aichi-u.ac.jp

Abstract

本稿の目的は、一つの文学批評として黒澤明の「野良犬」（1949年）を異文化理解的に再検討し、その細部に現れるアンビバレンスを犠牲にせずに本作品を理解するためのモデルを示すことにある。「野良犬」は、第二次大戦直後の東京を描き出している点、また米軍進駐下で製作されたという点でとくに興味深い作品となっている。たしかに黒澤映画の傑作には数えられないものの、これまで本作品に対し数多くの批評がなされており、そこでの解釈には、時間を超越した普遍的なヒューマニズムというものから進駐ならびにアメリカ／西洋からの影響に対する「対抗言脱」というものまでさまざまである。本稿の議論もこの範囲の中に位置付けられるかもしれない。けれども、「野良犬」は、ナラティブ、プロット、性格描写、文化的同一性の表象、映像的シニフィエなど、あらゆるレベルにおいて一つのアンビバレンスによって構造化されており、それを中心に据えなければ、本作品は十分に理解できないものとする。

This paper is a set of initial research notes for a reevaluation of Kurosawa Akira's *Stray Dog* (1949) and our attempts to understand it cross-culturally. It provides a literature review and sketches a model for understanding the film without sacrificing the ambivalence that pervades the film. *Stray Dog* is particularly interesting because it portrays Tokyo in the immediate aftermath of World War II and is also a product of filmmaking under the American Occupation. Although not considered one of Kurosawa's greatest films, the film has nevertheless generated a significant amount of critical interpretation. The criticism on the film ranges from seeing elements of a timeless and universal humanism to seeing examples of "counter-discourse" against the Occupation and American/Western influences. Wherever our interpretations of the film fall within this interpretive range, in order to fully understand the film, we must retain the ambivalence that structures the film at all levels (narrative, storyline, characterization, the representation of cultural identity, visual signifiers, etc.).

I. Introduction

Similar in sensibility to classic American crime drama films like *The Naked City* (1948) and *The Street with No Name* (1948), Kurosawa's *Stray Dog* (1949) is one of the earliest attempts to bring the crime drama to Japanese cinema. In fact, according to the documentary film *It Is Wonderful to Create* (2002), Kurosawa's film initiated the "police drama genre in Japanese film." *Stray Dog* displays some of the characteristics of American film noir and police procedural films: a playfulness with high contrast imagery, the contours of the gritty crime underworld, the exploration of dark themes, and an affinity for the procedures of police investigation. However, instead of the cityscape of New York City or the spacious decadence of Hollywood, *Stray Dog*'s setting is the bombed-out environs of postwar Tokyo and a nation in fragments trying to regain a sense of normalcy—not to mention moral balance—in the face of defeat and ruin. Kurosawa was quick to dismiss this film as flawed and unimportant (Richie 1996, 62-63). Nevertheless, the film clearly stands as a document of the postwar reconfiguration of Japan's national and moral identity.

Stray Dog is based on the true story of a Japanese police officer whose gun was stolen. Kurosawa expanded this episode into a novel, as he says in the manner of Georges Simenon, and then produced a screenplay from the novel (Richie 1996, 58). In Kurosawa's treatment, the police officer (Murakami played by Mifune Toshiro)

searches desperately and obsessively for his gun—a search that takes him through the streets and black markets of Tokyo. During his quest he is aided by an older detective who also acts as a mentor figure (Sato played by Shimura Takashi). The search for the gun eventually becomes a confrontation between Murakami and a criminal named Yusa. Murakami and Yusa are doubles for each other, both having recently returned from the war and both having had their bags stolen from them on their way home from the front. As Sato proclaims, they represent two divergent paths available to the “après-guerre” [postwar] generation. Murakami chose the path of moral responsibility and became a police officer, while Yusa took the path of despair, wallowing in self-pity and turning to crime as a way out of his despair and misfortune.

What I would like to present here is a set of initial research notes for a reevaluation of both Kurosawa Akira's *Stray Dog* and our attempts to understand it. My interest in *Stray Dog* began several years ago with a desire to understand the cross-cultural dynamics at work in the film's use of space both visually and thematically in relation to the genre of film noir and the American Occupation. Early inspiration came from a footnote in Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro's *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (2000): “We need a study of how the Japanese films of the Occupation years inscribe on their textual surface the Japanese sentiment toward the United States” (408). After a preliminary conference paper in 2006, I set the project aside. Coming back to it later, I found that two critics, Rachael Hutchinson (2006) and Lars-Martin Sorenson (2009), had in many ways answered Yoshimoto's call. My interest then evolved into a fascination with our attempts to read the film cross-culturally and ultimately led to the simple question with which I will begin.

How should we read a film like *Stray Dog*? It is a film that, while at one time dismissed by Kurosawa himself as “too technical” (Richie 1996, 62) and not usually considered one of his greatest even by his admirers, has still attracted a fair amount of critical examination in English. This critical commentary runs the gamut from a mere exercise in genre as Kurosawa himself claimed (Richie 1996, 62) to Kurosawa's “first masterpiece” (Rafferty 2004, 5); from evidence of Kurosawa's western influences (Richie 1996, Goodwin 1994, Jacoby 2010) to distinct if subtle protest against the American Occupation (Yoshimoto 2000, Hutchinson 2006, Sorenson 2009); from being an instance of Kurosawa's timeless and universal humanism (Richie 1996) to an enunciation of Japan's specific social and historical condition in

the immediate aftermath of World War II (Prince 1991, Yoshimoto 2000, Hutchinson 2006, Sorenson 2009). Indeed, as Desser (1983a, 1983b), Yoshimoto (2000), Hutchinson (2006), and others claim, Kurosawa, as a cinematic phenomenon, provides a case study for how we, in the United States, study Japanese film in general.

I, myself, come at the film not strictly from a film studies' perspective but from an American studies / cultural studies frame of reference (I will discuss the problems and limitations of this approach below). My larger project is how we, as Americans, regard Japan as a locus of the Other, "Japaneseness," the exotic—in other words, as a locus of difference—and further how we, as Americans, read images of ourselves and American culture in foreign texts (even if, as is the case with *Stray Dog*, as an absent presence). Of course, there are all sorts of problems and complexities attendant on approaching this film as a non-specialist in Japanese culture and film—various stations of awkwardness that I will try to navigate self-consciously, without, however, absolving myself of all the potential sins and violations of disciplinary impropriety. For I am, although not completely guilty of yet somewhat close to treading on territory called out by David Desser more than twenty-five years ago: the terrain occupied (pun intended) by "critics who know little of Japanese culture and film history (and, unfortunately, little of American film history as well) and who choose to see in Kurosawa their own particular social, political, or sexual themes" (1983b, 6). Moreover, with my formal academic training in American literature, I run the risk of treating *Stray Dog* as simply "a variant of literature," when, as Yoshimoto tells us, "the study of Japanese film requires more than just training in literary studies" (2000, 377)—let alone American literature as opposed to Japanese or comparative literature.

To be sure, I do not want to position myself fully as the naïf identified by Desser, and I *do* hope to provide fresh insight into our understanding of *Stray Dog*. However, at the same time, I do think it is important to acknowledge that films, like all cultural products, are inevitably caught up in the perhaps always globalized but certainly increasingly globalized system of cross-cultural consumption. And by "consumption," I do not mean simply the economic or sociological activity of purchasing products from another culture, but also the production of meaning, by consumers and producers alike, involved in this consumption). Undoubtedly, we will always need the benefit of specialized expertise. But at the same time, cinematic

texts exist within a system of meaning and interpretation that is not relegated only to the specialized study of experts. So, even beyond questions of disciplinary expertise—which, in Edward Said's (1978) classic formulation of Orientalism, has its own attendant problems—I think it important to understand how we all, even non-specialists, read and understand foreign texts like *Stray Dog*.

With that qualification in place—and I do think it necessary to so place it—I will in what follows fill in the outline of the critical terrain on *Stray Dog* alluded to above. From there, I will begin to sketch a model of cross-cultural interpretation I think necessary in order to understand the film.

II. Literature Review

Within the broad outlines of criticism on *Stray Dog*, I am most interested in readings of the film that try to come to terms with its treatment of the historical circumstances of the postwar years that, as Emiko Yamanashi (1998) tells us, were referred to in Japan as the “confusion era” (or more simply, “just after the war”). Of primary concern to me is the way the film has been discussed within the context of the American Occupation, especially how these discussions read the signifiers of national identity—which is to say racial and cultural identity as well. As Kyoko Hirano (1992) has established, part of the “confusion” of the “era” was the contradictions within Occupation policy itself. The simple irony of the American occupation of Japan was that the Americans wanted to retain, at all costs, the image of being “uncompromising fighters for freedom” even if the project of the Occupation was anything but a free and democratic process (Hirano 1994, 54). Among other things, this meant that American soldiers could not be shown, at least directly, in a negative light—thus, a Japanese newspaper reported of one crime that, “The criminals were unusually tall and hairy men” (qtd. in Hirano 1994, 58). In fact, American soldiers are not seen at all in *Stray Dog* due to the strict prohibition against showing the presence of the Occupation in film at the time it was created; this even extended to gratuitous use of English words (on this latter point, see Hutchinson's [2007] interesting reading of another postwar Kurosawa film, *One Wonderful Sunday* [1947]). Of course, censorship by the Japanese wartime government had been much worse, as Kurosawa himself was quick to note (Kurosawa 1982, 144). Nevertheless, the overriding irony of censorship during the American occupation is exemplified

by the banning of Frank Capra's film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) in Japan during the Occupation—though it had been shown before the war—because it showed American democracy in a compromised and unflattering light (Hirano 1992, 246).

The trajectory of the English-language criticism on *Stray Dog* reflects, not surprisingly, the trajectory of English-language scholarship in the humanities during the same time frame—from a preoccupation with ahistorical and universal humanism underwritten by auteurism toward a preoccupation with historicism, power, and cultural difference expressed through ideological and poststructural analysis. (Yoshimoto gives a basic—albeit polemical—overview of this trajectory in film studies in Part I of his book.) That said, I want to make it clear that I do not intend for this trajectory to be taken as linear or necessarily coherent, but rather as a fluctuation of what at any given time is the “cultural dominant” (Jameson 1991, 4) in the scholarship.

II. 1. Anderson and Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (1959, 1982)

Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie provide some of the earliest, though brief, comments by American critics on *Stray Dog*. They are primarily interested in the film as part of the larger Japanese film industry as a whole and give it only passing notice. As Jacoby (2010) notes, they go so far as to claim that the Occupation censorship apparatus inadvertently created the Japanese gangster film by severely restricting films that deal with Japan's “feudal” past (Anderson and Richie 1982, 222). Though not a gangster film in the same sense as *Drunken Angel* (1948), *Stray Dog* still demonstrates the shift away from period films set during the past (*jidai-geki*) to films set during the present (*gendai-geki*), a shift that was all but mandated by the Occupation authority in order to discourage the “feudal” mindset supposedly embodied by period films.

Anderson and Richie praise *Stray Dog* as “probably the best detective picture ever made in Japan” (presumably at least through to 1982, the most recent edition of their book) and “[i]n style very similar to the very best American crime pictures...” (1982, 186). What we see in this later comment is an instance of the “Orientalism” that will later be decried by Desser (1983a), Yoshimoto (2000), Rachael Hutchinson (2006), and others—in this case, privileging America and the West as the dominant term in an East/West binary used for aesthetic evaluation. (It's worth noting, if only

in passing, that this critique of the “uses” to which Japanese film and even “Japan” itself is put has a lineage that goes back at least to Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* [originally published in 1970] and Noël Burch's *To the Distant Observer* [1979]—see Nygren 1991 and Malcomson 1985.)

II. 2. Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1965, 1996)

Richie provides a more detailed analysis of *Stray Dog* in his comprehensive study of Kurosawa's films. Although we can here detect the “universal humanism” school of interpretation for which Richie often becomes the emblem (see Desser 1983a, Yoshimoto 2000, Hutchinson 2006), there is a lot of useful technical information and at least one impressive insight: “[Kurosawa] saw into [Yusa] completely but the way in which he did so was by so defining the characters of Shimura, Mifune, the girl [Harumi], and others, that the character of the criminal was what was left over, so to speak—his character was the quality not yet accounted for” (Richie 1996, 64). This absence that the Yusa character represents has been read many ways: as the old Japan that doesn't fit in with the new (Yoshimoto 2000, 178; Hutchinson 2006, 179); as “a national self, crushed and deformed by the war and its aftermath” (Prince 1991, 94); as “the return of the repressed” in the form of the defeated, returning soldier (Yoshimoto 2000, 178); as a sort of homonym for the U.S.A. rendered as “(Y)usa” (Yoshimoto 2000, 165; Sorenson 2009, 284); as an example of the film's Occidental counter-discourse (Hutchinson 2006, 179); and “as a representative of the *après-guerre* generation, so that the film associates crime with the post-war period and the cultural milieu of the Occupation” (Jacoby 2010). All of these interpretations are compelling in their own ways and end up filling in the blank identified by Richie's analysis of the character's structural function in the narrative.

II. 3. Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (1991)

As Stephen Prince notes in the introduction to his book on Kurosawa, it took over twenty-five years from the publication of Richie's *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* for the next “full-length” study on Kurosawa in English, his own, to appear (xvi)—discounting Desser's *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1983b), which focuses on the films indicated in the title. Prince tries to historicize *Stray Dog* in order to show how it, along with other postwar Kurosawa films, “participate[s] in the tasks

of postwar reconstruction. It is within this context that [Kurosawa's] conception of a political cinema is forged. These films directly engage the milieu of social and economic collapse and attempt to specify the terms of the new individual required by a new world" (Prince 1991, xix). *Stray Dog* explores what this new individual and world might look like in postwar Japan through two oppositions. In the first opposition, Murakami and Yusa represent two different sets of choices made by the "new individual" given the same set of circumstances (having witnessed the inhumanity of war, having been the victims of theft and a devastated society unable or perhaps unwilling to reintegrate those who fought in the war), the former to uphold the law and the latter to embrace criminality. In the second opposition, the older police officer Sato views Yusa as simply bad and evil, while Murakami is forced—precisely because he has had similar experiences—to see the difficult circumstances that led to Yusa falling into criminality. Thus, Sato and Murakami represent the older generation and the *après-guerre* generations, respectively.

In his reading of *Stray Dog*, Prince does acknowledge the important and powerful ambivalence that, for me, forms the heart of *Stray Dog* from beginning until end: "The differences in the models offered by Satō and Murakami are left in tension, their irresolution haunting the film" (1991, 96). Yet, Prince's analysis of *Stray Dog* remains surprisingly silent on the actual political effects and influence produced by the American Occupation, especially since he is trying to elucidate Kurosawa's "political cinema" and despite the fact that he does discuss the effects of the Occupation elsewhere in the book (this is a point also made by Yoshimoto 2000, 59-60). Moreover, he ultimately reduces the film to being "an unrelentingly individualist one" about moral choices (1991, 96). Although I disagree with this reduction of the film to being *simply* about individual moral choices, I think we do need to acknowledge that there is a role for authorial intentionality to play in understanding the film, especially considering the correspondence between Prince's interpretation and the statements he quotes from Kurosawa—a correspondence that does make a compelling case that Kurosawa was trying to represent the need for moral choices (1991, 2007). But, at the same time, if we take seriously the proposition that film is in a Foucauldian sense a discursive act, which I do, we cannot limit our interpretation of the film to being simply an enunciation created by the director-as-author. Yoshimoto cites David Bordwell's appropriation of a term from Russian formalism—"biographical legend"—as one way to negotiate authorship and

intentionality with film as a discursive act having many authors (Yoshimoto 2000, 61). Even given Kurosawa's legendary exertion of control over his filmmaking, he forms only part of the authorship of his films.

In the audio commentary Prince provides for the Criterion version of the DVD (Prince 2004), it is notable that he emphasizes the ostentatious Western clothing of yakuza characters like Honda (the crime boss) and Sei (Yusa's war buddy), reading them as signifiers for the corrupting influences of American culture. As we will see, other critics also tend to interpret the Western clothing as references to either the Occupation or Americanization.

II. 4. Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (2000)

About ten years after Prince's *The Warrior's Camera*, Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro produced another full-length study in English of Kurosawa's films and what I think is the reading of *Stray Dog* that best retains the film's ambivalence. Yoshimoto's project, as the title suggests, is to interrogate the role played by Kurosawa's films in the context of film studies' formation as a discipline and, as he points out emphatically, not to provide yet another auteurist study of Kurosawa. And whether we agree with his contention that the film is about "the rhetoric of filmic narration" (2000, 149), Yoshimoto's reading of *Stray Dog* is particularly good at leaving the film open-ended, not trying to resolve the many tensions that inhabit the film.

As he says, "One of the most conspicuous aspects of *Stray Dog* is the excess of visual images" (2000, 158). This notion of excess is important for understanding what *Stray Dog* does as a film, which for me is an expression of the complexities and ambivalence that marked the "confusion era." In fact, Yoshimoto extends the notion of excess beyond merely the visual to include the verbal and aural as well—the seeming redundancy of the voice-over narration, the non-diegetic sound of the "rabid" dog breathing, the sound track during the black market montage. All of these levels of signification, or rather what we might call "mis-signification," collude to produce what Yoshimoto, I think rightly, calls "a heterotopic space of competing meanings and functions" (2000, 159)—heterotopia being, according to Foucault (1970, 1986), a space within which we find different, incommensurate sets of logics at play. As I will eventually want to argue below, it is the tensions produced by this competition between the visual and the verbal, the visual and the aural—indeed, between different visual images themselves—that are the film's message. And,

though I do not want to make it into some type of *master* discourse, framing these other competitions within the act of cross-cultural interpretation invokes yet another competition, that between two cultural systems: what we call “Japan” and what we call “America.” This is true for both reading Japan and America in the film itself *and* the cross-cultural space within which we read the film.

Yoshimoto was also perhaps the first critic in English to emphasize what Hutchinson (2006), as we will see in the next subsection, calls a “counter-discourse” to the Orientalism that pervades much of the criticism on Japanese cinema in general. At one point Yoshimoto claims, “Although *Stray Dog* was made in occupied Japan, there is no overt reference to this sociopolitical situation because of strict censorship by the American Occupation forces. As if to elude the American censorship, the film contains a number of textual details and figures that allude to the shadow of America” (2000, 164). Perhaps the strongest figure of this counter-discourse is Yoshimoto’s reading of the attempt to apprehend Yusa, or rather “(Y)usa,” as “an unconscious textual inscription of the imaginary resistance against the U.S.A.” (2000, 165). (As we will see below, Sorenson will push this reading even further.) Importantly however, Yoshimoto’s readings of these textual details and figures opens the film up not as a repository of “Japaneseness” but rather a haphazard collection of fragments, the totality of which expresses the ambivalent tension in Occupied Japan. And it is this point that ultimately separates Yoshimoto from others who view the film as enunciating a single, coherent message—regardless of whether that reading is Orientalist or counter-discursive.

Perhaps the drawback to Yoshimoto’s reading of the film is that his interpretations of some of these fragments might seem too obscure or forced. One example of this would be his Lacanian reading of Murakami’s lost gun as the *phallus* (2000, 166); another would be the symbolic merging of Murakami and Namiki (Harumi’s family name) to form the “Muraki Clinic” sign, which uses the same kanji as the two characters’ names. To this latter, one might object by noting that the “conscious” impetus for the clinic’s name came from an assistant art director who inserted his own name because it did not appear in the credits (this factoid is revealed in the documentary included in the Criterion edition of the DVD, a segment of *It Is Wonderful to Create*). And yet, this kind of objection mostly depends on an auteur-derived intentionality, rather than viewing the film as a discourse of which Kurosawa is only in part the author.

II. 5. Hutchinson, "Orientalism or Occidentalism? Dynamics of Appropriation in Akira Kurosawa" (2006)

Although her article does not focus on *Stray Dog*, Hutchison extends Yoshimoto's work and also calls for a reinterpretation of Kurosawa's films in order to move away from essentializing readings. She identifies two major lineages in the critical work on Kurosawa. On the one hand is the Orientalist tradition that tends to reduce Kurosawa's films to a "'Japaneseness' as Other to a homogeneous West" (2006, 173). She names many representatives of this tradition but cites in particular Richie and the French film theorist Noël Burch. The alternative is a counter-discourse against these Orientalizing tendencies, as called for by Satō Tadao and Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro. For Hutchison, instead of ahistorical cultural essences we must instead pay attention to "historical specificities" and allow for a process of "Occidentalism"—a concept she borrows from Chen Xiaomei (1995)—to make visible those aspects of Kurosawa's films that "appropriate" rather than "adapt" Western culture. Thus, she reads *Stray Dog* as a counter-discourse against the new, Occupation-sponsored Japanese government: "the foregrounding and problematisation of the returned war hero [or just any soldier?] calls [sic] attention to the fact that he is now alienated from the wider Japanese society that desperately wanted to forget about the war and its aftermath" (2006, 179). So, as in Yoshimoto's reading of the film, Yusa becomes a return of the repressed.

Hutchinson also makes an important point about signification within Kurosawa's films: "By foregrounding the mode of representation [for example, "the use of the hard-edged wipe from *Rashomon* onwards"], Kurosawa calls attention to the signifier, rather than the signified" (2006, 177). While Hutchison, following Yoshimoto, is content to leave this semiotic disjunction as a self-reflexive exercise in "the rhetoric of filmic narration" (Yoshimoto 2000, 149), I think what we see in *Stray Dog*'s focus on the signifier is a breakdown in the chain of signification, such that signifiers have no clear referents or have multiple referents.

II. 6. Sorenson, *Censorship of Japanese Films During the U.S. Occupation* (2009)

Lars-Martin Sorenson, in some ways, represents a merging of work done by Hirano Kyoko in her book *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo: Japanese Cinema under the American Occupation, 1945-1952* (1992) and Yoshimoto's call for reading the

resistance to the Occupation inscribed on film. Sorenson brings to this project a careful study of archival documents from the Occupation period and attention to the viewing audience. Although early in his book Sorenson points out how the universal humanist approach to Kurosawa's films had prevented Richie in the 1960s from seeing the attempts to subvert censorship (2009, 21), Sorenson himself reverts to a universalism of his own at the end of the book: "The ability of films to transcend geocultural boundaries substantiates the idea that a set of transcultural/universal human concerns and dispositions do exist" (2009, 319). Thus, because conflict is a universal (and timeless) human experience, "the samurai hero is marketable primarily because of the conflict under which he suffers" (2009, 321-2). It is not clear how Sorenson's version of humanism here differs from that of someone like Richie in the 1960s. I would agree with Sorenson that there is something fundamentally archetypal about conflict that is recognizable and can be appreciated across cultures. However, my argument against Sorenson would be that that recognition and appreciation do not make the conflict the same, nor does it preclude other explanations from being just as compelling if not more so. Exoticism can also explain why Western audiences might be drawn to samurai films. I think more to the point is that we need to be able to accommodate multiple and contradictory readings all at once.

Even though his study does seem to respond to Yoshimoto's call for reading the inscriptions of resistance to the Occupation, Sorenson finds Yoshimoto's reading of *Stray Dog* "too academic" and essentially outside the realm of consciousness of the film's audience. Perhaps this is why he under-reads Yoshimoto's analysis of the film, especially in relation to the character Ogin, a middle-aged female pickpocket who begins to wear Western-style clothing after the war. In one example, he states,

Yoshimoto—in my view misleadingly—argues that Ogin is not presented as "a symbol of negative effects produced by Japanese militarism and defeat. She is also an image of a liberated woman, no longer bound by patriarchal customs and rules" [quoting Yoshimoto]. I see her not as a negative symbol of Japan's defeat, but as an example of the negative effect of the U.S. Occupation. And I consider it highly unlikely that Ogin was seen as a positive symbol of liberation and the death of patriarchy in the eyes of the Japanese audience of 1949. My guess would be that at least at this point in the narration most viewers would consider her as a cheap, westernized thief (2009, 278)

I hate to be nit-picky but I do think we need to call attention to Sorenson's omission of the words immediately preceding his quotation of Yoshimoto: "Yet the film does not present Ogin only as a symbol of ..." (Yoshimoto 2000, 175; emphasis added). Yoshimoto is claiming that the film does both these and more. Moreover, it seems clear from the larger context of the quotation from Yoshimoto that he includes the "negative effect of the U.S. Occupation" as part of the "negative effects produced by Japanese militarism and defeat." The important point Yoshimoto is, I think, trying to make is that the Ogin sequence "ambivalently acknowledges the changing times and articulates the nostalgia for the years before militarism" (Yoshimoto 2000, 175).

I do agree with Sorenson that Ogin and the other extreme examples of Westernization in the characters like Honda and Sei do probably signify some attitude about Westernization, perhaps even what Yoshimoto calls *ameshon*, which he translates literally as "pissing in the U.S." but figuratively as someone who rushes to embrace American culture in a superficial way (Yoshimoto 2000, 408). However, we must qualify that reading of the signifier with the phrase "among other things." These characters and all the elements of the film perform multiple functions. Ogin can represent both pre-war nostalgia *and* resistance to the Occupation. She also signals the irony of common Japanese people's appropriation of America's purported democratic ideals such as civil rights in the service of self-interest, another American ideal. Instead of retaining the contradictory nature of the film and the slipperiness of the signifiers, Sorenson wants to propose a singular and definitive reading of the film:

Kurosawa's resistance in this film is very real, and his inscription of the Americanness of Yusa, of Honda the baseball fan, of Mr. West—Sei-san—at the Sakura and of Ogin, the permed pickpocket in western dress defiantly walking out on the impotent Japanese police officer, Mifune, who—like his fatherland—has been disarmed by the United States, are all parts of a quite conscious, deliberate and carefully calculated chain of elements in *Stray Dog*, which serves to depict the criminal characters as Americanized. (2009, 282)

To this, we must point out that the existence of baseball and its incredible popularity in Japan significantly pre-dates the American Occupation—as far back as the 1870s (Kelley 2008)—as does Western clothing (which I will discuss more below). Certainly, the Americanization of Japan—and both positive and negative attitudes toward that process—is part of the text we must read here. However, there is no

clear message.

We see this same reductiveness to making a character represent one thing only with Yusa: “the ultimate representative of unconstrained individualism—a thief and a murderer named USA” (Sorenson 2009, 285). Yusa may indeed be read as a coded reference to the U.S.A. (as Yoshimoto had earlier suggested), but he also can and *must* be read simultaneously as the figure of the returning soldier, whom the “new” Japanese society can only awkwardly try to ignore and punish when necessary. Even further, I would argue that the entire film must be read in multiple and at the same time contradictory ways. And I do not mean this as some poststructuralist exercise in the play of language or a kind of hermeneutic relativism. Retaining multiple readings of the film and its elements must be done in order to fully understand the ambivalences in the film, especially as these ambivalences merge with issues of cultural difference between Japan and America, both within the film as well as outside the film in our attempts to read *Stray Dog* across cultures. Cultural difference never speaks in one voice only. It always has mixed and changing messages.

Importantly, we can do this without taking away from Sorenson’s main point that Kurosawa was consciously expressing resistance to the Occupation and the USA (2009, 282). Of course, I would rather put it another way: *Stray Dog* expresses deep ambivalence about the Occupation and the USA—both a resistance to it and a rush to embrace it, the latter of which is itself part of a trend that goes back at least to the Meiji Restoration in the nineteenth century. Whether or not Kurosawa the person was trying to send a particular message—and whether or not that particular message was to criticize the American Occupation—does not really matter; or rather, it is one piece of the textual apparatus, which includes things like our own historical and cultural positioning, the historical and cultural positioning of the film and director, as well as other readings of the film.

II. 7. Jacoby, “Disputed Territories” (2010)

This article is part of a special section of the British Film Institute’s monthly magazine *Sight and Sound* dedicated to the centennial of Kurosawa’s birth. It discusses *Stray Dog* along with *Drunken Angel* in order to answer the question: “What do two striking post-war thrillers tell us about Kurosawa’s attitude to the post-war Allied Occupation of Japan?” (headnote). Although this article comes from

Sight and Sound as opposed to a peer-reviewed academic journal, Jacoby is clearly aware of the academic criticism on the two Kurosawa films, mentioning Anderson and Richie, as well as Yoshimoto. And his interpretation of the film fits in, to some degree, with those of Yoshimoto, Hutchinson, and Sorenson.

Jacoby tells us that "... Kurosawa's 1940s thrillers can be interpreted in part as interrogations of the Occupation itself." And like Yoshimoto, Hutchinson, and Sorenson in particular, he reads various parts of the film as signifiers of the Occupation and America—for example, Western-style clothes and "Western names for dance halls, cabaret theatres and bars." In short, "Kurosawa presents a Japan saturated by Western culture; this can surely be taken as a metaphor for the presence of a foreign occupying force, to which Allied censorship forbade direct reference."

One point missing from Jacoby's and others' interpretation of Western clothing is that it is difficult to assign one clear referent to any of these signifiers. The Japanese taste for Western clothing goes back to the Meiji period, when Japan first started to appropriate Western culture on a large scale. Although it started among the elites only, wearing Western clothing started to seep down to the masses throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, with a tipping point being the decade of the 1930s, according to Toby Slade (2009). Slade argues that there were a number of pragmatic and circumstantial factors that helped popularize Western clothing before World War II and the ensuing Occupation, in addition to a craze for Western culture: becoming accustomed to wearing Western-style clothing in the military and in schools; a series of disasters like the Great Kantō Earthquake (1923), which created a need to replace lost belongings including clothing, and the Shirokiya Department Store Fire (1932), which made clear how the non-functionality of traditional Japanese clothing and female attitudes of modesty with regard to clothing were both impractical and even dangerous in the workplace; and the drop in the price of wool, which made Western-style clothing cheaper (Slade 2009, 56-59). Thus, the appearance of Western clothing in the film, by itself, cannot be taken simply as references to the Occupation and Americanization. In fact, there are only a few times during the film where we actually see characters wearing traditional Japanese clothing (e.g., at the police station and in the black market sequence), and all of the main characters, good or bad, wear Western clothing.

Even the expensive clothing—that associated with Yusa, Sei, and Honda, as well

as the dress Yusa gives to Harumi—may function less as indications of Americanization and more as signifiers of the desire by those in the lower classes to escape poverty and despair, along the lines of Prince's discussion of socioeconomic class (1991, 98) or the inability of the "new Japan" to satisfy many of the people. The "new Japan" certainly does implicate the American Occupation and its supposed goal of democratizing Japan; however, it also includes the militarism that led to the war and then to Japan's defeat and the newly reconstituted government. I do agree with Jacoby and others that *Stray Dog* is a response to and commentary on the postwar situation (at least in Tokyo), but it is not a singular statement and it embodies contradictions and ambivalences rather than a singular artistic vision.

Jacoby's final conclusion is that "... Kurosawa's precise attitude to the Occupation remains equivocal," but, somewhat contradictorily, he also concludes that "Kurosawa, it seems, did ultimately endorse the project of the Occupation." The motivation for the shift, significantly, is Jacoby's reversion to the Orientalism of earlier critics. Dismissing Yoshimoto's Lacanian analysis of Murakami's relationship to his lost gun as the *phallus*, Jacoby instead finds bushido to be the proper framework for understanding the relationship: "The policeman's particular devotion to his own weapon may be related to the values of bushido, the samurai code, according to which . . . the sword is 'the soul of the samurai.' Thus Murakami's despair at the loss of his gun and dedication to its recovery suggest a connection with bushido values: in this case, the gun is the 'soul of the policeman.'" (And it is difficult to see how this reading is any more "political"—as Jacoby claims—than Yoshimoto's.) He then reads the final scene between Murakami and Sato as "a way forward, reconciling Murakami's bushido-inspired commitment to his weapon with his successful performance of his professional duties in the post-war police force." Thus, for him, the film becomes a resolution between traditional (feudal) Japan and the democratic ideals sponsored by the Occupation (for critiques of Occupation-style democracy, see Hirano 1994, 54-58).

Here, again, this kind of foreclosure on the contradictions and ambivalences in the film takes away from the film as an artistic achievement as well as a historical document of the "confusion era." Even characterizing Kurosawa's position as "equivocal" suggests a dissimulation that is probably better explained by the strictures and inconsistencies of censorship during the Occupation. As Sorenson notes in his audio commentary to the Criterion DVD of *Drunken Angel*, the process

of the Occupation censorship in Japan was not univocal and the process suffered from overworked staff, which might have at times undercut its ideological aspirations.

There is also reason to problematize this reading of the film on a textual level. In the final scene, Sato lies recovering in his hospital bed and congratulates Murakami on capturing Yusa and breaking his first big case. And yet Murakami still looks forlorn, unable to rid himself of both his obsessive guilt about allowing his gun to be stolen and used to murder innocent people as well as the “thin blue line” that separates himself from Yusa. Sato gestures toward the open window of his hospital room and says, “There’ll be all sorts of cases under those rooftops today. And a few good people will fall victim to someone else like Yusa. Forget about Yusa. No, as soon as your arm heals, you’ll be busy again. You’ll forget all about Yusa, naturally.” As the melodramatic music swells to a crescendo, Murakami stares out the window, while Sato rather awkwardly uses a hand mirror to do the same. At the last minute, Murakami looks up as the scene fades out. In his silent contemplation, he seemingly accepts the wisdom of his older, more experienced colleague; however, his look is anything but certain about how he will confront all those crimes and all those criminals: will it be with the black-and-white model of criminality and human behavior embodied by Sato, or will it be a model of the new subject in a new world, as befitting the younger, *après-guerre* generation? With the fadeout on Murakami looking up to the sky above, the film subtly refuses the viewer closure on this point.

III. Cross-cultural Interpretation

In his autobiography, Kurosawa relates an interesting anecdote about the making of *Stray Dog*. An American woman from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals observing the filming of the opening sequence with the panting dog accused the filmmakers of injecting the dog with rabies, which of course was not the case: “Because the Japanese were barbarians, injecting a dog with rabies was just the sort of thing we would do, and she had no time for the truth” (1982, 174). This little bit of intercultural misunderstanding elicited a rather caustic response from Kurosawa, even thirty years after the event: “. . . I never at any other moment experienced a stronger sense of regret over Japan’s losing the war” (1982, 172).

This anecdote interests me because it reminds us of the plentiful and inevitable

opportunities for misreading and misinterpretation—or, if we prefer, *méconnaissance*—across cultures. Comfortably situated at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we may be inclined to accept Kurosawa’s racial interpretation of the incident as a feature of that particular historical moment; however, I want to insist that readings and interpretations are, even now, not uninformed by issues of race and cultural difference—and this “naturally” goes beyond the personal and individual level into the realm of “discourse” (in Foucault’s sense) where our readings and interpretations of, as well as our misreadings and misinterpretations of, Kurosawa’s films are part of a discursive formation that is, in part, informed by “racial thinking.” We will need to disconnect “racial thinking” from simplistic notions that this or that reading or interpretation is “racist” (even if it is), so that we can concentrate on the machinations of racial thinking themselves, such that it is not a matter of this interpretation or critic being racist but rather of racial thinking always being present and informing the discourse.

In the case of *Stray Dog* and interpretations of it, the racial thinking, in part, governs our readings of the film. This racial thinking is easy to point out in the cases of “Orientalist” readings that essentialize some notion of “Japaneseness,” or even “American-ness” and “West-ness” for that matter. However, it also applies to the “resistant” readings that are trying to counter Orientalism. Our desires to read certain signifiers, such as nontraditional clothes, as those of the West or specifically of America are also influenced by racial thinking and the need to deal with cultural difference. What I think helps underwrite Yoshimoto’s reading of the film as highly ambivalent is that the process of signification that we see in the film is, in a perhaps now-dated post-structural sense, unhinged. We are not able to assuredly connect a solitary signifier to any secured signified. The Western-style clothing in the film does not simply reference Westernization or Americanization. Although jazzy, the music featured in the black market sequence and at the Yayoi Hotel is not simply evidence of the craze for or the mere presence of Western or American culture. (At the hotel, it is a Latin tune called “La Palma.”)

What I think we need in order to understand a film like *Stray Dog* cross-culturally is a more nuanced model for how Japanese film incorporates and presents American or Western culture (and vice versa), one that is open to ambivalence and irony. Such a model would also need to incorporate the cultural positioning of the interpreter. Along these lines, I find some of Scott Nygren’s work on Japanese film

helpful for thinking through cultural difference in and around film, in particular his article “Doubleness and Idiosyncrasy in Cross-Cultural Analysis” (1991). Yoshimoto is critical of Nygren’s proposed cross-cultural analysis and the interpretation of Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952) Nygren produces; however, I think there is at least an interpretive spirit that is worth reexamining. I would agree with Yoshimoto that Nygren does become somewhat mired in poststructural language, and I would even say that Nygren never really fulfills his project (even in the later version of the essay that appears in Nygren’s book *Time Frames: Japanese Cinema and the Unfolding of History* [2007]). And yet, he does highlight issues that often go ignored. One issue is the tendency of Western critics to Orientalize Japanese films. Western critics cannot rely solely on either methodology or notions of Japaneseness such as bushido or *wabi sabi* as the key to interpreting a text: “neither a cultural tradition in its own terms nor critical methodology per se suffices as a controlling discourse” (Nygren 1996, 173). Another is the tendency to reduce a text to a singular statement. Instead, [n]ecessary schisms remain an integral part of the process of [cross-cultural] analysis which can never be recuperated into a single, unproblematic, and unified whole. The point here is that there is not and cannot ever be a transcendent or idealist solution to the active interplay of separate cultural languages, knowledge systems, or representations. Any attempt at ultimate synthesis would be yet another imaginary position. (Nygren 1991, 178-9)

When confronting a film cross-culturally, we have to be open to not just the historical context—itsself full of ambivalences, ironies, and contradictions—but also to the incommensurability of cultures that produce even more misreadings and misrecognitions than occur within a single culture. In short, what we need in order to truly appreciate *Stray Dog* is a model of interpretation that does not lead down the road of Orientalism by reducing the film to universalism or bushido or some other unifying principle and, at the same time, that does not encourage us to reduce signifiers to simply signifying the West or America.

References

- Anderson, Joseph L., and Donald Richie. 1982 (originally 1959). *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*. Expanded ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chen, Xiaomei. 1995. *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*. Oxford:

- Oxford University Press.
- Desser, David. 1983a. "Kurosawa's Eastern 'Western': *Sanjuro* and the Influence of *Shane*." *Film Criticism* 8.1 (Fall): 54-65.
- _____. 1983b. *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970 (originally 1966). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House.
- _____. 1986 (originally 1967). "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16 (Spring): 22-27.
- Goodwin, James. 1994. *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hirano, Kyoko. 1992. *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo: Japanese Cinema under the American Occupation, 1942-1952*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian.
- Hutchison, Rachael. 2006. "Orientalism or Occidentalism? Dynamics of Appropriation in Akira Kurosawa." *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*. Eds. Stephanie Dennison, Song Hwee Lim. London: Wallflower Press. 173-187.
- _____. 2007. "Kurosawa Akira's *One Wonderful Sunday*: Censorship, Context and 'Counter-discursive' Film." *Japan Forum* 19.3: 369-389.
- It Is Wonderful to Create*. 2002. Dir. Okamoto Yoshinari. Kurosawa Production Co.
- Jacoby, Alexander. 2010. "Disputed Territories." *Sight and Sound* 20.7: n. pag. EBSCOhost.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kelly, William W. 2008. "Is Baseball a Global Sport? America's 'National Pastime' as Global Field and International Sport." *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 4 May 2008. N. pag. http://www.japanfocus.org/-William_W_-Kelly/2740.
- Kurosawa, Akira. 1982. *Something Like an Autobiography*. New York: Random House.
- Malcomson, Scott L. 1985. "The Pure Land beyond the Seas: Barthes, Burch, and the Uses of Japan." *Screen* 26.3-4: 23-33.
- Nygren, Scott. 1991. "Doubleness and Idiosyncrasy in Cross-Cultural Analysis." *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 13.1-3: 173-187.
- _____. 2007. *Time Frames: Japanese Cinema and the Unfolding of History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Prince, Stephen. 1991. *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- _____. 2004. Audio commentary for Criterion's DVD edition of *Stray Dog*.
- Rafferty, Terrence. 2004. "Kurosawa Comes of Age." Pamphlet for Criterion's DVD edition of *Stray Dog*.
- Richie, Donald. 1996 (originally 1965). *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.
- Slade, Toby. 2009. *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*. New York: Berg.
- Sorenson, Lars-Martin. 2009. *Censorship of Japanese Films During the U.S. Occupation*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

- Stray Dog*. 2004 (originally 1949). Dir. Kurosawa Akira. Criterion. DVD.
- Yamanashi, Emiko. 1998. "Painting in the Time of 'Heavy Hands.'" *The Confusion Era: Art and Culture of Japan During the Allied Occupation, 1945-1952*. Ed. Mark Sandler. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 22-37.
- Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. 2000. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.