

Through a Tube, Darkly: Critical Remediation in *High and Low* (1963)*

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Abstract:

Akira Kurosawa's 1963 police procedural *High and Low* is, as its title suggests, intensely interested in the socioeconomic valences of spatial relationships, literalized in Yokohama's affluent hills and its low-lying slums. The central conflict between inhabitants of these two spaces articulates this local topography into a global framework, in which concrete spaces of social interaction and functional production become abstract places that act as conduits for flows of media and capital. Previous analyses have read the film as an historical reflection of and nationalistic reaction to Americanization. Attending to the film's transnational, transtemporal, and transmedial articulations reframes the film as a critical engagement with globalization rather than a symptomatic reflection thereof. The immediate context of the rapid adoption of television, concomitant with Japan's emerging consumerism, allows Kurosawa to figure abstract economic patterns through intermedial formal techniques. These textual practices associate the materiality of celluloid with manual labor, and the ephemerality of TV with speculative finance. By further linking the protagonist Gondo with the former pair and the antagonist Takeuchi with the latter, *High and Low* formally and structurally critiques economic globalization as a form of criminality.

Keywords: Remediation; Transnational Cinema; Police Procedural; Akira Kurosawa; Japanese Cinema.

The title of Akira Kurosawa's 1963 police procedural film *High and Low* unsubtly announces an overarching conceptual binary, one presumably more profound than that of cops and robbers. Its implied moral Manicheism – the Japanese title, *Tengoku to jigoku*, more literally translates as *Heaven and Hell* – is matched by the hierarchical spatial and social relationships literalised in the film's mise-en-scène. Industrialist and protagonist Kingo Gondo (Tôshiro Mifune) owns a chic, modern house situated on a hill overlooking the port city of Yokohama, while the villain, medical intern Ginjirô Takeuchi (Tsutomu Yamazaki), resides in a modest shack in the city's low-lying slums.

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In his comprehensive monograph on Kurosawa's oeuvre, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto warns against being taken in by 'the deceptive obviousness of both formal and thematic dichotomies' (310). As easily as this maxim is recognised in theory, in practice it has been honoured more in the breach than the observance: the interpretive models commonly applied to Kurosawa's work – national allegory, historical reflection, and textualist formalism – tend to reify such deceptive dichotomies. Each respectively relies on an exclusive antinomy between genre and nation, text and society, or form and function. A fuller understanding of the relationship between social formations and popular genres – not least the crime film – requires attending to the transnational, transtemporal, and transmedial elements of mass media narratives.

Before addressing each of these in turn, a brief plot synopsis is in order. Apparently fuelled by class resentment, Takeuchi attempts to kidnap Gondo's son, Jun, but mistakenly abducts Shinichi, the son of Gondo's chauffeur. Realizing his error yet undeterred, Takeuchi demands that Gondo pay an exorbitant ransom for Shinichi's safe return. Initially resistant to sacrificing the funds intended to buy a majority share of his company, National Shoes, Gondo ultimately submits, bankrupting himself but becoming a folk hero for his selfless act. The second half of the film is devoted to the police's dogged efforts to track down the kidnapper, who is eventually caught and sentenced to death.

For Yoshimoto, 'Gondo's action is a means of reconstructing the identity and unity of the Japanese nation, which was increasingly being problematised by [. . .] the intrusion of a foreign body (e.g., popular and consumer culture [. . .] from abroad)' (331). His allegorical approach reads nation through genre and vice versa, leaving filmmakers with the option of either assimilation or opposition to American cinematic hegemony. Yet, as Christina Ann Klein proposes, transnational film cultures invite us 'to see Hollywood as an *object* rather than an agent

of globalization, a reservoir of symbolic resources from which [non-US] filmmakers draw as they navigate their way through their own globalised cultural economy' (Klein 873). Far from a symptomatic reflection of American cultural imperialism, *High and Low* provides a key illustration of how the transnational flow of ostensibly American film genres like the police procedural affords filmmakers opportunities for critical engagements with globalization and its traveling companion, financialisation.

My use of the latter term may raise eyebrows, given that it has been indelibly stamped with the date of 1973.¹ While Kurosawa's film precedes the conventional break between postwar liberalism and neoliberalism by a decade, it partakes in an impending transformation through what Raymond Williams characterises as a 'structure of feeling', the 'felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living' (Long 63). Such a structure, and the creative work that emerges from and helps to shape it, does not simply reflect its contemporary moment but anticipates the further development of nascent historical changes. According to Williams, 'It is a kind of thinking and feeling which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange' (*Marxism* 131). Through this kind of inchoate creative discourse, Kurosawa extrapolates the financial future from contemporary trends of planned obsolescence and consumerist massification.

The formal vehicle for Kurosawa's critique is remediation, the incorporation of one medium into another. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined this term to describe how new media paradoxically construct 'transparency', the sense of being unmediated, through 'hypermediacy', the integration or imitation of older media and their perceived legitimacy as information sources (6-9). As Bolter and Grusin understand it, remediation is a key component

of the ideology of new media; i.e. that it does everything old media does, but better – so buy now! More than just a marketing technique or a conduit for cultural capital, ‘remediation can also be,’ writes Marissa Moorman, ‘a self-conscious strategy deployed to challenge media ideologies’ (93-94). I argue that remediation can become a materializing index by announcing itself as a marker of historical distinctions between old and new media, rather than eliding history through the ruse of transparency.²

High and Low’s immediate context of the rapid adoption of television, itself both symptom and driver of Japanese society’s emerging consumerism, allows Kurosawa to figure abstract economic patterns through materialist media practices. He remediates the ancillary marketing materials of Western-genre television series, the silent-era film practice of ‘spot colour,’ and the distorted reflections cast by cathode ray tubes. This textual practice associates the materiality of celluloid with manual labour, and the ephemerality of TV with speculative finance. By further linking Gondo with the former pair and Takeuchi with the latter, *High and Low* formally and structurally critiques financial globalization as a form of criminality.

The Yokohama Kid: Transnational Media and Planned Obsolescence

A curious thing happens about ten minutes into Kurosawa’s film. As Gondo shows his fellow board members the door upon refusing their request to participate in a hostile takeover of National Shoes, his son Jun barges into the living room, outfitted in a store-bought Western sheriff’s costume, toy rifle blazing. His playmate Shinichi, the chauffeur’s son, falls to the floor in mock death throes, then springs back to life as the boys chase each other out of the room. The boys’ violent game interrupts the first act’s ongoing explication, creating a jarring generic juxtaposition between the crime film and the Western. The placement of this scene immediately

following the surreptitious board meeting connects the prospective leveraged buyout with TV, presumably the source of the boys' Western fandom and of the ancillary marketing materials they wear.

While Western films had been popular in Japan since the silent era, the postwar explosion of TV ownership raised the genre's standing in popular consciousness. In a 1962 *Film Quarterly* article, Joseph L. Anderson remarked that 'in Japan at the moment, there is a craze for fast-draw skills, side-arms collecting, and cowboy and gunman stories. As both a cause and an effect of this, dubbed versions of every major U.S. Western videofilm series now play on Japanese television' (58). Given the genre's intrinsic association with the United States and its apparent incongruity with the film's cultural milieu, it is tempting to read the boys' cowboy costumes as Kurosawa's commentary on the Americanization of postwar Japan. Matthew Bernstein has argued that the motif of the cowboy costumes 'connects predatory capitalism to the West', and more generally that the film's Yokohama setting is represented as 'a city infiltrated by Western culture' (187). Yet this contention is contradicted by the centrality of the Western genre in Kurosawa's oeuvre, and vice versa.

His *Seven Samurai* (1954) spawned a Western remake, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), that was popular in both the US and Japan (Anderson 58). It also inspired the kinetic editing, slow-motion violence, and cynical worldview of Sam Peckinpah's genre-redefining 1969 Western *The Wild Bunch* (Prince, 'Genre' 331-44). Also well known, if frequently disavowed in the critical literature (Prince, *Warrior* 13-18; Mellen 68-72), is the inspiration that Kurosawa drew from Hollywood Westerns, especially those of John Ford. Kurosawa himself famously, if somewhat equivocally, stated, 'I have learned from [the] grammar of the Western' (Richie 147). This cinematic education is most apparent in *Yojimbo* (1961), a genre-redefining samurai film

that overtly repurposes Western elements: the wandering hero, the one-street town, the climactic showdown, etc.³ In this respect, Kurosawa is not that different from the boys in their costumes, playing with the Western.

Yojimbo, a free adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, also juxtaposes the Western with the crime film. Its mixture of frontier semantics and hard-boiled syntax provided the template for Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), the catalyst for a decade-long wave of European 'Spaghetti Westerns'. Perhaps the oddest twist in these transnational peregrinations concerns Clint Eastwood. His breakout role in *Fistful* set him on a path to movie stardom after having long been consigned to TV roles, most notably Rowdy Yates on *Rawhide*, which ran in Japan as well as in the United States from 1959 to 1965 (NHK 131). It is tempting to speculate that Kurosawa drew some inspiration for *Yojimbo* from *Rawhide*, long before Leone recast Mifune's eponymous samurai as Eastwood's Man with No Name.

These dizzying global media circuits belie the notion that American popular culture subverts Japanese national character. This recurrent motif of Japanese purity and American contamination is, as Scott Malcomson has argued,

a schema of East/West confrontation that [. . .] leaves the West with the burden of moral censure but also the historical momentum for domination. This is one way in which the promotion of faraway Japan as innocent Other finally concedes the historical victory to the West that it is condemning. (26)

Moreover, this binary system elides the historical development of domestic discourses around Japaneseness in the postwar period. Japan's 'economic miracle' was paralleled by an 'introspection boom' that forged a cottage industry of commentary on what was and was not uniquely Japanese (Hein 422). This journalistic and academic genre, known as *Nihonjinron*

studies, produced nationalist polemics that maintained distinctions between elite and popular (high and low) culture by framing the latter as a foreign intrusion. This assertion of a pure national identity disavows the transnational hybridity of postwar Japanese culture.

In this light, television is less an instrument of American infiltration than an artefact and catalyst of a decentred globalisation. Despite the widespread popularity and outsized visibility of U.S. programs in the early years of Japanese TV, they accounted for under five percent of the content broadcast over Japanese networks at the time (Kato 175). Nor can the technology itself be claimed as uniquely American: there had been independent televisual experiments in Japan dating as far back as 1924 (Kato 169-70). An undeniable element of self-conscious Americanisation in the postwar adoption of household appliances commingled with nationalistic pride in the Japanese electronics industry, which grew from manufacturing 14,000 TV sets in 1953 to nearly five million in 1962 (NHK 137). The impossibility of disentangling Americanisation from postwar Japanese identity is demonstrated by the ‘three sacred treasures,’ a colloquialism for the essential appliances that make a modern home: washing machine, refrigerator, and television. This phrase previously referred to the Japanese imperial regalia – sword, jewels, and mirror – which, Shunya Yoshimi notes, ‘were much emphasised during the formation of the modern nation-state’ in the mid-nineteenth century (155-6). The conceptual malleability of this triad allows it to support both the ‘expel the foreigners, revere the emperor’ ideology held by one political faction at that time and Japan’s postwar policy of economic growth through increased consumerism.

If the adoption of television is a sign of American cultural imperialism, it is surprising that Yasujiro Ozu, the ‘most Japanese’ director according to *Nihonjinron*-inflected film-critical discourse, made a film about TV, while Kurosawa, the ‘most Western’, assiduously avoided the

subject. Ozu's *Good Morning* (1959), like *High and Low*, has two children at the centre of its narrative, in this case brothers. They are on a quest to persuade their parents to buy a TV set, though they are more interested in watching sumo matches than American Westerns. Their silent-treatment strike against adult society in aid of this goal is precociously rebellious and thus stereotypically American. Their re-entry into society through renewed deference to their elders, a stereotypically Japanese trait, only occurs once their demands are met and the made-in-Japan set is finally delivered. Ozu's film narrates not only cultural hybridity but also a material process that was occurring in both the US and Japan.

During this period, children gained increasing influence on their parents' purchasing decisions. This development is indissolubly linked with the emergence of television and media globalization. Michael Kackman's research into the Hopalong Cassidy brand points toward a surprisingly early periodization for the latter. In 1948, William Boyd, who had played Cassidy in dozens of B-Westerns over the previous decade, acquired the rights to those films and the character. He moved aggressively to expand his brand internationally, including into Japan, through TV distribution deals and secondary marketing. A 1950 *Coronet* magazine profile claimed that Cassidy received over 1,000 letters a week 'from [overseas] parents who want to know where they can buy Hopalong outfits' (qtd. in Kackman 88). Kackman argues that, in Boyd's case, 'merchandise was not used to extend the viability and popularity of the primary texts; instead, in both economic and cultural terms, it eventually became the primary text...' (83). Consequently, Boyd's business model 'was not a Fordist *extraction* of value through distribution of a finite commodity' (i.e. film prints) but rather 'involv[ed] the ongoing *creation* of value through extending the reach of an intellectual property' via merchandising and sponsorship deals (79).

Marc Steinberg has likewise argued for resituating the rise of convergence, in the sense of the flow between ‘interconnected media and commodity forms’, as emerging not in the digital age but in the 1960s (viii). In the Japanese context, the anime series *Astro Boy*, which premiered two months before the release of *High and Low*, can be seen as marking an epochal shift from ‘advertis[ing] and sell[ing] a product based on its content’ to the new method of ‘overlapping the commodity image with a character image’ (Steinberg ix). *Astro Boy* thus figured Japan’s emergent shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy. Steinberg and Kackman indicate that deindustrialization and globalization were being reflected in pop culture far earlier than they and their associated phenomena, financialization and neoliberalism, are thought to have arisen.

While he is frequently invoked in support of the now-conventional periodization of ‘late capitalism’, Fredric Jameson acknowledges the continuities between the post-1973 world and the postwar period, which ‘constituted the hothouse, or forcing ground, of the new system’ (xx). The 1973 endpoint of Japan’s unprecedented economic growth completed an ongoing trajectory, the seeds of deindustrialization having been laid in the midst of its economic ‘miracle’. Japan’s liberalization of international trade in late 1959 and its ‘Income Doubling Plan’ of 1960, which sought to create the per capita income required for a consumer society, were key historical pivots in this regard (Matray 170-2). The rise in consumerism, harbinger of an expanding service sector alongside a declining manufacturing sector, is emblematised by the adoption of television into domestic spaces.

In the symbiotic relationship between TV and consumerism, children’s programs could themselves become vehicles for marketing the new appliance. One particularly cynical example is *National Kid* (1960-61). The Matsushita Corporation, which marketed its television sets under

the National brand (now Panasonic), produced the series after its consumer research arm discovered that 57% of household electronics purchases were initiated by children (Partner 167). Yoshimoto identifies a neon sign for National Electronics on the Yokohama skyline during *High and Low*'s opening credits. He cites the repetition of this word in the name of Gondo's company, National Shoes, to support his reading of the film as national allegory (324-5), but I see the connection between the two Nationals as analogical rather than symbolic. National Shoes mirrors National Electronics in its implementation of planned obsolescence, an emergent industrial practice that TV manufacturers found particularly advantageous.

As a rapidly developing new media technology, television sets quickly became obsolete relative to new models, a fact that was openly exploited by corporate strategists (Slade 98-9). In Japan, colour television broadcasts began in 1960, when many were still saving up a month's salary to purchase a black-and-white set that would already be obsolete before they bought it (Kato 173). By mid-decade, the colour TV predictably supplanted the monochrome model as one of the three sacred treasures of aspirational consumerism (Koizumi). Moreover, skyrocketing TV sales portended the potential obsolescence of the film industry, which had experienced plummeting box office receipts since 1958 (NHK 132). In *High and Low*, planned obsolescence is the primary motivator for Gondo's desire to take control of the company and return it to making durable products. The rest of the board have no objections to the shoddily made ladies' shoes that the company pumps out, following a profit-dictated trend toward disposable fashion. In the opening scene, Gondo rips apart one of these shoes, pointing out each defect to the board members as he disassembles it. As factory head and a former labourer himself, Gondo favours functionality over appearance. He gruffly dismisses another executive's comparison of shoes to hats, proclaiming, 'Hats are decoration. Shoes carry all your body weight.'

As previously noted, this scene immediately precedes the arrival of Jun in his cowboy hat, an artefact of the proliferation of television and its creation of specious value through the perceived need for conspicuous consumption. The boys' cowboy costumes are not primarily an intertextual allusion to the Western, then, but a materializing index marking a discrete historical conjuncture. They are manifestations of the commodification of children's attention and the corporate capture of their influence over their parents' pocketbooks. They are figures for the emergence of television and the concomitant shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, from production to consumption. *High and Low*, however, rejects the inevitability of planned obsolescence, figured in the shift from celluloid to television, through its continual use of remediation as materializing index.

Two Sides of the Coin: Materiality and Ephemerality

In light of the ongoing emergence of television, it is remarkable that a film that so thoroughly integrates other media shows little trace of TV. Since corporate executives were early adopters of the new technology (Kato 171), the lack of a television in their mid-century modern living room is particularly striking. This absence comports with Kurosawa's personal animosity toward television, a medium in which he never worked.⁴ Late in life, the director remarked, 'The way television films are made and the way theatrical films are made are fundamentally different, and I only know how to make theatrical films' (Ross 77).

This disavowal is refuted by the *mise-en-scene* of the film's protracted first act, which takes place almost entirely within the Gondos' living room. This protracted sequence has been compared to a stage play, but its stark, domestic interior set is more reminiscent of early television dramas. Per Donald Richie, who observed the shoot, '[t]he method of filming was

something like that used in TV with [three] different cameras using different lenses, changing position from time to time' (168). Kurosawa's multi-camera method, requiring extensive rehearsals and diffuse lighting schemes, also echoes the 'liveness' of early television. But rather than switching feeds between cameras and broadcasting ethereal signals, his crew was producing a physical object to be manually reconstructed in the editing room. Kurosawa, who often edited his own work, was highly attuned to the materiality of celluloid, as is powerfully invoked in another living-room sequence later in the film.

A plume of pink smoke appears on the Yokohama skyline, emitted from a pouch of powder sewn into the lining of the ransom briefcase that Takeuchi has burned to destroy the evidence of his crime (Figure 1). This singular stroke of colour in a monochrome film may seem innovative, but many early films used 'spot colour', meticulously painted by hand. A direct parallel occurs in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), where the smoke from the bandits' gun barrels are bursts of yellow. While spot colour became less common after around 1906, there are remarkable examples throughout the silent period, such as the yellow gold in *Greed* (1924) and the triumphal red flag in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) (Hertogs and de Klerk 12). Film historian Paolo Cherchi Usai notes that 'manual application of colour resulted in noticeable differences from copy to copy, affirming the uniqueness of each' (22). This technique leaves traces of the manual labour it entails, acting as material evidence of the physical manipulation of the filmstrip.⁵

Kurosawa revives this obsolete cinematic practice and enlists it in his critique of television. Structures of feeling frequently limn the emergent by reimagining the residual, reading current trajectories through past cultural formations. The residual – that which has been superseded – can express 'certain meanings, experiences, and values which cannot be expressed



Figure 1. Spot colour as materializing index. High and Low (Akira Kurosawa, 1963).

or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture’, and therefore ‘may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture’ (Williams 122). In this case, spot colour amounts to an expression of defiance against TV’s potential to make cinema obsolete.

Within the diegesis, the pink smoke is likewise evidence of the manual labour of altering the briefcase, undertaken by Gondo himself. The emphatic blocking of this scene stresses the other characters’ astonishment at seeing this titan of industry taking a seat on the floor as he dumps out the old leatherworking tools from his youth as a lowly apprentice. The evocation of an earlier, humbler time in Gondo’s life aligns precisely with Mifune’s rags-to-riches ‘star text’ (Dyer), revolving around the idea that he had never forgotten where he came from (Galbraith 352). The apparently nostalgic tone of this scene is complicated by the planned obsolescence of the briefcase, whose intended function is to be burned. The pinkness of the smoke acts as a materializing index, but its inevitable dissipation is the epitome of ephemerality.

As Aoki, the family chauffeur and father of the kidnapped Shinichi, observes Gondo’s leatherworking, he stands upright and bows his head, embarrassed by his employer’s humility. A

moment earlier, Aoki had been dictating to a detective endless serial numbers from a stack of ransom money, paradoxically indicating the individual identity of inherently interchangeable bills. This action illustrates anthropologist Keith Hart's 'two sides of the coin':

On one side is 'heads' – the symbol of the political authority which minted the coin; on the other side is 'tails' – the precise specification of the amount the coin is worth as payment in exchange. One side reminds us that states underwrite currencies and that money is originally a relation between persons in society, a *token* perhaps. The other reveals the coin as a thing, capable of entering into definite relations with other things, as a quantitative ratio independent of the persons engaged in any particular transaction. In this latter respect money is like a *commodity* and its logic is that of anonymous markets. (638, emphasis added)

The notation of serial numbers draws out this unsettling fluidity between materiality and abstraction, difference and similarity.

Whereas marking bills turns commodities into tokens, the kidnapping turns the boys into commodities. Takeuchi nabs the wrong boy because he is unable to distinguish between them while they are playing sheriff-and-outlaw, alternating roles indicated by costume. His subsequent, indiscriminate ransom demand makes Jun and Shinichi interchangeable by assigning them the same abstract, numerical value. This subjects them to the anonymization of the commodity theory of money, which conceives of economic actors as separate from the social realm. Conversely, as government agents, the police evoke the Keynesian, social welfare state version of the token theory, soon to be overtaken by the monetarist commodity theory of neoliberalism (Hart 646-7).⁶ According to the generic conventions of the police procedural, numbering paper currency can reveal the culprit's trail if, say, he buys a distinctive brand of

cigarettes from an observant newspaper vendor. By identifying concrete instances of interpersonal exchange, the marked bills restore the social relations underlying the token theory of money.

Takeuchi's connection to commoditization is characteristically expressed by a televisual metaphor. As an unpaid medical intern, Takeuchi's budget precludes conspicuous consumption, so he perversely replaces the missing commodities with his patients.⁷ His accomplices in the kidnapping are two former patients turned employees, both heroin addicts who are happy to be paid in dope for keeping an eye on Shinichi in a safe house. Put differently, they are compensated for their attention with a pleurably stultifying diversion. This is essentially the situation described by communications theorist Dallas Smythe: broadcasters deliver consumers to advertisers for profit, thus turning the audience into a commodity (5). The analogy with Takeuchi's fiendish exploitation of addicts is nightmarishly manifested by a sequence that literalises the Frankfurt School's 'hypodermic model' of mass media's pernicious influence. With the police in pursuit, Takeuchi accosts another strung-out addict as a test subject for the lethal dose of heroin that he plans to use to silence his accomplices. As he grabs the dopesick woman, her visage is eerily reflected in his mirrored sunglasses, whose convex curve, rounded corners, and 4:3 aspect ratio uncannily recall a cathode ray tube (Figure 2). Takeuchi's heinous crimes, committed against children and addicts, echo the economic structures of commercial television. Both extract unpaid labour in return for a momentary pleasure whose substantive effect is an insatiable acquisitiveness.

Like TV's conjuration of consumer desire, Takeuchi's criminal plot involves creating value without production, a hallmark of financial as opposed to industrial capitalism. Conversely, Gondo's decision to pay the ransom moves him away from financial speculation and



Figure 2. The audience commodity. High and Low (Akira Kurosawa, 1963).

back towards manufacturing. This is overtly figured when he practises his craft on the leather briefcase. Kurosawa positively realigns Gondo with labour while negatively connecting Takeuchi with finance. The complex dialectic of materiality and ephemerality, token and commodity, labour and alienation, celluloid and television, runs through *High and Low* like a red thread – or permeates it like pink smoke.

Walking in the City: Place and Space

Kurosawa erects a stark distinction between the first and second halves of the film, mediated by a virtuosic sequence on the then-new bullet train that is beyond the scope of the present discussion. The director's 'dramatic geometry' (Burch 319) corresponds to the title's spatial dichotomy. Kurosawa articulates the local topography into a global framework, in which concrete places of social interaction and functional production become abstract spaces that act as conduits for flows of media and capital. Globalization's complex antinomy of distant contiguity characterises the *Low* half of the film from its first image. In an extreme long shot taken with a

telephoto lens, which causes faraway objects to seem much closer, the camera peers up at Jun and Shinichi, reunited in play inside the Gondo house. A cut reveals that the previous shot's point of view is through a policeman's binoculars from inside a phone booth. He and his partner have been tasked with locating the payphone from which the kidnapper placed his ransom calls, one with a clear view of the picture windows of the house on a hill. 'The kidnapper was right,' says one cop to the other. 'That house gets on your nerves. As if it's looking down at us.' As *High and Low* finally begins to act like a proper police procedural, looking relations become central, particularly as they are structured by class-based geographical segregation.

Michel de Certeau provides a hermeneutic for this visuospatial nexus in his distinction between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*). A place is a site of '[t]he atopia-utopia of optical knowledge', from which '[p]erspective vision and prospective vision constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with' (93). This is the point of view constructed by a map, which collapses the time of lived experience into synchronous space, enacting the dominant's exclusion of both the residual and the emergent. The map's perspective can be approximated in material sites of an elevated height with a panoptic view, such as the Gondos' house overlooking the city's slums. The house's placeness is expressed both visually and temporally in the film's first, *High* half. The repetitive immobility of this distended sequence reproduces the map's collapse of time into space, enacting the 'spatial turn' that Jameson finds to be characteristic of late capitalism (154). At the same time, a ringing phone, portending Takeuchi's ransom call, disrupts the stability of the Gondos' place by connecting it to the space-time of the city below. According to Certeau,

A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. The space is composed of mobile elements. ... In short, *space is a practiced*

place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. (117)

In the *Low* segment of the film, the police's spatial practices, borrowed from the lower city's working class, reinstate geographical and temporal mobility after the static *High* segment. The movements of the Yokohama police through the terrain of the city become not only the literal method of catching a crook, but a material praxis in opposition to the alienation embodied in the kidnapper.

Two points are pertinent here. First, place is a mode of perception and a strategy of power, while space is a mode of habitation and a tactic of the everyday. The literal coordinates of high and low are matched by implications regarding social class that are more complex than a simple binary, as is illustrated at a meeting of the dozens of detectives working the case. As might be expected, an enormous wall map of the precinct abstracts the city into a place. Three small circles on the map indicate the locations of the potential phone booths identified by the pair of cops seen earlier. Next to the map, and dwarfed by it, hangs Shinichi's drawing of his view from the safe house. The overpowering map and its official notations turn out to be useless without the crayoned drawing from a working-class child's doubly low perspective. Dominant looking relations derive their efficacy from everyday, embodied experiences of space, as when the sound of a trolley heard in the background of the tape-recorded ransom call is identified by a transit worker as belonging to a specific trolley line in a specific neighbourhood. Combining this information with clues from the map and Shinichi's drawing, the police finally find the safe house, but not before they do a lot of walking.

Second, according to the logic of the text, place aligns with television, while space aligns with film. As the conversing cops depart from the phone booth, the camera follows in a

rightward track along the bank of a canal. As they exit the frame, the camera cranes up into a high-angle shot of the polluted water and reverses lateral direction. We dimly discern a blurred reflection, its horizontally zig-zagging outline recalling analogue TV static. The camera continues to track left as it tilts up to introduce Takeuchi to the audience. As he exits into an alley, his distorted reflection appears again, this time in the blank cathode ray tube of a TV set on display outside a small electronics shop. The next few cuts follow his itinerary (the opposite of a map, per Certeau) through narrow alleyways and up the wooden stairs to his humble rented room. Once inside, he begins rifling through the local papers for news of his crime. He finds a story about the ransom drop, which involved Gondo's throwing the briefcase from the moving train. The page is illustrated with an aerial photograph of that section of the train line, marked with white X's at the sites of significant events, converting time into place. He switches on the radio, which is also talking about him. As the announcer reports that 'Gondo's sacrifice has not gone unnoticed,' the camera zooms in on a portrait of the formerly rich man, reproduced in one of Takeuchi's newspapers. This shot effectively synchronises picture and sound in the manner of an ersatz TV news report. The initial spatiality of this sequence reverts to placiality once Takeuchi begins consuming mass media.

Broadcasting is an inherently placial phenomenon, emanating from a central point to cover a vast geographical area while homogenizing time through the virtual simultaneity of reception. Meanwhile, the consumer is transfixed by the flickering images that proceed in a ceaseless flow (Williams, *Television* 86-96). Televisual flow finds its counterpart in cinematic montage, the photographic equivalent of walking on foot, to paraphrase Werner Herzog (Blank). At the time, TV productions like *Dragnet* that shot on location had to use film cameras, manually crafting celluloid made-for-TV movies in the editing room (Calhoun 106). This manual assembly

process, as we have seen, is central to Kurosawa's figuration of the television/cinema dialectic. As the police and the culprit take centre stage, the question of medial specificity is elaborated through the complex conceptual structure *place:television::space:film*.

Conclusion: The Shoemaker's Reflection

In the film's final scene, Gondo and Takeuchi meet in a prison visiting room, separated by a pane of glass. As the sequence alternates between over-the-shoulder shots from either side of the divider, Gondo's reflection is overlaid on the image of Takeuchi's face and vice-versa. The glass serves as a barrier between the two and a medium through which their apparent opposition is rendered as a complex duality or potential equivalence. The significance of this scene has proved elusive for Kurosawa critics, but it becomes coherent if read in conjunction with an earlier meeting between the two.

Having descended from his high place, Gondo wanders the *noir* space of the lower city. Intently inspecting the window of a shoe store, he is unaware that the young man who asks for a light is the kidnapper who has upended his life. Four detectives observe the encounter from a nearby car, surprised to see Gondo but unwilling to intervene and reveal their ongoing sting operation. They might also see, as the camera does, the men's reflections in the shop window. We know from earlier instances that Takeuchi's reflection connotes television, whose *dispositif* constitutes a sedentary form of window shopping. The latter has its own version of distant contiguity: the open display of the consumer's coveted object juxtaposed with the glass's foreclosure of possession. In classical Hollywood cinema, a window-shopping scene generally explicates a character's acquisitive aspirations. A skilled *metteur-en-scène* might figure the imbrication of conspicuous consumption and narcissistic speculation by overlaying the gazer's

reflection on the desired item. Takeuchi's reflection on Gondo's face works in precisely this manner.

Gondo, conversely, tends not to fetishise commodities or to commoditise humans, and he is not really window shopping. He favours function over form, as he demonstrates by reverse-engineering National's latest high-heeled shoe. Presumably, this very model is among the variety of pumps at which he peers, surveying the relative soundness of their seams. Gondo's reflection is to be found not in his visage but in these shoes. 'Reflection, in the sense of a turning back,' Heidegger tells us,

is only a mode of *self-apprehension*, but not the mode of primary self-disclosure. [. . .] It is surely a remarkable fact that we encounter ourselves, primarily and daily, for the most part by way of things and are disclosed to ourselves in this manner in our own self. [. . .] Certainly the shoemaker is not the shoe, and nevertheless he understands *himself* from his things, *himself*, his own self. (159-60)

Gondo's act of reflecting is not optical but ontological, not egocentric but relational, not evanescent but material.

The dialectic relationship between the last two qualities, here as throughout *High and Low*, is manifested through the antinomy of television and celluloid. The facial superimpositions in the jailhouse window recall the uncanny phenomenon of simultaneously viewing a televised image and one's own reflection hovering atop the tube. As their inconclusive conversation ends, Gondo watches a metal shutter slam down behind the glass. He is left with his own reflection, as if he has just turned off a TV set (Figure 3). This final image encapsulates Kurosawa's critical remediation of television as agent of consumerism, a mode of self-apprehension that negates self-disclosure. The dialectic relationship between the two media – the materiality of the



Figure 3. Turning off the TV. High and Low (Akira Kurosawa, 1963).

filmstrip, associated with labour, versus the ephemerality of the TV broadcast, associated with speculation – is figured in the fleeting reflections that haunt *High and Low*.

Notes

¹ After taking power in a September 1973 coup, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet – with assistance from the United States – instituted the wholesale adoption of neoliberal economic policies, such as deregulation, privatization, and ‘free trade’ (Harvey 7-9). The OPEC oil embargo of the same year precipitated a global economic crisis that would provide a rationale for the spread of neoliberal austerity to the Global North, particularly the US and UK (Jameson xx-xxi; Harvey 43-8, 56-8).

² My notion of a materializing index is derived from Michel Chion’s conception of materializing sound indices, ‘details that cause us to “feel” the material conditions of the sound source and refer to the concrete process of the sound’s production’ (112).

³ The category ‘samurai film’ has no equivalent in Japanese film discourse, which classifies these texts as *jidaigeki* (period film) or *chanbara* (swordfight film).

⁴ As a director, that is. He appeared in several Suntory whiskey commercials beginning in 1979 (Yakir 54).

⁵ Richard Misek asserts that prints of *High and Low* were hand-painted (61), but I have been unable to verify this conclusively.

⁶ While Japan did not establish an effective social welfare system until the late 1970s, the postwar state employed broadly interventionist economic policies. The Income Doubling Plan, for instance, ‘seems to mix Keynesian and (proto)neoliberal policies’ (Kingston 41; cf. Allinson 91-94).

⁷ The Japanese internship system caused such financial hardship that medical school graduates boycotted public hospitals in 1963. The same year, the Japanese Medical Association recommended abolishing internships (Bowers 145).

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