Kurosawa Akira's The Lower Depths: Beggar cinema at the disjuncture of times

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ABSTRACT
Kurosawa’s The Lower Depths (1957) has been seen exclusively as a literal adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s drama with no content on its own and therefore as a merely formalist exercise in transforming a theatre play into a film. Breaking with the received film-as-theatre approach, this article contextualizes the film within the 1953 Japanese debate on ‘beggar photography’ and photographic realism and Kurosawa’s cinema of the 1950s. Morphing the iconography of post-war misery together with the iconography of the Tokugawa period, Kurosawa’s cinematic rendition of Gorky’s play not only countered the ideological tendency of post-occupation Japan to avoid realistic representation of its war-inflicted destitution but also linked this representation to its causes in the nationalist and militarist past.

KEYWORDS
cinematic adaptation
Maxim Gorky
post-war Japanese cinema
photographic realism
beggar photography
Japanese period drama

Have I fallen to the bottom of the earth? Is this hell?
(Kôbô Abe, Kangaroo Notebook)

IN GORKY’S SHADOW
The critical reception of Kurosawa’s Donzoko/The Lower Depths (1957) has been overshadowed by its famous Russian source, Maxim Gorky’s drama Ha ðne/The Lower Depths (1902) and its strong and long-lasting presence on
the Japanese and international stage. In his cinematic rendition of Gorky, the director followed the overall four-act structure, *mise-en-scène* and text of the play so closely that his film has easily acquired in the eyes of the critics the status of a ‘literal’ adaptation (Richie 1984: 125). This understanding essentially equated the meaning of a Japanese post-war film with that of a Russian turn-of-the-century drama by reducing them to the common denominator of their tragi-comic portrayal of the human condition (Richie 1984: 133).

Kurosawa’s own vagueness in regard to his choice of source seems to have been complicit in this path of reception. In the first English-language discussion of the film, Donald Richie assembled several quotations from the director alleging that he ‘always wanted to make Gorky’s play into a movie … into a really easy and entertaining movie’, or saying: ‘I wanted to make a stage play. I wanted to see what I could do’ (184: 125). Thus on the basis of truncated autobiographical statements, Kurosawa’s interest in Gorky appeared as a merely sportive wrestling with the capacities of a different medium. The presumption of a purely aestheticist motivation removed the film from the context of the director’s otherwise socially and politically minded output. As a result, in English-language scholarship *The Lower Depths* has been studied exclusively in terms of formal, aesthetic challenges mastered by Kurosawa in his transformation of a piece of theatre into a piece of cinema.

Richie praised the film’s camerawork as ‘a *coup de théâtre*’ for its elaborately unobtrusive way of bringing across the philosophical subtlety of Gorky’s dialogue (1984: 132). Sumie Jones discussed the director’s work with actors in relation to *shingeki*, the Japanese modern theatre movement, whose debt to the realism of the Stanislavsky method has been strongly associated with the history of Gorky performances in Japan. Jones proposed that Kurosawa’s cinematic adaptation of Gorky be understood as the director’s ‘declaration as a new sort of *shingeki* director – one with cameras’ (1986: 181). James Goodwin addressed the quality of detachment in the director’s visual rendition of Gorky’s dialogue scenes in terms of ‘a precept of the fifteenth-century Noh master Zeami, that of “watching with a detached gaze”’ (1994: 97–100).

In the long run, the framework of ‘film as theatre’, within which all these insights into the elements of Kurosawa’s aesthetics have been gained, became so firmly ingrained that *The Lower Depths* turned into a singular blind spot of Kurosawa scholarship. By seemingly obviating the need for any alternative perspective, it left the film untouched by the new approaches that had started making their way in recent studies of Japanese cinema. In Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto’s *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (2000), where Kurosawa figures as ‘a logical choice for an intense critical scrutiny and rethinking of the disciplinary formation and configuration of Japanese cinema studies’ (2000: 3), *The Lower Depths* constitutes a conspicuous exception to the author’s demand for a new methodology.

In Yoshimoto’s book, Kurosawa’s film still preserves its received status as ‘another innovative model for the adaptation of theater to film’ to be approached as just ‘another attempt by Kurosawa to reexamine the modern history of Japanese theater and its interrelationship with the formation of Japanese cinema’ because, as the author argues, ‘Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* was a major repertoire piece of a type of modern Japanese theater called *shingeki*’ (2000: 270–71). Similarly, see Stuart Galbraith’s *The Emperor and the Wolf* where the author describes the film even more radically as ‘a faithful and effectively adapted work that has little in the way of cinematic flourishes and instead, by its own design, is more like a record of the performance of a
play'. Galbraith sees in Kurosawa’s multiple-camera technique a precursor of Electronovision, a videotape-to-film technology used ‘to record what was an actual theatrical performance’ (2001: 244).

The emancipation of Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths* from the theatrical patronage of Gorky has not yet begun. And that for a good reason: If taken out of the familiar context of theatrical adaptation, as in Catherine Russell’s *Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited* (2011), *The Lower Depths* appears to be a film about which there is not much to say beyond its being just another example of ‘Kurosawa’s ideology of humanism’ (2011: 88). Therefore, inclusion of Kurosawa’s film into the agenda of critics who, like Russell herself, advocate for ‘situating classical Japanese cinema within a more historical and geopolitical framework, augmenting art–historical methods with more sociopolitical approaches to cinema as a cultural practice’ (2011: 2) is the basic precondition for a meaningful re-visioning of the film.

Kurosawa’s adaptation of Gorky testifies to a much more complicated picture of the director’s participation in the cultural politics of post-war Japan, if approached on the methodological premises that Yoshimoto set out for ‘any serious reexamination of Kurosawa’s authorship’, that is by way of opening up the autobiographical space of Kurosawa’s interest in western and Japanese theatre and ‘introducing various kinds of context and history that are excluded from this space’ (Yoshimoto 2000: 68). The context that has been so far excluded from the critical discussion of *The Lower Depths* is the context of post-war Japan and Kurosawa’s own films of the 1950s that dealt in various more or less oblique ways with the aftermath of nationalism and militarism while overtly celebrating the US-induced project of democratization.

In the context of late-1950s national reconstruction, Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths* stands out above all as a film that addresses one of the major ideological problems in post-occupation Japan – the emergent tendency to shy away from realistic representations of beggars in the medium of photography. This reticence did not extend to fiction films or musicals including romanticized and stylized representations of post-war poverty, but aimed specifically at photographs of actual homeless, destitute victims of wartime bombings and displacement, who still haunted the public spaces of big cities as painful reminders of Japan’s defeat. The historian John W. Dower has shown how the whole new category of ‘improper’ people, such as victims of atom bombings, battle-shocked ex-soldiers, orphaned street urchins, poor war widows and homeless refugees, were placed by the war outside ‘proper’ society. These persons carried the stigma of Japanese military disgrace and were shunned as social outcasts (Dower 1999: 61).

The relevance of this post-war context for Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths* has been pointed out before. Sumie Jones noticed that Kurosawa’s film was visually codified so as to appeal to the Japanese audience’s emotional memory of war (1986: 194). And according to Thomas Rimer, the Japanese critic Satô Tadao observed that the film

> reveals a complex vision, combining the film-maker’s desire to record the nihilism evident in the Gorky original while suggesting as well his response to what he took to be a similar moral and economic confusion that existed during the decade that followed the end of the Pacific War.

(Rimer 2000: 2)

Taking these observations as a point of departure, this article argues that the film’s allusions to the war were the very reason why critics of the time objected to in the cited passages in Satô’s book. Satô mentions the relevance of the post-war context for the audience’s identification with the gangster and bandit characters in *Drunken Angel* and *Rashômon* in the confusion of the post-war (Satô 1969: 215). I thank Takeda Arata for verifying the source.
to Kurosawa’s ‘negative’ attitude (Richie 1984: 133). *The Lower Depths* carried too much of recognizable recent history represented too brazenly against the grain of ideological constraints emerging within the cultural establishment of post-occupation Japan. It was doubtless this criticism that provoked the director’s ‘this was not me but Gorky’ defense, which sent his film off on a path of theater-bound critical reception. The more the living memories of the war generation faded and the institutional suppression of the cultural memory of war progressed, the larger loomed Gorky’s shadow.

In his conversation with Donald Richie in 1960, Kurosawa admitted that his films could be ‘liked’ only by viewers ignorant of Japanese history; moreover that such ignorance was precisely what he expected while making his films:

You know, one of the reasons that foreigners might like my films is that I really think of my audience as being the young Japanese. I really make my films for people in their twenties – and these kids don’t know anything about Japan and Japaneseness, really. Oh, they will, in time. But not now. When they see my films, they aren’t expected to know anything beforehand. With most Japanese films you have to know the whole story or it doesn’t make any sense. But, I’m Japanese, all right. Oh, I’m truly Japanese.

(Cardullo 2008: 8)

In what follows below, we will attempt to decipher Kurosawa’s message about Japan and Japaneseness in *The Lower Depths*, the message that he expected the young generation to receive ‘in time’ while meanwhile putting it circumspectly into an envelope issued in Gorky’s name.

‘NEVER AVERT ONE’S EYES’: BEGGAR PHOTOGRAPHY AND KUROSAWA’S GORKY

In a 1976 interview with Judy Stone about his work on *Dersu Uzala* (1975) in the Soviet Union, Kurosawa talked about the influence that Russian literature exercised on him and his generation. According to Stone’s report, the director admitted that ‘[f]or him, the novels of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev were guideposts on how artists should search for the realities beneath the surface of life and “never avert one’s eyes from them”’ (Cardullo 2008: 161). What was it that Kurosawa might have learnt from Gorky in 1957 not to avert his eyes from? What realities did Gorky help him search for beneath the surface of Japanese life at that moment in history?

It is not without significance that Kurosawa turned to Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* when the post-occupation cultural establishment had suddenly changed its attitude towards photographic representation of post-war social distress. During the American and Allied occupation of Japan of 1945–1952, photographic representations of beggars and war-inflicted destruction were common, and even popular. The photography of poverty and post-war destitution came to constitute the core of what was perceived as the photographic realism. Only with the end of American censorship, which aimed primarily at cultural representations compromised by nationalism and militarism, did the post-war beggars become unwelcome in the public media.

The historian of Japanese post-war photography, Julia A. Thomas, showed how in 1953, the year following the end of the American censorship, a debate
on the politics of representation broke out in the pages of the influential photo magazine *Camera*. This debate was provoked by the famous realist wartime photographer Domon Ken, who since January 1950 served as one of the judges for the magazine’s monthly amateur photo contests. Domon lashed out against amateur photographers who took pictures of begging war invalids, vagrants, back-alley prostitutes and street urchins – that is, all those ‘improper’ people displaced and made homeless and destitute by war. His outburst was especially remarkable because Domon was regarded as a founding father of photographic realism, and it was his own work that until that point ‘had inspired thousands to venture forth to capture the desolation of Japan’s post-war street life’ (Thomas 2008: 372–73). In 1953, all of a sudden, Domon declared these images to be ‘lacking reality’ and invited realist photographers to focus on images of beauty instead.

Thomas noticed that in the ensuing controversy on what came to be called ‘beggar photography’ (*kojiki shashin*) and the nature of photographic realism, all participants, established photographers and photography critics alike, despite their very different opinions about the representation of beggars and their radically divergent political positions, were nevertheless conspicuously unanimous in avoiding any reference to images of Japanese post-war destitution. Most importantly, in the course of the debate, Domon developed a normative standard for amateur photographers according to which ‘objectivity’ of representation was considered a flaw that would disqualify photographs from publication.

Thomas reports how Domon initially refused to publish an amateur picture of a maimed war veteran begging in the snow, and then developed his aesthetic theory on the basis of this rejection. When Domon finally reproduced

![Figure 1: Ogawa Kojiro, Shōisha (Maimed), Camera, August 1953.](image)

the image under public pressure, he offered it only as a negative example of framing that should be avoided for its lack of reality. What accounted for this lack – paradoxically – was its character as a record of a mere fact, which made
it into a ‘haunting’ image that Domon claimed to be unable to put out of his mind (Thomas 2008: 382–83).

Domon argued that reality was always an emotional reality, and the emotional meaning of an image was implicit in different types of framing. Tight framing, he insisted, must be avoided as ‘objective’. Only the types of framing that relate a figure to space in a way that makes the photographic image conform to a recognizable visual genre are acceptable because they make its content readable in terms of an emotion. If the photo of a begging veteran had been framed so as to conform to the genre of portraititure, it would be acceptable as a representation of sadness; or if it had been framed as a landscape, it would be acceptable as a representation of loneliness (Thomas 2008: 384–86). Domon’s aesthetic normativity was effectively imposing a censorship on realistic representation and inviting a practice of visual escapist.

In the course of this debate, which reverberated through many other photo magazines throughout the second half of the 1950s, photographic realism came to be defined not as a style of representation but as a discursive practice, which was to establish in the first place what reality was (Thomas 2008: 369). This reality, as Thomas’ analysis suggests, was the wishful future-oriented reality of a prosperous, reconstructed Japan.

The self-imposed virtual taboo on the representation of beggars, initiated by the Japanese cultural establishment, appears to conform to the interest of the Japanese administration ‘in both maintaining the fiction of their success in the war and protecting their kokutai, or national polity’ (Kushner 2006: 157). Realistic photographs of iconic losers interfered with both objectives. The effort to suppress these images echoes the ‘linguistic acrobatics’ used by the Japanese officials in replacing the word haisen, ‘defeat’, with shu-sen, ‘end of war’, in post-war political discourse. Both were practiced in order to ‘diffuse responsibility for the war, obscure its goals, and evade the reasons why Japan lost’ (Kushner 2006: 157–58).

If asked in this context, the question why Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* mattered in 1957 Japan becomes relatively easy: Gorky’s play is about a group of beggars in a homeless shelter who all look back with narcissism at their better past, hope for a better life, but do not know a way out. The play as a whole raises the question of what is the better strategy for overcoming distress – a blunt confrontation with the facts or a hope-inspiring illusion. The content of Gorky’s play seems to fit perfectly the discourse of the time on the nature of realism.

Even though Gorky’s name is often associated with the communist stance, the development of his work and thinking had been more complex. So was his reception in Japan. The early Gorky, the creator of such cynical characters as the tradesman Mayakin in the novel *Фома Гордеев*/*Foma Gordeyev* (1899), was received as a Russian counterpart to Nietzsche (Rekho 1965: 40–43). As the author of the socialist novel *The Mother* (1907), Gorky was programmatically celebrated in the 1920s by the proletarian literary movement around the journal *Tane-maku Hito* (“The sower”) (Shea 1964: 76). But his pre-revolutionary, existentialist play *The Lower Depths* was famous in Japan above all for its close association with the aesthetic of critical realism and was performed alongside the pessimistic dramas of Chekhov, to which it is indeed very close in sensibility.

Kurosawa’s stated commitment to the ‘search for the realities beneath the surface of life’ and ‘never averting one’s eyes’ with the novels of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev as guideposts sounds like a topos of the Marxist literary criticism pursued with the most theoretical acumen by Georg Lukács, who famously criticized modernist writers for their failure ‘to pierce the surface’ of immediate, subjective experience in order ‘to discover the underlying essence,
i.e. the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them’ (Lukács 2001: 1040).

To this modernist failure of representing reality, Lukács opposed the tradition of realist literature. His wartime books *Studies in European Realism* and *Der Russische Realismus in der Weltliteratur* (“Russian realism in world literature”) with chapters on the critical realism of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and on Gorky were translated into Japanese in 1954. In these writings, Lukács defined critical realism as a mode of representation that is characterized by objectivity and social typicality and by a critical and omniscient narrative distance from the represented world, which allows the reader to draw objective conclusions, to see through the characters’ historical and social situation, which they cannot see themselves from their limited individual perspective. This is also the method of Lukács’ literary analysis. He approached literature as a representation of historical forces at work in society and interrogated aesthetic forms as expressions of social content.

Most importantly, Lukács interpreted the victory of the Soviet Union in World War II as a testimony to the ideological superiority of the Russian critical realism of the nineteenth century over the aesthetic of ‘Western decadence’ and called for the post-war revival of the Russian realist tradition, which he invested with the political potential to take on a new edifying function of democratizing and spiritually transforming nations recovering from fascism (Lukács 1952: 9). Not coincidentally, his book on Russian realism found the most resonance through its post-war translations into German and Japanese.

Gorky’s association with the tradition of critical realism is most pronounced in his close collaboration with Stanislavsky who applied to theatre the principles of objective representation developed in the nineteenth-century novel. Stanislavsky’s theory of the ‘fourth wall’, famous for its focus on absolute verisimilitude in *mise-en-scène* and acting, sets the viewers in a position of omniscience regarding the action on-stage so that they can objectively survey the characters’ situation and deliver judgment about the dramatic conflict in the context of the whole, without identifying with any particular personage.

Gorky wrote his play *The Lower Depths* specifically for Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theater. Moreover, while working on his drama with Stanislavsky’s method in mind, the writer relied closely on photographic realism, even commissioning a photographer in Nizhny Novgorod to take pictures of local beggars in order to have convincing, realistic prototypes for his characters. Later, Gorky shared these photographs with Stanislavsky by way of assisting the director’s work on the performance (Gorkiı 1970: 612). *The Lower Depths*, first produced in Japan in 1910, was one of the most important foreign channels through which the legendary theatre director Osanai Kaoru first introduced realism to the Japanese theatrical stage. Successive revivals of this play have indexed and helped to develop the realistic style of Japanese modern theatre ever since (Jones 1986: 178–79).

In an interview with Bert Cardullo, Kurosawa spoke about objectivity, psychological depth and revealing nakedness of Dostoevsky’s novels, pointing out the representational features of critical realism which equally characterize Gorky’s pre-revolutionary dramas:

On the whole, he [Dostoevsky] is – how should I say – more psychological than visual. At the same time that he deepens characters and action through psychology, this author strives for surface representation that is
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rigorously objective. It is an objectivity that is total, even fatal, in that it attempts to present everything nakedly. But nakedness, if you will, can still be put into images. For this reason I was led to adapt Dostoyevsky to the screen, but the effort was a veritable battle that left me exhausted.

(Cardullo 2008: 179)

But Kurosawa’s words also help understand how the director’s cinematic adaptation of Gorky could be conceived as a compensation for the visual challenge posed by Dostoevsky. *The Lower Depths*, which shared Dostoevsky’s theme of a good man coming into the world of misery and failing to help or redeem it, offered a significant representational advantage over Dostoevsky by being more visual and compact.

If judged in terms of the philosophical and psychological dialogism described by Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Lower Depths* might be Gorky’s most Dostoevskian play. In carnivalesque fashion, it brings together in a night asylum destitute people of very different social strata, age, gender and even religious persuasion. Every theme of the play (desire for truth, entrapment of self-deception, illusory pride of self-fashioning) finds its polyphonic expression through multiple voices, always reemerging with a different existential accent. Positioned in a social limbo between their more determined past and their vagrant, up-rooted present, the characters constantly try to put on some air of dignity in front of each other, only to be denigrated and ridiculed in turn by their fellows. This spectacle of ‘crowning’ and ‘de-crowning’ accounts for the play’s tragi-comic atmosphere.

It is significant that Kurosawa cut out of Gorky’s play the famous monologue of Satin, celebrating the belief in human dignity and proudly rejecting deceptive illusionism: ‘How marvelous is Man! How proud the word rings – MAN! A man should be respected. Not pitied – pity is degrading’ (Gorky 1978: 309). This programmatic monologue, voicing the authorial position by way of a radical counterpoint to everything that the play has actually represented, made the drama highly popular in Japan, even though for different reasons, in both the pre-war and war periods. The omission of this monologue in the post-war context drained Gorky’s play of its one moment of transcendent optimism – the very optimism that had informed the grandiose human endeavours of the first half of the century, all of which by 1957 ended in defeat.

In his treatment of post-occupation Japanese society in *The Lower Depths*, Kurosawa seized upon the Dostoevskian jarring honesty, if not brutality, implicit in Gorky’s dismantling of the last defenses that sustain the protagonists. The scene where the thief rejects the pilgrim’s sentimental tune is most telling in this respect. Shortly upon his arrival at the shelter, the pilgrim starts humming a soulful folksong. The thief gets visibly irritated and shouts at the pilgrim to stop. In Gorky, this scene is a rejection of weakening sentimentality. Kurosawa’s choice of the tune makes this rejection even more charged in the context of post-war Japan. His pilgrim intones a legendary Buddhist chant about the tormented souls of the dead children whose parents do not mourn them:

This is the tale of the Riverbank of Sai –
The lonely limbo for children’s souls,
Nested beneath mountains in the netherworld.
Just to hear it wrings the heart.

(Kôbô 1996: 67)
From their limbo, the children call back to their parents asking them to perform the mourning rituals on their behalf. With their calls unanswered, they start erecting their own stone monuments in place of their parents, which will only be destroyed by the Devil so that the children’s efforts are fruitless and endless like those of Sisyphus. The pilgrim’s robe marked with the words ‘Osaka cemetery’ additionally corroborates the theme of the homeless shelter as a place of the undead. Offering a musical counterpoint in the manner of Kurt Weill’s songs in Bertolt Brecht’s Threepenny Opera, the pilgrim’s interrupted tune provides a comment on the situation of war victims who, stigmatized as ‘improper’ people, were abandoned and forgotten by their own country.

The tune’s sentimental reputation in Japanese culture is also such that Kōbō Abe parodied its merciless commercial exploitation as a tearjerker by making it into a means of fundraising for the devil children in his 1991 novel Kangaroo Notebook, which portrays the protagonist’s journey through hell. The thief’s rejection of the tune mirrors Kurosawa’s rejection of Domon’s request for sentimental truth, such as the pilgrim tries to offer. Sentimental truth of this kind was still present in Kurosawa’s Hakuchi/The Idiot (1951), where in the epilogue of the film the tearful heroine Ayako appears to acknowledge the efforts of a good man and to bemoan his failure. With the change of political context and his turn to Gorky, Kurosawa abandoned such fact-transcending sentimentality, staging the rejection of the pilgrim’s tune as a self-reflexive moment of his film’s critical realism: it will aim, rather, to represent hell as hell.

‘BENEATH THE SURFACE OF LIFE’: BEGGER CINEMA AND KUROSAWA’S TOKUGAWA

Kurosawa set his version of The Lower Depths in Edo (Tokyo) at the end of the Tokugawa period (1860–1868) and gave his characters Japanese names and identities. This turned Gorky’s modern play into a period drama (jidai-geki) (Cardullo 2008: 14), the genre prohibited under the occupation for its association with the feudalistic values of militarism (Hirano 1992: 66–70). In his 1960 conversation with Donald Richie, the director explained his motivation as an attempt at using modern cinema in service of a historically informed picture: ‘I have long thought that the Japanese jidai picture is very often historically uninformed, and, beyond this, has never really availed itself of modern film-making techniques’ (Cardullo 2008: 14).

Richie suggested that the historic transplantation of Gorky’s play was ‘ironic’ because the Tokugawa period was famous for its prosperity and rich popular culture, which provided Japan with its most cherished national icons of kabuki actors, samurai warriors and sumo wrestlers (Richie 1984: 125). Kurosawa’s engagement with ‘Edo-memory’, like any other, was refracted through the prism of modernity (Gluck 1998: 262). Without ignoring the political complexity of the possible usages of ‘Edo’ in the postwar Japan, Kurosawa’s particular focus on the iconography of post-war destitution makes the usurpation of the ‘Edo’ cultural icons by the twentieth century’s nationalism and militarism especially relevant for this film. For example, the samurai culture had been re-appropriated for the purpose of cultivating the code of personal loyalty to the emperor. At the beginning of the century, one could see Japanese army officers posing in ornate traditional samurai garments for photographs used for the purposes of militarist propaganda (Daugherty 2002: 8).

In the Pacific War, Kabuki theatre was exploited to provide reenactments of the recent battles: these functioned as entertaining news reports and as a means
of keeping up the morale of the population. Plays with titles like Three Heroic Human Bombs (March 1932) or Reborn in Bombing (September 1937) were sometimes written and rehearsed overnight as an accompaniment to Japan’s military expansion throughout Asia (Brandon 2009: 2–6). Sumo wrestlers were involved with the military education of Japanese school children (Daugherty 2002: 20). Kurosawa’s choice of a historical setting that had once notoriously fed into an aggressive and ultimately self-destructive national narcissism appears to be not just ironic but political, especially if one considers that Gorky’s play allowed Kurosawa to make this setting into a décor for another topic prohibited under the occupation – anti-social behaviour, ‘such as suicide, gambling, murder, black-marketeering, prostitution, and petty crime’ (Hirano 1992: 74).

Freed from constrains of censorship, Kurosawa includes among his beggars a former samurai, a former kabuki actor and a sumo wrestler (Kurosawa cast an actual sumo wrestler with no prior acting experience for the role of the Tatar). The ex-samurai is a pimp. The ex-actor is an alcoholic. The sumo wrestler portrays a day labourer who ends up as an invalid after being injured at work. His arm is swollen to gigantic proportions, suggesting that he is about to lose the limb. The rest of the group, besides several bankrupted craftsmen, includes a thief, a gambler, a widowed peddler woman and a prostitute. All of them, drunk and dressed in rags, engage in gambling, begging, whoring and drunken orgies in a way that recalls the underworld sequence of Nora inu/Stray Dog (Kurosawa, 1949), which portrays an undercover policeman, disguised as a vagrant war veteran, strolling through the lower depths of the post-war Tokyo.

Kurosawa’s Tokugawa version of the lower depths also offers a full display of murder, suicide, theft, ugly jealousy fights and nervous breakdowns. Though the depiction of oppressed down-and-out underdogs was not uncommon for drama of the time, the characters’ period costumes are so torn and dirty that their appearance loses its historical specificity, merging easily with that of contemporary beggars, those destitute, deranged, injured veterans, who were perceived as losers, and especially despised because ‘[t]heir unkempt appearance seemed a mockery of the heroic ideals and imagery that has saturated wartime propaganda’ (Dower 1999: 59).

Figure 2: The Lower Depths: Kurosawa’s Samurai. Compare to Figure 1.
The homeless shelter, transformed into an Edo-period dwelling, undergoes the same updating in terms of post-war iconography as the beggars' outfit. In the documentary Kurosawa Akira: Tsukuru to iu koto wa subarashii/Akira Kurosawa: It's Wonderful To Create (Okamoto, 2002), the film’s art director Muraki Yoshiro tells how Kurosawa introduced a dramatic 30° tilt to Muraki’s first design for the building, which was executed on the basis of historical photographs and reconnaissance of the architectural remnants in Tokyo. Like the worn and torn fabric of dirty costumes, diagonals and tilted lines inscribe the iconography of the recent war into the historical matrix of Tokugawa times, rendering the past in terms of the present and opening the present onto the past.

Some elements of the backyard *mise-en-scène* can be found, for example, in a historic photograph of Hiroshima after bombing: in the background, a crater-like wall, with its soil laid open behind destroyed stone fortifications; on the top, a wire fence, dead trees with exposed roots, a broken ruin of a Christian cathedral; and on the very bottom, covered with rubble, shacks of homeless survivors living on bare essentials. Others convey the visual history of war: the spatiality of the

*Figure 3: The Lower Depths. The war iconography of the backyard mise-en-scène.*

*Figure 4: Hiroshima after the Atomic bombing.*

*Figure 5: World War II military underground hospital. Compare to Figure 13.*
prolonged, dark, tunnel-like interior of the shelter, with bunks on the side, was very well known to the Japanese of that time from their experience with either military underground hospitals on the front lines or bomb shelters at home.

The comical scene in which the Landlady upbraids the crazy youth for spreading gossip about her love life uses an eerie iconographic reference to the trials of young right-wing terrorists in the 1930s who had been involved in the assassination of the liberal members of the government, perceived as not sufficiently supportive of militarization and Japanese expansion throughout the Asia Pacific region. Kurosawa silently morphs historical snapshots of collective memory into a dense iconographic texture laying bare the collective subconscious and exposing on the cinematic screen just what Japanese society was trying to forget.

Figure 6: The pandemonium scene in The Lower Depths.

Figure 7: The bombing of Kobe.

In pursuit of this goal, Kurosawa invited the famous rakugo master Kokontei Shinshô to join his actors on the set during rehearsals. Rakugo is an art of comically nonchalant solo narration about simple folk of the Tokugawa period. Rakugo narrators are trained to speak and act like their characters and are even expected to incorporate their traits in their own life. Jones discussed this production episode as Kurosawa’s effort to reinforce the Edo atmosphere of his film because ‘[h]aving Shinshô on the set would be equal to bringing a piece of real life from one hundred years earlier’ (Jones 1986: 185).

Shinshô was indeed a colorful figure ‘who loved the red-light districts and loved Japanese liquor even more. It is said like a true resident of Tokyo he never let the sun shine on his day’s earnings and changed his names sixteen times in a bid to evade creditors’ (Kushner 2006: 113). But Shinshô was also regarded as the major figure in rakugo during the peak time of nationalism and militarism. He was directly involved with the Japanese entertainment industry’s efforts to fire up the troops at the end of the war. The historian of Japanese propaganda, Barack Kushner, quotes Shinshô’s joking boast ‘that when the war got worse and the Allies began dropping bombs, the worst part was the lack of decent alcohol’ (Kushner 2006: 114).
In May 1945, Shinsho-, along with another famous rakugo master Sanyû-tei Enshô, signed two-month contracts for entertaining the imperial troops in Manchuria. They ended up stuck in the region during the tumult of the Soviets entering the war and could not return until January 1947 (Kushner 2006: 113). In his 1969 memoir Binbo jiman (“In praise of poverty”), Shinsho- depicted the atmosphere of panic in the pandemonium of fleeing Manchuria, jam-packed trains, the Chinese seaport city of Dalian crawling with Japanese refugees (Kushner 2006: 113). His presence on the set conveyed precisely that mixture of Japanese traditional culture’s compromise with militarism and experience of defeat that Kurosawa was aiming at with his morphing iconographies of the Pacific War, Edo and tragi-comic acting style.

Kurosawa knew well what realities he was searching to reveal beneath the surface of Japanese reconstruction, for he too had participated in the country’s compromising past. His wartime films for Toho Studios fully complied with the ‘final battle’ (kessen) standards, which the entertainment industry, mirroring military rhetoric, adopted in March 1944 (Kushner 2006: 113). Kurosawa’s militarist film Ichiban utsukushiku/The Most Beautiful (1944) is about the mobilization of young women working in the home-front industry of optics (a gun-sight factory) in the last year of the war. In its ideological excess, this piece of propaganda can proudly stand next to such classics of the genre as Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph des Willens/Triumph of the Will (1935) or Sergei Eisenstein’s Стачка/Strike (1925). His two other films, Tora no o wo fumu otokotachi/The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail (Kurosawa, 1945) and Sanshiro Sugata (Kurosawa, Part I, 1943; Part II, 1945) are perfect examples of the co-optation of kabuki and martial arts for wartime entertainment. All Kurosawa’s wartime films were banned under the American occupation (Hirano 1992: 29–33).

The only difference that distinguishes Kurosawa’s involvement with militarism from that of the rest of the cultural establishment is his public denunciation of this involvement and a confession of guilt, which he articulated in his autobiography:

I offered no resistance to Japan’s militarism. Unfortunately, I have to admit that I did not have the courage to resist in any positive way, and
I only got by, ingratiating myself when necessary and otherwise evading censure. I am ashamed of this, but I must be honest about it. Because of my conduct, I can’t very well put on self-righteous airs and criticize what happened during the war.

(Kurosawa 1982: 145)

Kurosawa’s radical honesty about his own involvement allowed him to reinvent himself as a democratic film director after the war. The exploration of the militarist past remained, however, a topic that could be approached only underhandedly and via foreign sources. The removal of post-war censorship strictures on period drama freed Kurosawa to be maximally subversive by providing a vehicle for a reflection on the past. The literary adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth in Throne of Blood (Kurosawa, 1957) explored the problem of militarism and relentless greed for power as the cause of the total devastation of a feudal stronghold, and was meaningfully followed by the adaptation of Gorky where the aftermath of devastation could be seen in its full material and psychological scope.

Kurosawa not only stylized his fiction film, The Lower Depths, in terms of the realist war and post-war photography but also chose to frame his film in the tight format, the very format censured by Domon Ken for its alleged objectivity (compare Figures 1 and 2). In this way Kurosawa invented a ‘beggar cinema’, visually revealing a logical connection between the appropriation of the Tokugawa period for militarist propaganda and contemporary Japanese misery. Merging Tokugawa iconography with the iconography of militarism, war, right-wing extremism and defeat in an adaptation of Gorky exposed layers of meaning and history under the surface of beggarly reality, shedding light on the reasons why Japan lost.

**IN THE PIT OF WAR: AREN’T WE ALL BEGGARS?**

The Lower Depths opens with a slow pan that moves along the torn edges of a large, deep pit reminiscent of the craters left behind by the bombings. It seems to be a low-angle point-of-view shot from the perspective of somebody down below scrutinizing the sky, an anxious, uneasy memory in any postwar setting, and especially so in post-atom-bomb Japan. Above, there are dead trees, wire fence, walls of a rundown temple, dark as if covered with soot, or with the smoke of recent explosions. Below are the decrepit roofs of sheds where people live a life reduced to its bare minimum. Soon, however, one learns that the camera is poised at the height of the roofs, too high a position to be claimed by any character in the film. It is an establishing shot circumscribing the setting of the film in a pit of war, but it invites the viewer to adopt the camera’s omniscient perspective as his own. This opening pan, masked as an extra-diegetic one behind the opening credits, is Kurosawa’s only addition to Gorky.

The camera stops to show the two distant figures of temple acolytes who throw old foliage over the edge of the pit upon the roof of the shelter. They mistake a dwelling below for a heap of trash, being blind or oblivious of the human beings who are struggling to survive at the very bottom. This reference to the homeless as trash locates the film within the hermeneutic horizon of the debate on ‘beggar photography’, which would be familiar to the viewers of the time. Moreover, it harks back to one of the last shots in Kurosawa’s earlier film about post-war Japan Subarashiki nichijōbi/One Wonderful Sunday (1947), where a couple of destitute lovers perch on a bench at the train station next to a waste container with the word ‘trash’ written on it in big English letters and positioned as if it were a caption to their image.
The message of the 1947 film was however fully in the spirit of the optimistic representation called for in the 1953 debate. The film portrays one Sunday that the ex-soldier Yuzo and his fiancée Masako spend in post-war Tokyo. Plagued by poverty, the couple can afford neither coffee nor concert. After a series of misfortunes and emotional ups and downs, the lovers end up in an abandoned amphitheatre amidst the ruins of the bombed city, where they pretend-play a performance of Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony*. The power of imagination is linked to the theme of ‘liberation’ (Bourdagh 2012: 26–27). It helps the couple overcome despair and maintain their sense of dignity. The film’s message is unambiguous: even if their poverty reduces the lovers to the status of trash in the Japanese society, their belief in a better future and power of imagination optimistically defy this stigma.

*One Wonderful Sunday* was made at the time when Kurosawa was embarked on the post-war project of learning for himself, and also teaching his countrymen, what constituted freedom and democracy: ‘The freedom and democracy of the post-war era were not things I fought for and won; they were granted to me by powers beyond my own’ (Kurosawa 1982: 145). His cinema under the American occupation of 1945–1952 played precisely the role which, according to Thomas, photography in general played under the unsettled conditions of post-war Japan. It was neither art nor documentary but a form of discursive practice, which was expected to define what reality was (Thomas 2008: 369, 390).

Kurosawa defined what the reality should be in his first programmatic post-war film *Waga seishun ni kuinashi/No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), where he connected the task of reconstruction to the revival of the democratic heritage of Japanese political dissent suppressed under militarism. The series of films that followed were indeed neither art nor documentary. Rather, they functioned as cinematic versions of the Brechtian ‘Lehrstück’, delivering lessons in the challenges and duties of democratic citizenship, showing what constitutes a good doctor (*Yoidore tenshi/Drunken Angel*, 1948), a good policeman (*Stray Dog*, 1949), a good lawyer (*Scandal*, 1950), a good civil servant (*Ikiru*, 1952). To these differentiated examples, *One Wonderful Sunday* was
a general foil, making the moral perseverance of the middle class into the cornerstone of reconstruction.

The film offers a picture of a society stratified along money lines. The girls in mink coats, the topos of wealth and beauty in post-war Japan, stand for luxury. However, suggesting that this luxury was achieved mostly through organized crime and black marketeering, Kurosawa makes his characters reject these harbingers of Japan’s future economic prosperity, even though they might be the icons of a wishful reality to which the country collectively aspired. The middle-class lovers equally reject another extreme, represented by Kurosawa’s cinematic counterpart to ‘beggar photography’ – the scene with a street urchin who confronts the couple asking them for a bun. The homeless hungry child, eight or ten years of age, does not beg, however, but pulls out a wad of money and is ready to buy their bun from the couple for double the price.

His ragged, dirty appearance is so shocking to Masako that she gives him her bun for free. When the couple tries to talk to the urchin and find out something about him, he is not forthcoming, turns his back on his benefactors and shushes up the ex-soldier with the resentful words: ‘You, ex-soldier, don’t talk big, you are not better than anyone else’. There is no hope for a better life in the child’s coarseness and cynicism. Even though he might be far better off financially than the impoverished middle-class couple, his image represents a futureless disillusionment.

Kurosawa engages in a three-minute study of this phenomenon, showing the urchin in a variety of shot formats, from several sides and angles. Like a nightmarish vision, the beggar appears in a foggy long shot at a distance, approaches to address the couple, turns away to eat the bun, and finally chews it in an extreme close-up. The only way of dealing with this vision is to shake it off, Kurosawa suggests, which Masako also does quite literally after a moment of sentimental turmoil.

It is between these two extremes of absolute poverty and utter luxury that the middle-class couple’s sentimental education takes its course. When at the beginning of the film Yuzo was ready to pick up a cigarette butt from the floor in the train station and abandon himself to the condition of a beggar, by the end of his Sunday journey, he squashes another unfinished cigarette butt at the same train station without reservations, thus asserting his restored sense of dignity, won not in the least through a confrontation with the phenomena of corrupt luxury and degrading destitution.

In 1957, in the context of what could be perceived as an uncanny reemergence of the narcissistic politics of national representation, which was to culminate in the controversial leveling of the Tokyo slums before the 1964 Olympics, this earlier film appeared in a different light. Under the conditions of ideological appropriation of photographic realism for the purposes of cleansing the reconstructed Japan of its unseemly past, including beggars, Kurosawa inverted the message of *One Wonderful Sunday*: what was just a three-minute beggar episode acquired over two hours of screen time, what was a portrayal of a social outcast turned into a portrayal of the whole society, and what was an invitation to forward-looking optimism turned into a critical representation of the trappings of a backward-looking escapism and blinding narcissism.

The logic of this inversion is characteristically articulated in Kurosawa’s post-occupation film *Ikimono no kiroku* / *I Live in Fear* (1955). The psychiatrist who is in charge of a paranoid patient haunted by fear of an atom bomb comes to question the sanity of the whole society, which seems to have forgotten too soon the reality behind the patient’s fear. The doctor says:
Whenever I see this patient, I become terribly depressed. This is the first time that’s happened to me. Of course, the insane are depressing to be around. That said … whenever I see him … I somehow feel … oddly anxious … even though I’m the one who’s supposed to be sane. Is he crazy? Or are we, who can remain unperturbed in an insane world, the crazy ones?

Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths* similarly puts in question the propriety of the whole society vis-à-vis the ‘improper people’, the beggars who interfere with the comfort of oblivion by reminding the rest of the national defeat, the historical fact against the foil of which all Japanese are beggars.

**THE LOWER DEPTHS AND THE FUTURE OF THE PAST**

Kurosawa’s words that ‘to be an artist means never to avert one’s eyes’ were recently featured as one of the mottos to an exhibition on the 1950s Japanese and western avant-garde, ‘Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962’, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (February–June 2013), curated by Paul Schimmel of MOCA, LA. The choice of the motto adventurously points to a common denominator between Kurosawa’s aesthetic of critical realism and the Japanese artistic rebellion of the 1950s, opening a new possibility of looking at both. In fact, the ideological hijacking of the notion of reality to which Kurosawa responded with *The Lower Depths* in 1957 also provoked the emergence of post-war Japanese avant-garde art with its mistrust of the deceptiveness of representation, its focus on matter instead of form, its cultivation of performance. Though critics usually do not align Kurosawa formally or ideologically with the Japanese avant-garde, Kurosawa’s iconography of matter and the logic of his camera work in *The Lower Depths* have astonishing points of resemblance with the performances of the early Gutai group (Tiampo and Munroe 2013: 144–45).

Consider a shot of the shelter’s interior from Kurosawa’s film and a work resulting from the first Gutai group exhibition in 1955. The Gutai piece features a large paper canvas with six torn holes, left behind after the artist Murakami Saburō had burst dramatically through three paper screens. The paper surface, smooth and flat at the first glance, turned out to be deceptive. The act of breaking through revealed its three-dimensional complex layers and opened

![Figure 11: Kurosawa’s iconography of matter in The Lower Depths.](image1)

![Figure 12: Murakami Saburō, Work (Six Holes).](image2)
the canvas onto a world behind it. Kurosawa’s *mise-en-scène* offers a similar iconography of matter: wooden partitions, broken paper and cloth, torn openings. In their fractured tactility, these surfaces betray multiple layered realities beneath them and yield views of receding enclaves.

Kurosawa’s *mise-en-scène* in *The Lower Depths* similarly exposes several layers of action. The camera works through them into depths, as if it were piercing holes in the space and matter. The gambling scene in the film is a perfect example of the camera’s radical performativity. This two-minute scene consists of 28 shots of different duration, presented from radically different angles. The scene starts with a high angle establishing shot of the shelter’s tilted interior, showing three groups of people, or three over-layered planes of being in deep focus. In the foreground, a dying woman is coughing badly. The pilgrim next to her is mending a shoe and talking with her in the intervals of her cough. In the middle ground behind them two craftsmen are playing a game. And in the background, six beggars are gambling. All of them are absorbed in their activities, entirely unaware of each other, or being only superficially in relation, whereas the viewer and the camera are surveying all of them at once from an omniscient perspective.

From the establishing shot Kurosawa jump-cuts right to the gambling group in the background while changing the camera angle by 45° so that it focuses on a player to the right. He continues clockwise, rhythmically showing one player per shot but from radically reversed perspectives: capturing one player from the back, as if looking over his shoulder, the next one from the front, as if confronting him from within the group. The camera angles continue shifting by 30° to 20°, as if reenacting the sharp angles and tilted lines of the shelter’s interior. The players start a syncopated, *bakayashi* folk tune, which parallels the rhythm of editing with its jazz-like repetition.

After one circle is complete, the tune breaks off. The camera captures the view of the tinker who watches the players but suddenly turns in the space in order to return to the middle plane and to watch another game. The tinker’s
Kurosawa Akira’s The Lower Depths

movement reflects the movement of the camera, justifying its communication with the middle plane. In fact, the camera retreats in front of him and takes in the group in the middle plane. Then he turns again and returns to the group in the background. The camera makes another round of gaming in a somewhat closer shot format and with a somewhat more agitated tune. The acting joins in to reinforce the radical changes in the camera angles. The players’ darting glances to left and right cross in the air. Finally, the camera stops, offering a reversed establishing shot of the same space from the opposite wall so that the pilgrim and the dying woman are now far in the background. The crossing beams behind them come into view, exposing a blueprint of the scene’s visual vertigo.

Kurosawa’s camera work does precisely what Murakami Saburō does in the Gutai performance: It breaks through the layers of this narrow, tunnel-like space, tears holes, breaks it into pieces, opening the planes of being onto each other and onto something else. Even though Kurosawa reassembles the broken pieces back into a totality of an omniscient view, this reassembling happens each time from a radically different vantage point. His camerawork’s destabilization and dissecting of the mise-en-scène in the end opens a critical perspective onto a space that seemed to be stable at the beginning and allows for cerebral conclusions about the shelter’s inhabitants, the causes of their misery, and the ways of their escapism. But Kurosawa also relies on the representational aspects of cinema to add layers of historical and social context to the Gutai group’s impulsiveness and matter-centered iconography.

In The Lower Depths, Kurosawa’s performative camera work joined with the art of photography to create a critically annotated repository for the collective memory of Japan’s defeat, effectively excluded from cultural institutions. The study of this visual heritage is only beginning. ‘Willed amnesia about wartime activities is a less plausible stance than it used to be, and indeed, […] “the question of responsibility for the war that ended half a century ago becomes more pressing for Japan” rather than less’ (Thomas 1998: 1487). The
emerging interest in recovery of the memories of war promises a new path of reception for Kurosawa’s beggar cinema with its deferred message about Japan at the disjuncture of times.

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Kurosawa Akira’s *The Lower Depths*


**SUGGESTED CITATION**


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