1. A Foreign Fool

"Film is a new art. Even I am not aware of all the possibilities it offers. In certain aspects of my approach to this art I am doubtless Japanese and it is apparent. But I think that this new art is not the continuations of a Japanese tradition".

Akira Kurosawa¹

_Ran_ is the embodiment of the 'otherness' in the playing of Shakespeare. Not only was this film directed by a Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa, not only was the film produced in a country on the other side of the world, not only is the language of the text 'foreign', not only is the setting for the action alien to the world of Shakespearian England, not only is the costume historically and geographically 'other' than English, not only are many of the characters different in gender to those in Shakespeare's text, and not only is the medium in which the text is encoded a twentieth century phenomenon, specifically bearing an oriental signature, but also... the Fool-figure is played by a Japanese transvestite pop singer!

Akira Kurosawa's 1985 film-text, _Ran_ ('Chaos'), is not _King Lear_, and is certainly not an occidental reading of _King Lear_. However, it is clearly a reading of Shakespeare's play in more than just a general sense. It is foregrounded by its foreign-ness² which makes it particularly useful in my study because the Fool's potential as a dramatic entity is integrated and redefined by Kurosawa in his deployment of a fool-figure, the character, Kyoami, Hidetora's court jester³.
The director recognises that his discourse does not rely on the playtext of *King Lear* for the construction of its voice but on the strengths of the medium of film. It is an approach evident in the general pattern of scripting which involves Kurosawa writing his own screenplays to his films, the characters only being allowed to speak when they can not communicate in any other way. Consequently, it is no surprise that the relationship with the *King Lear* playtexts is particularly distinctive. He said himself, “I had no wish for a literal transposition. I looked mainly for perspective”.

It is a perspective that is achieved to a great extent in the use of Peter as Kyoami, for in the jester that Hidetora keeps at his side, Kurosawa makes a specific reference to *King Lear*. The actor who plays the character is explicitly relocated in a discipline that is alien to his popular cultural role in the late-twentieth century. This produces a tension between differing fields of reference: *King Lear*, the discipline and conventions of Noh drama, the military turmoil of Japan’s past, and the cultural sign of Peter. Peter is appropriated by Kurosawa to construct a voice that transmutes Shakespeare’s words, re-shaping the Fool and representing him in a cinematic language to ‘defamiliarise’ the playtext of *King Lear*. It is an approach that one might explain in terms of the point in Kurosawa’s long and distinguished career when the film was made, *Ran* the expression of an ‘old age’ style in which the director does not feel the need to be ‘realistic’. The jester from *King Lear* is perhaps the most obvious evidence of this temper to the film.

“Sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace”

The shifts in both style and purpose during Kurosawa’s long and chequered career frame the specific deployment of Peter and suggest that certain elements of this director’s programme have not changed, Kurosawa’s movement to the making of *Ran* evident in the history of his career as a film director. The use of a contemporary entertainer to compound the associations generated by a
character in the film discourse illustrates this point. It is an approach used by Kurosawa in an early film in his canon, *Tor no o o fumu otokotachi* ('They who step on the tiger's tail'), made some forty years before the filming of *Ran*, in 1945.

Based on a Kabuki play, *Kanincho*, the plot of *Tor no o o fumu otokotachi* deals with the usurpation of feudal codes in order that a warrior and his servant may survive. The film was banned by the occupying American forces in deference to the culture of the defeated nation as the film appeared to champion feudalism. However, the casting in the film of a then famous contemporary comic actor, Enoken, as a servant served to advance Kurosawa's actual objective: to foreground the distance of the samurai ideals from the twentieth century audience, the comic serving as representative of those very spectators. Likewise, in *Ran*, Kurosawa foregrounds Shakespeare as culture and as cultural artefact, locating the spectator once again in relation to the action and to the protagonist, in this case Lear, by the signifying power generated through his casting of Peter as the old shogun's fool.

Kurosawa's films have, however, always contained a didactic element. The purpose that one might identify in the use of Peter in the larger discourse of *Ran* can also be traced to a common message that appears to run through his many influential works, namely to foreground the responsibility that man must take for his actions. The film that first brought the director international recognition, and that marked a breakthrough for the Japanese film industry in general, was his fourth film, *Rashomon*, gave expression to this view but also showed Kurosawa's ability to capture something of the tensions between Eastern and Western cultures and the specific historical position of Japan. The film expresses Kurosawa's humanism and sets that against the post-war imposition of Western definitions of reality. Kurosawa's purpose belies the dismissive and simplistic tag of maker of samurai films and for which, ironically, he has received much domestic criticism from his film industry peers. That *Rashomon* struck a chord in both Japanese and Western cinema and wrote
Kurosawa as ‘the most Western film maker’ was also deeply ironic given that his purpose was to redefine the cultural purpose of Japanese art and to use the Samurai past to articulate that discourse.

Less political in nature, Kurosawa's most famous film, *Shichinin no samurai* ('The seven samurai', 1954) - a text re-written by Hollywood as *The Magnificent Seven* - continues to give expression to the director's belief in the power of individuals to 'make a difference', even those of lowly birth. The humble element of the Japanese social order is represented by Kikuchiyo, the son of a peasant farmer, who helps the eponymous samurai warriors to defeat the evil bandits, claiming the right to do good by pretending to be a samurai too. Like Enoken, and later, Peter as Kyoami, this character's behaviour works with the samurai code to generate comment about the director's belief both in the power of mankind, and its often frustrating unwillingness to grasp that responsibility.

While successful, *Shichinin no samurai* was, however, expensive to produce and marked another of the characteristics of Kurosawa's relationship with the Japanese film industry: its unwillingness to bankroll his often spectacular and thereby, costly productions, an obvious irony given that this struggle for funding should have taken place when Japan was one of the richest and most technologically advanced nations in the world. The expense of *Shichinin no samurai* contributed directly to the difficulty that Kurosawa had in making both of his *jidai-geki* movies ('period picture', *gendai-mono* being 'modern story' films), *Kumonoso jo* and *Ran*. Toho Films that had produced the film had become very wary of Kurosawa's suggestions for projects because *Shichinin no samurai* had exceeded budget, and as in *Ran*, Kurosawa insisted on creating huge effects for the film that were extremely expensive. It was not surprising that the Japanese film industry was so parsimonious given the decline in the Japanese market since the early 1970s. It was a commercial decline that
contrasted starkly, as I will consider in more detail later, Kurosawa's reputation for uncompromising and grand schemes and hindered the director in his negotiating the production of *Ran*.

Kurosawa received much public criticism in Japan for his *jidai-geki* movies. They appeared to his critics as films that merely pampered to Western tastes, and his period pieces are still regarded with some hostility as being signs of the patronising relationship of the West to the Japanese film industry: mere crowd-pleasers. Kurosawa, however, saw the past as a means of making his critique of contemporary society more palatable.

Kurosawa's approach is illustrated in *Kumonosu jo*. Based on the story of *Macbeth*, this film reflects one might say the political rather than fatalistic powers that shape mankind's actions, actions that adversely impact on the very fabric of society. It is an inflection of Kurosawa's liberalism that reflected the attitude to politics in the decade following Japan's defeat at the hands of the allies. In giving expression to (albeit a more extreme form of pessimism regarding) man's inability to control his destiny, the director uses for the first time a codification for his discourse that draws directly on the Noh drama. It is a film text structured and motivated by the form and structure of the Noh with its use of the five play sequence. By this detailed reference to the conventions of the Noh, Kurosawa creates in *Kumonosu-jo* an artificiality that makes (the Macbeth character) Washshizu's death an inevitable product of general cultural convention and not simply, or even, the product of his own decision. In this respect, it suggests an extreme form of the notion of the individual's destiny being in the hands of others, not gods but politicians and literally, in the case of Japan's occupation, foreign forces.

Following the critical acclaim he received for *Kumonosu-jo*, at least in the West, Kurosawa was to experience a bad decade in the Sixties, with his virtual black-listing by the Japanese film industry
after the release of Red Beard in 1965 (again, despite international acclaim). There followed the critically and commercially unsuccessful Dodes'ka-den in 1970, a film that he had been forced to produce with his own money. While he denied it at the time, it is thought that Kurosawa's being unceremoniously removed from the team making Tora! Tora! Tora!, also contributed to the depression that led to Kurosawa's attempted suicide in 1971.

These elements come together in Ran in Kurosawa's revisiting the Noh, experiencing problems obtaining support from his domestic film industry, receiving hostile reviews for his films, and trying to give expression to the humanist views about man's responsibility for his own destiny. Adversity, having to tout around the studios of Japan with 'storyboard' paintings of his design, and sadness, in his wife dying after a protracted struggle against cancer during the period of filming, may also be considered as influential in Kurosawa's design of Ran. These experiences give piquancy to the role and function of Peter as Kyoami and suggest that the story of Lear and his suffering may even have had a personal relevance for the ageing director.

2. Filming the Fool

“The bow is bent and drawn”

The problems Kurosawa experienced in moving his idea from the storyboard to celluloid illustrate the influence of the commercial forces and his overcoming these hurdles is testimony to the importance Kurosawa attached to his project, to his reading of King Lear.

The process took a decade to complete. The first screenplay was started in 1975, just after the release of the director's twenty-fifth film, Dersu Uzala, and was completed around 1978. The script was amended over the next seven years in collaboration with Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide. However, it took Kurosawa seven more years to raise the funds necessary to take the Ran script to
production as Japanese studios found the story not only expensive but also felt that the temper of the proposed film was too tragic in content. During that time the director had major problems with funding, which also hindered the development of his other projects.

It was during this period that Kurosawa met French producer, Serge Silberman, in September 1982. The French producer had connections with Gaumont who had initially shown interest in financing Ran. By early 1984, Silberman had taken over the project through his own company, Greenwich Film Production and he negotiated a sum of $10.5 million through Japanese film-company, Nippon Herald-Ace, a Japanese film-importing company. Toho agreed to distribute the film, and Fuji TV also added financial support in return for the broadcasting rights. With this financial backing, Kurosawa was able to start filming his first production for four years, Kagemusha having been released in 1980.

As mentioned, that such a famous director should experience difficulty in obtaining financial backing was due in part to his having received poor reviews over the previous ten years for his films, and in part was due to the size of budget that his plans for Ran involved. Throughout, however, Kurosawa was not daunted by the financial and commercial pressures, a fact which may be attributed to the significance which he gave the film,

'It seems to me that Ran is my life work. I want to pour my remaining energy into this work.'

Filming started in June, 1984, at the newly-built Kurosawa Studio in Yokohama, taking nearly twelve months to complete and costing over $11 million, the largest film budget in Japanese history. The significance of the film to both Japanese cinema and to the circulation of foreign readings of Shakespeare is illustrated by the fact that Ran was issued on general release in June, 1985, after its world premiere on the opening day of the first Tokyo International Film Festival. That a film which Kurosawa found such difficulty funding (having to enlist the help of a Western producer after so
many years of fruitless attempts himself) should be positioned in the vanguard of such a prestigious celebration of Japanese film-making, examples the mixed fortunes Kurosawa had in his own 'court' and the ambivalence of the home market to his films. Kurosawa's voice was respected when heard, but there were problems when seeking an audience. Kurosawa did, however, make full use of his opportunity, long awaited as it was, and Kyoami was central to his design.

\section*{The Fool as Frame}

Shinobu Hashimoto, who worked with Kurosawa on the scripts for \textit{Kumonosu-Jo} and \textit{The Bad Sleep Well}, observes of the director,

'Everything he says is clear and particular and concrete. Everything that is meaningful and strong - that is Kurosawa. How much have I not learned from him about real and strong expression?\textsuperscript{18}

Repeatedly, Kurosawa uses the Fool-figure to frame the cinematic verisimilitude of \textit{Ran}, sustaining a tension of intertextual discourses with contemporary culture, discourses that illustrate the 'foreignness' of Shakespearian production. He takes the words of Shakespeare and manifests a potentiality in a strong visual image, whether that be the Lear-figure actually striking the Fool-figure, or picturing the Lear-figure doing rather more than "striking" in killing one of his offspring's guards for "chiding of his Fool". It is this ostension, this 'voicing', which bears out Kurosawa's words that 'extreme manifestations contain all that is most true to life\textsuperscript{19} and which makes the Kurosawa text so interesting. He structures the Fool in terms not only of his idiosyncratic linguistic signature but also of his visual, filmic, expression. The stylistic character notes of Kurosawa's directing supply the vocabulary for the Fool's voicing.

Kurosawa insists, for instance, that the camera should not be used self-consciously, that the camera work should not distract from that which is being pictured: "Beauty comes from what is filmed, not
how. This is why, when his cameras follow the characters, they stop when the characters stop, in
order to retain no sense of independence to the camera. He creates the dream-like quality of Noh
theatre in the filming by editing each take at the end of each day (rather than, as is the general
custom, at the end of a period of filming). This ensures that the transitions between scenes are as
smooth and as seamless as possible. Further, to bridge scenes, Kurosawa interleaves shots of
clouds that again serve to distance the particular action and put it in the context of nature and the
passing of time. A sense of a universality is created but one that is achieved by placing human
action as a micro-organism in the pattern of nature's activity.

The director's deliberately shunning the close-up generally in Ran in order to 'flatten' characters
creates a similar effect. To place the character in his/her historical position and in this sense create
an objectivity is in keeping with a Noh-like distancing from the subject. Kurosawa has commented on
this, saying he wanted to create the perspective of a distant, impersonal viewer, observing the
"absurd behaviour" of humans. This technique, as Parker notes, could be considered as serving
the same purpose as the Noh mask, to 'impose a surrender of subjectivism upon the actors wearing
them'. Of course, the technique also has more pragmatic advantages in that it can make less
obvious the thick make-up of the actors, particularly that of Tatsuya Nakadai as Hidetora, whose
appearance is particularly stylised. Kurosawa is known to favour the long shot also because he
believes it forces the actor to use his/her whole body and thus encourages a characterisation that
captures the 'soul' of the figure.

In establishing the environment in which Ran is set, Kurosawa is clear that

"What is of prime importance is the quality of the decor, of the objects or
the beauty of the countryside in which the film is shot"
Sensitive to the potential that landscapes offer, from the opening scenes of the boar hunt to the closing vision of Man’s fragile mortality, Kurosawa uses landscape as an essential means of expression, influenced to a great extent by the paintings of the period\textsuperscript{25}. Yet his awareness of the potentiality of landscape to give voice to his discourse not only accounts for the sweeping views of the countryside around Mount Fujiyama but also for the spectacular in \textit{Ran}, most vividly expressed in the battles for the Third and First Castles.

Kurosawa’s battles could not be more detailed, elaborate, colourful, or frequent. Thousands of extras are used, as are horses by the hundred (fifty were imported from the USA especially for the film). In the coming together and mingling of the hundreds of extras as the forces of Jiro and Taro, with their differently coloured liveries, Kurosawa creates an effect not unlike a Busby Berkley choreographed dance routine\textsuperscript{26}. The battle scenes also make clear the importance of the use of colour, \textit{Ran} giving Kurosawa the opportunity to deploy his painterly expression. It is colour as much as the accuracy of the historical detail in the battle scenes that forms a vital element of the imagery, just as it does in Noh drama. It is as important a notation as the camerawork in the film.

The great canvasses Kurosawa composed during his ten-year wait resulted in more than a hundred colour sketches and the importance he assigned the use of colour can be seen in the fact that \textit{Ran} was only the fourth film in colour he had directed in a very long career\textsuperscript{27}. He also designed and painted many of the kimonos and some of the armour that was used in the film. The paramount importance of colour is evident in his use of gels and of tinted light reflectors to enhance colours where he felt they were not vivid enough. So it is that the armies of Hidetora and his sons are distinguished by a palette of primary colours, and the merging, blurring and reformation of these armies creates a vivid spectacle that is both awe-inspiring and at the same time, in creating mesmerising patterns, distancing. The great battles serve as microcosms of the fluid movement of
human history and of the endeavours of mankind, patterns that form and re-form before dissolving again.

Kurosawa's filmic style serves to foreground and complement in *Ran* the Noh, Buddhist, mass media (specifically, cinematic) and medieval references, providing correlatives for sexual, social and military mores of societies separated by hundreds of years. Yet, this complex of overdetermined signs is shaped into a discourse by the Kyoami Fool, who is often a central figure within this signifying web of stylised cinematography that recuperates a specific Japanese mythology of war and religion.

Mirroring the general filmic style, Kurosawa does not attempt to merge the images of the king and his retainer but maintains instead a distance between Hidetora and his fool. The specific depiction of the figure of the jester in terms of camera work, costume, movement and narrative participation suggests that the 'Noh-ing' of the Fool is, like the film, representative of a cultural straddling, both of acting and dramatic conventions, and of technical and cultural styles. Kurosawa engenders a specific Fool-figure by 'de-gendering' Kyoami, grafting alien elements to the character in constituting Kyoami as a dramatic force. In now examining Kyoami's involvement in the principal phases of Hidetora's tragedy poses questions about the Fool's potential as the alien and the domestic servant, the iteration of the past and the present, and the suturing of the filmic text and the spectator.

### 3. The Fool in Frame

To use Noh's *jo-ha-kyu* structure, one might see three movements in the telling of Hidetora's story. Each brings together the elements of the directorial purpose, filmic strategies, and cultural intertext that construct Kyoami's 'voicing'. By examining Kyoami's relationship with both Hidetora and the
spectator, it is possible to identify the coalescing of culture, history and cinema in the fool, the voicing of Kurosawa's uncertainty in the present through a voice calling, apparently, from the past.

**Jo: The Calm Before the Storm**

The opening scene of the *jo* introduces both Kyoami and the principal players (apart from Lady Kaede) in the power game in the valley of the Ichimonji at the beginning of the film-text. It is a scene that maps the relationships of the protagonists, but regarding Kyoami specifically, it places the Fool-figure and the Cordelia-figure, Saburo, together in the same frame.

Kyoami's appearance comes at an awkward point in the negotiations that are taking place with the two neighbouring warlords who have been guests of the hunting party. Each lord, Ayabe and Fujimaki, is trying to persuade Hidetora that Saburo should marry their respective daughters and the discussion has clearly reached an embarrassing stalemate. At this point, the eldest son, Taro, summons Kyoami from the periphery of the enclosure where the lords are resting after their boar hunt. Taro instructs the androgynous figure who bows and moves forward to "entertain us". Kyoami's function is, then, to act as a form of light relief, which, given that Lear's fool does not have such an opportunity in the playtexts of *King Lear*, might be seen as Kurosawa's way of providing that opportunity for his fool-figure early on in the establishment of characters and the action. However, it is not Kyoami but Saburo who takes advantage of the entertainment to offer criticism of Hidetora's plans. Indeed, unlike the Fool's first words on entering Lear's court, Kyoami begins his entertainment with a formality that in tone and style attempts to draw a line under the previous discussion. Kyoami provides the *Kyogen* entertainment one might say as relief from the Noh drama that is developing. - his function being to distract from, not draw attention to the weighty content of the conversation at 'high' table.
The figure that moves forward into frame is, however, not the one Kurosawa originally conceived when he was putting together his screenplay. There, it is Hidetora who breaks the awkward silence and calls forward a ‘servant-entertainer, the equivalent of the fool in a medieval European court’, Kurosawa describing this entertainer as ‘A man called Kyoami with a shaven head and wearing strange clothes’. Clearly, between the writing of the screenplay and the production itself, the director changed his mind about both the look and possibly the age of the fool-figure he wished to have as Hidetora’s companion.

In the film-text, the figure that scurries forward is youthful, and, indeed, feminine in movement and appearance. Far from being bald, the youth has long black hair drawn up above his head into a plume, its exaggerated movement accentuating the youth’s frequent stylised nods and bows. While distinguishing Kyoami from the samurai lords, the entertainer’s clothes are not particularly strange in appearance. He wears red jacket and trousers with stripes of colour which match the colours worn by the Ichimonji. Notably, there is no sword hanging at his side. If nothing else, it is the absence of a sword that suggests the androgynous nature of the figure because without a weapon, in a world of masculinity, of feudal power determined by the sword, Kyoami is, in effect, effeminate.

Kyoami kneels and bows low in front of the gathered lords, immediately delineating the power structures and his lowly status, but he then takes control of proceedings, manipulating his audience to his design, shifting the field of reference to one of entertainment and away from that of diplomacy. There is, however, a tension in the intense stare he appears to cast in the direction of first one mountain, and then another, a look which forces his audience to follow his eyes. Having ensured the total attention of his audience, he then begins his formal chant,

“From the far mountain
From the near mountain”

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The moment he begins to speak, the lords begin to laugh as they recognise the formal patterning of Kyoami's words. The frame is one which is understood - it is highly conventional and works by a reciprocal submission to the rules, the conventions, of the entertainment so that when Kyoami moves to the next phase of his performance, an impression of the creature which he has referenced, the spectator is given the first example of Kyoami's function not simply as entertainer, but as totem of the natural world. As he hops forward, he says,

"Who comes hippety-hopping
   Showing off his handsome ears"

He then takes a fan from his belt, opens it so that it appears like two ears, and holds up a ceramic vase taken from the tea table to create a “hare”.

The audience is entertained by having it relinquish its serious ideas for the frivolous idea of a simple creature, Kyoami conjuring it through gesture and song. The whole routine is completed with a formal bow as Kyoami kneels as he had before starting his entertainment. However, unlike the words that Lear's Fool uses, material that serves to direct criticism at the king, Kyoami's entertainment is appropriated by another, by Saburo, who asks sarcastically, "Only one hare, Kyoami?"

The question initially appears to confuse the youth and when he begins to understand the reference is to the guests at their table, Kyoami's face registers the fear of one in the presence of those with the power over life and death. So, rather than Kyoami being shown as the one who flouts the conventions, it is made clear that it is Saburo, the Cordelia figure, who uses mockery and satiric wit to criticise his father, Hidetora. It is Saburo who takes up the analogy: “Hopping here to be eaten by father”, while it is the fool who looks fearful at the way in which the content of his wit has been
appropriated. This is a fool that knows his place and he quickly scurries back to the periphery from whence he came, fearful lest he might be associated with Saburo’s insult to Hidetora’s guests.

The fragility of Kyoami’s position is re-affirmed when, the party having decided to retire so that Hidetora may sleep, Saburo walks purposefully in Kyoami’s direction with drawn sword in hand only to stop short of the cowering youth before stooping to cut saplings to shade his sleeping father. That Kyoami cringes, fearing the worst makes very clear the threat to his position at court of which the figure appears to be all too mindful.

The spectator’s first view of Kyoami makes clear that the entertainer and the entertainment are different. to that in Shakespeare’s playtext The relationship between lord and servant defines more explicitly the threat of the whip, and suggest the importance of a stylised humour which has an oriental signature, than the extempore verbal wit that Lear’s fool deploys. While both fools may ‘frame’ their entertainment with the signature of their courtly position, the substance of that humour is profoundly different. It is a difference that is confirmed as the cinematic narrative progresses. Kyoami is here a servant as much as entertainer, one who does not exchange freely with his masters as Lear’s fool does, one whose power to deconstruct situations through language appears circumscribed by position, convention and the sword. Foregrounding the rigidity of that structure, Kurosawa suggests both the courage Kyoami shows in defying his lord, and the breakdown of order which the spectator witnesses occur very soon after the formality of this opening scene.

Evidence of Kyoami’s courage and the fractures in the rigid formal etiquette follow hard on the fool’s entertainment, it being Kyoami’s willingness to intervene which possibly saves the lives of Tango and Saburo when Hidetora’s anger finally shatters the diplomacy. Reacting first to Saburo’s, and then Tango’s defiance to his plans to retire, Hidetora strides over to his sheathed sword and would
draw it but for the hands of Kyoami who manages to hold on to the weapon long enough for the old man to calm himself sufficiently to temper his initial fury and channel it into a symbolic rather than a physical cutting-off, merely banishing the two from the Ichimonji kingdom.

Kyoami’s courage is clear. An unarmed boy interceding with an old warrior wild with rage is an image used by the director to indicate the state of the Ichimonji household. It is the first act of resistance to Hidetora’s will that the spectator sees the fool make, but it is not the last.

In the second phase of the jo, when Lady Kaede is introduced, the tensions that will lead to Hidetora’s spiral down into madness become evident. The fool’s role in this passage in the film-text is critical. It establishes that Kyoami does hold a privileged position in Hidetora’s court and it suggests very clearly that Kyoami is instrumental in bringing to a head the tensions between father and eldest son.

After witnessing his concubines forced to give way to the wife of his eldest son, Lady Kaede, Hidetora turns from the window in the First Castle’s tower incensed. His aide, Lord Ikoma (whom is subsequently revealed to be a traitor working for Taro) suggests that it is only “natural” and for a moment there is silence as if Hidetora is desperately trying to find a way of agreeing with Ikoma while yet retaining his dignity. This inner turmoil is intensified by the serene image of the warlord sitting framed by the plain wall behind him. It is the outer stillness of a Noh drama. However, before Hidetora may square the circle, the apparently private conversation and contemplation is fractured by the sound and sight, in the immediate foreground, of a fan being opened with a loud crack, like a gunshot. From the corner of the screen emerges Kyoami, who has been sitting, unobserved by the spectator. His costume still marks him out as the fool. Rather than the rainbow motley worn on the boar hunt, Kyoami’s jacket and trousers are muted hues of green, white and orange, but there is still
the variegated patchwork of materials, the motley, of the entertainer, and Kyoami's hair is still a feminine parody of the warrior's severe warrior pigtail.

Rising and standing in front of his seated lord, Kyoami begins the distinctive chanting he had used when first creating the entertainment after the boar hunt, the speech only the second verbal intervention which Kyoami has made into the narrative of the film-text. Again, words are accompanied by stylised body movements as the entertainer begins,

“Gives away his house;
Gives away his land;
His bounty earns him a new title:
Lord of the rice fields.
A scarecrow!”

Hidetora's reaction is to place his hand on the hilt of his sword and to demand,

“Well, a fool?”

An apparently fearful Kyoami, now kneeling in front of his lord, bows deeply to the floor saying,

“No, the fool is me....”

but instead of continuing with what might be expected, an apology, Kyoami then looks up defiantly and, holding Hidetora's gaze, says,

“.... for serving as butt to your laughing stock.”

The punning reference to Hidetora's predicament is compounded by his next words,

“But you're another for losing your keep”,

a satiric reference both to Hidetora's castle which he has given away to his eldest son, and to his wealth. At that point, Kyoami pulls a mock grin, turns and scurries away before an incensed Hidetora can move.
In this act of defiance, and in the one directed at Taro that follows, Kurosawa defines, through filmic discourse, Kyoami’s role as the contesting voice, of reason, that speaks to Hidetora as the Fool speaks to Lear. The impact of Kyoami’s intervention is abetted by the camera’s ability to hide as well as to reveal, concealing the entertainer while the spectator focuses on the turmoil that Hidetora feels, before permitting the fool-figure to literally and visually burst in on the reveries of Hidetora, Ikoma, and the spectator.

The next entertainment illustrates Kurosawa’s cinematic suturing of texts as he appears to tie together and make coherent two references from *King Lear* in terms of the fool-figure. The conversation between Goneril and Oswald when the eldest daughter asks for confirmation that her gentleman was struck for chiding of her father’s fool and complains of his “riotous” knights, and the conversation which follows hard on when Goneril demands Lear “disquantity” his train coalesce in *Ran* in Kyoami’s satiric song about Taro. Using his famed directness, Kurosawa employs these narrative semes to speak a riotous fool.

When Taro’s followers seek to take charge of the Ichimonji banner, prompted by Lady Kaede’s insistence that without it her husband is not head of the family, there is a struggle with Hidetora’s retinue. Kyoami steps back from the struggle on to a raised platform but rather than to bring levity to this tense moment of confrontation, Kyoami uses the moment to mock Taro and his followers with a song in which he compares the eldest son to a gourd blown about by the whims of, it is implied, Lady Kaede.

“See the lord, a gourd in the wind”

Then accompanying his words with an impression of the vessel blowing about, Kyoami sings,
“Swinging this way, swaying that way
Spinning as the breeze blows
So high up, dangling from the tower”

Kyoami finishes gleefully with the words

“Isn’t this fun!”

Indeed, Hidetora’s followers laugh loudly at the fool's entertainment, but one of Taro's men bursts through Kyoami’s audience determined to avenge the insult to his master, drawing his sword to do so. Before the ‘knight’ may ‘chide’ the young man, however, an arrow strikes the assailant between the shoulder blades and he falls dead. Hidetora is seen in the next frame withdrawing his bow through the window from which he has been leaning and the incident curtails the attempt to wrest control of the banner and Taro’s men withdraw.

Kyoami, protected by his master’s power and right to kill, is left to sing again and in the scene which follows Kurosawa shows us the young man taking full advantage of that opportunity, accompanied in his mocking ‘Gourd’ song this time by Hidetora’s retinue as they sit around an open fire entertaining themselves. It is this riotous behaviour which prompts Taro to seek Hidetora’s vow, signed and sealed in blood, that he will control Kyoami’s songs. Nevertheless, the kyogen that is used to punctuate the serious movement of the principal narrative is seen in Kyoami’s ‘entertainment’ to do more than merely divert and entertain: it propels forward the action of the protagonists.

Kyoami figures one last time before Hidetora’s descent into madness and his wanderings on Asuza plain (Kurosawa's ‘Heath’) when the spectator sees Hidetora strike his fool. Having left both the First and the Second Castle in disgust, Hidetora is contemplating the advice of his traitorous aide, Ikoma, to seek shelter in the Third Castle, now vacated by Saburo. Kyoami, as before interjects to try
balancing the poor advice Hidetora is receiving. He kneels in front of his master and says sarcastically,

“That’s it. Hurry!”

The fool then stands and pirouetting on the spot, arms outstretched, chants,

“Hell is ever at hand
Which you cannot say of heaven”

But before Kyoami may enlarge on his thesis he is rudely interrupted by Hidetora who whips the boy viciously causing him to fall and roll back in pain, landing up next to the kneeling Tango. As the dust-covered figure comes to rest, Hidetora shouts at him,

“Stay behind if you’re afraid”

There follows a lingering image of Tango and Kyoami under a darkening sky alone in the wilderness, the disconsolate pair static bundles framed by the arid landscape. Above the sound of Kyoami weeping, Tango whispers

“And yet all we did was tell the truth”.

The closing image of the young fool and old retainer deserted on the plain might be seen as identifying the end of the Introduction, for the next image is of Hidetora and his retinue entering the gates of the Third Castle, a place where Hidetora will literally begin his journey into the flames of hell.

The scene rounds off the fool’s movement through the Introduction, jo, Kurosawa using Hidetora’s blow to manifest in action the mind of a man becoming increasingly desperate, literally and metaphorically punishing the voice of truth that until now has escaped his master’s censure. The blow marks Hidetora’s loss of control, Kyoami becoming one of Hidetora’s victims. From being a peripheral figure, an entertainer, decorating an official diplomatic function, Kyoami moves by degrees to a central position in which the spectator is able to identify Hidetora’s social and emotional
journey in terms of Kyoami’s physical and verbal defiance of authority. The degree of Kyoami’s influence on and his ties to Hidetora are thus established and in this respect Kyoami’s role in the Introduction bears comparison to the function of the Fool to Lear in many respects. However, in the next phase, ha, the Destruction, Kyoami is not only the critic but also becomes Hidetora’s anguish.

Ha: Giving Voice in the Storm

On the heath, the spectator joins Kyoami and Tango in their search for and discovery of Hidetora, who is kneeling among the waving grasses of Asuza Plain staring, hands fixed at temples, toward the static camera’s gaze. It is the Fool-figure who literally, verbally, culturally, and cinematically translates these cinematic signifiers into a discourse of pain. It is the Fool, not the father, who verbalises the filial ingratitude, doing so through a code with references both specific and mythic.

Moments earlier, the spectator had witnessed the destruction of the keep in the Third Castle where Hidetora and his small band of loyal followers had sought refuge. Kurosawa had filled the screen with images of death, destruction and sacrifice. The concubines of the warlord had stabbed each other rather than be captured, and Hidetora’s warriors had fought to the last man against overwhelming odds. Their bodies, scattered around the burning fort, had been panned over again and again by Kurosawa’s cameras. Amid the chaos and the constant hiss of arrows fired at the keep in which Hidetora desperately searched for some means of committing sepuku, Kurosawa drew the spectator's gaze to the helplessness of a man literally and figuratively experiencing the coalescing of his past in the fires of his sons’ greed. When, in desperation or distraction, Hidetora appeared through the smoke belching from the doorway to the keep, the spectator was encouraged to feel the same wonder that the old warlord himself and the serried ranks of soldiers felt as he emerged from the conflagration unscathed. It was this wonder that kept Hidetora alive, the soldiers, so recently his vassals, too scared of the apparition to approach or challenge it. So, Hidetora was allowed to
stagger off into the waving grasses of the surrounding countryside, leaving behind the smoking remains of his power, his influence, indeed his identity. It is this figure, an empty husk, Tango and Kyoami discover.

Kurosawa suggests in Kyoami's action that follows the cinematic equivalent of the Bunraku narrator, called the benshi34, supplying the spectator with an interpretation of the action.

When Hidetora first falls to his knees, Kyoami does too, gazing intently at the spot that transfixes the old man's eyes. The positioning serves as an ironic parody of the opening scene, when Kyoami, after the boar hunt, is able to persuade the gathered dignitaries to look at the places high on the mountains where he appears to be staring so intently. Then, as in this scene, it is the young man who literally nominated both the subject and the object of the gaze, allotting a meaning to the look. Then, it had been simply an introduction to some light entertainment, the manifestation of a rabbit among the hunting party. Here, though, amid the swirling grasses and in differing circumstances for the great warrior, Kyoami provides a visual correlative for Hidetora's thoughts. Like a Japanese Archimedes, Kyoami cogitates, pondering his master, then jumps back in excitement, having identified or more precisely, given meaning to, what it is that mesmerises Hidetora.

This moment is a crossroads of many dimensions, cinematic, spectatorly, cultural, and narrative. Hidetora, Kyoami, and the spectator are suspended at this juncture of discourses for a brief moment before being impelled forward by the director using the fool-figure.

The interpretation made by Kyoami of Hidetora's stare is in keeping with the subject matter of Noh plays, many of which are warrior ghost plays (shuramono) in which a dead warrior returns from limbo (shura). In the context of this type of Noh theme, the emotion that registers on Hidetora's face is not
that of fright at an apparition but of anguish and guilt. A typical drama of this type is *Atsumori* that
deals with the anguish of Kumagi, a successful warlord, at the killing of a young opponent, Atsumori.
The play deals with Kumagi’s search for a means of expiating the guilt. In the Ashikaga period this
theme was close to the hearts of the many samurai who fought for the numerous barons and
factions that supported the two rival emperors. The words which Kyoami speaks are a version of a
passage from another Noh play, *Funa Benkei*, which also makes explicit the references to the evils
of the past haunting the present:

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‘the Heike clan
Defying gods and buddhas
Committed untold sins and crimes
And were by heaven chastised
And drowned beneath the waves, -
I see now the erstwhile emperor and his lords
Rising in swarms out of the sea.'
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Kurosawa’s script references this Noh drama throughout using the first person to underline that
Kyoami is Hidetora, is his voice, is the means by which the old man articulates his position:

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“The wonder of it!
I see on this withered plain
All those I destroyed -
A phantom army,
One by one they come floating,
Rising before me."
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The linguistic code is, however, overlaid and reinforced by the cinematic codes Kurosawa deploys and by the non-verbal codes which Peter employs. "Oh, excellent" he cries. "The failed mind sees the heart's failings", and with this deduction Kyoami rises from his knees in a show of triumph, raising one hand, and placing the other on his hip as he falls into a mode of paralinguistic and gestural discourse. Spinning in his adopted pose, he chants, "The wonder of it!", then he switches posture, whipping his lowered arm up, with the fluency of a karate black belt, his face etched with a determination and intensity such as has not been seen before on the face of the youthful Fool. From Kyoami's mouth a droning chant-like monologue issues forth, "I see on this withered plain all those I destroyed". Kyoami becomes Hidetora. Rising from the grasses next to the immobile old man, he is the physical manifestation of Hidetora's conscience, the self that could not, would not speak earlier. As Kyoami circles behind Hidetora to face Tango, he gives voice to the 'Noh-ing' of the Fool for, in referencing a "phantom army", Kyoami articulates possibly the most important aspect of his contribution to the film's Buddhist message, referencing the history into which the actions of Hidetora and all his family shall reside. According to tradition, it is a world of their own making, where soldiers go to enact forever their lives, good or bad, on this earth. "One by one they come floating," chants Kyoami as if he is Hidetora's conduit into the light from the darkness of a guilt-ridden soul. Kyoami, like Hughes37, appears to be a puppet in the power of another, an automatic writer. "Rising before me" intones the young figure rushing toward the camera, teeth bared in a snarl until stopped abruptly and forced to turn by the sudden rise of Hidetora, face equally as impassioned, who rushes forward in the same direction as the young retainer, before turning and running over the brow of the hill.

Kyoami's actions are a clear means of articulating Lear's guilt but do not serve as a catalyst in quite the same way as is the Fool's goading of Lear. Kyoami's gestures do not require supplementary verbal comment but rely on the conventions of Eastern entertainers, dance and ritual, and religious and traditional beliefs, to create an osmosis of common feeling. Instead of a Fool verbalising Lear's
folly, "Thou should'st not have been old till thou hadst been wise" (F. I v 43), Kyoami here actually becomes that guilt - not simply critical of it but its generated voice. In taking that guilt and translating it into a reference to the Noh drama, Kyoami becomes both the discourse of critique and, at the same time, the embodiment, the manifestation, of conscience. It is this act of ostension that figures the cinematic medium's technological potential to 'show'.

The storm which Kyoami gives voice to also rages in the fool's breast. It identifies another way in which Kurosawa uses the fool-figure differently. Unlike Shakespeare's fool, Kyoami does question whether it is prudent to stay with a "mad old man". The duty that Kyoami feels might be considered that of a lover given the reference Kurosawa makes to the relationship of lords and their fools in this period, so that Kyoami's anguish as he nurses Hidetora among the ruins is not just that of one irritated by the ingratitude of a wilful child, nor the pragmatic uncertainty of a retainer who is aware of his master's loss of influence, but is possibly the anguish of one who no longer wishes to see his lover in pain.

Kurosawa traces Kyoami's ambivalence and pain, ambiguous though it is, among the ruins where the living ghosts that torment Hidetora provide reminders of both the warlord's past crimes and his present torture. It is Kyoami who crystallises much of this emotional torment in the display of both his words and emotions. The fool's words lash Hidetora in a way that belies any trite suggestion that Kyoami is merely being cruel to be kind. In the visualising of Hidetora's pain, Kurosawa appears to be suggesting the intensity of Kyoami's passion. The coruscating nature of Kyoami's lessons is no better illustrated than when he elicits an acknowledgement of Saburo from Hidetora. In a haranguing monologue, Kyoami presses and presses against Hidetora's unwillingness to speak his youngest son's name,
“Earth and sky are topsy-turvy.
I was the fool and made him laugh.
Now the coin is flipped.
Don’t be mute, say something.
You speak nonsense, I’ll speak truth;
We’ll see what comes of it.
Begin, old man!
A serpent’s egg is white and pure,
A bird’s is speckled and soiled.
The bird left the speckled egg for the white.
The egg cracks, out comes a snake.
The bird is gobbled up by the snake.

Stupid bird!”

At this point Hidetora submits to the insistent voice of tormented guilt in his head and its echo in front of him, and cries out “Saburo!”

Kyoami’s labours are seen to take a physical and emotional toll on the youth as he is left to nurse Hidetora through the long hours spent waiting for Tango to return with Saburo. During this time, Kurosawa makes the spectator aware that while Hidetora has been left with his conscience in the form of Kyoami, the fool, left with his own soul searching, has no such means of coalescing and exorcising his anguish. The young retainer is left to reflect on the prudence of his continued loyalty to a man who it appears has abandoned his own identity. In soliloquy, as Hidetora enjoys a fitful sleep, Kyoami gives vent to his frustration, asking himself,

“Why stay with this mad old man?”
He then uses a figure of speech which recalls the Fool’s advice given to the stocked Kent to “Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill” (F, II, iv l. 69) when he reflects that

“If the rock you sit on starts to roll
Jump clear
Or you’ll go with it and be squashed.”

Shakespeare’s words suggest that the Fool is advising Kent to leave Lear but Kurosawa is identifying that his fool is struggling with his own bond to his master, not satirising the ‘foolish’ loyalty of others. Kyoami appears to act on his reflection and makes to go, concluding that

“Only a fool stays aboard”

but fate intervenes for as he is about to leave the shelter Hidetora stirs, asking “Where is this place?”. There is a prolonged pause, during which the spectator witnesses the silent battle Kyoami has with himself, before he turns and barks “Paradise!” to his master’s dazed query. Then returning to Hidetora’s side, he drops his belongings, dejectedly slumps down to his knees next to the huddled figure and reflects

“All my life
I’ve been his nurse.”

Kyoami then begins to weep inconsolably but Kurosawa chooses not to make clear whether the youth’s tears are for his master’s plight or is an eruption of anguish and frustration at his sense of his own predicament.

Kyoami’s behaviour, the sense of an inner battle taking place, certainly acknowledges Hidetora’s ‘greatness’ but there is also a different quality here. The duty that Kyoami feels is that of a nurse to a child not necessarily the love and respect of a retainer for a ‘great man’. Kyoami returns from the brink of departure possibly because of compassion; his is not an unquestioned loyalty. There is also a fatalism in the fool’s words, a resignation which focuses itself on Hidetora.
“Man is born crying
When he’s cried enough, he dies”

observes Kyoami when Hidetora collapses having uttered Saburo’s name; and when Hidetora observes that he is “lost” Kyoami replies

“Such is the human condition.”

This fragility of purpose, the mournful dejection and uncertainty, stand at odds with the energy and passion displayed among the swaying grasses as Kyoami pictured the dead of Hidetora’s past. To complement the vision of Hidetora’s crimes and the anguish that he has caused and which haunts him, Kurosawa gives the spectator, in Kyoami, the torment of those victims still living. At the same time, the director creates echoes of Cordelia in Act IV, nursing an exhausted Lear who is “bound upon a wheel of fire”. In detailing ha, the Destruction, Kurosawa manifests that vision of a living hell.

Kyu: Voicing Grief

Kyoami is, unlike Lear’s Fool in the playtexts of King Lear, both present at the death of his master and one of the voices that shapes the significance of Hidetora’s death. It is a responsibility that completes the fool-figure’s function in the structure of the film-text, providing the conduit for kyu, the Haste, and the lesson which, perhaps, Kurosawa wished to communicate.

After having been found and reunited with Saburo on Asuza Plain all appears well. The spectator sees Lady Kaede’s decapitation by Corrugane, who is incensed at Kaede’s merciless pursuit of the innocent Lady Sué, and it is made clear that Jiro and his lords commit sepuku. The power of the Ichimonji is broken and the First Castle burns. However, Hidetora is happy. He rides behind his son and as their horse ambles along the old man asks only that they talk “Father to son”. At this point a shot rings out and Saburo falls from his saddle. Hidetora grieves over his son’s body, unable to believe that he is now dead, and in pushing away Tango who attempts to console his master, the old
man is seen to clutch at his chest and, gasping for breath, slump down across the body of his son, his last gasps attempts to utter Saburo's name.

It is now the turn of Kyoami to weep as he kneels next to the inert body of his master, vainly attempting to revive him. The presence of Kyoami at this stage identifies an absence in the King Lear texts. While the stoical Kent states that he will follow his lord and Albany makes clear that there will be "general woe", there is no specific character that focuses and distils that emotional potential. There is no Horatio to give expression to Lear's tragedy, only Albany in the Quarto (and Edgar in the Folio), who in very general terms, formalise the lesson of the play. It is an absence that is filled in different ways as I have documented in other chapters. Kurosawa, however, chooses a different narrative effect, for as the gathered soldiers stare in disbelief at the corpse, it is Kyoami who gives voice to the disbelief and anguish of those survivors left to wonder at the fortunes of man.

Given the suggestion of a physical and emotional story to Kyoami's relationship with Hidetora, and the feminine qualities that the youth has displayed, Kurosawa provides himself with a means of verbalising uncontrolled grief where the presence solely of the samurai warriors would not have given such an option. He is able to counterpoint the reactions of the stoical and the hysterical in having Kyoami present at the death.

"Are there no gods... no Buddha?"

cries Kyoami

"If you exist. Hear me!

You are mischievous and cruel!

Are you so bored up there

You must crush us like ants?

Is it such fun to see men weep?"
But as Kyoami rants at the heavens, Tango interrupts brusquely, chastising the youth,

“If it is the gods who weep.
They see us killing each other
Over and over again since time began.
They can’t save us from ourselves”

At this, Kyoami collapses once more into fits of tears but Tango continues, urging the fool to stop crying because

“It’s how the world is made.
Men prefer sorrow over joy;
Suffering over peace.
Look at them in the First Castle.
They revel in pain and bloodshed.
They celebrate murder.”

Tango’s words may seem trite but in the context of the scene they reveal the shift in position that Kyoami has undergone. No longer the teacher, the fool is now being taught a curt lesson. It is a lesson which Kurosawa appears to be directing at the spectator too, in no uncertain terms, the director able to articulate his message because of his choice of Peter as student rep’. The twentieth century overlays the sixteenth century scene in the form of the weeping youth who no longer offers stylised dance and satiric song but who is now unaccommodated man, as fragile and dejected as ever Hidetora was. Kurosawa does not simply use Kyoami as a means of focussing the spectator on the enormity of Hidetora’s tragedy, the waki figure of Noh drama to Hidetora’s shite character. Superadded to this function, Peter is the means of focussing the spectator on his or her own tragic predicament in a world in which we all contribute to our own pain because we have not learned the lessons of the past.
4. Intertextual Inspiration

King Lear: Also Ran?

Re-viewing these elements of Ran identifies the intertextuality evident in the choice of Peter specifically, foregrounding the relationships between cultural referencing and 'inspiration'. It is a patterning that is woven into the very fabric of the whole production of Ran and suggests a text that has a self-conscious cross-cultural referentiality, a patterning of quotation that suggests a postmodern impulse.

Obviously, there is the awareness of the Shakespearian original that, at some point outside the film itself, was adverted as being inspired by the King Lear text. The specific setting of the story, however, initially references directly Japan’s troubled past and the internecine wars that plagued the country in the early part of the millennia. In fact, Kurosawa had a very specific historical period in mind and prided himself on his knowledge of Japanese history and culture. This is manifested in the efforts and expense to achieve authenticity.

As mentioned, like Kumonosu-Jo, Ran falls into the Japanese category of film genre called jidai-geki. However, unlike most examples of this genre, Ran and Kurosawa's films in general are far more than mere costume dramas.

Ran is set in the Sengoku Jidai ('Age of the Country at War' - 1392-1568), the "Middle Ages" of Japanese history, a period when central government had broken down and the country was in a state of continual war between great lords. As mentioned, Kurosawa had depicted this period in Shichinin no samurai (The Seven Samurai), Kumonosu-Jo (Throne of Blood), and Ran's immediate predecessor, Kagemusha (1980), and while he may have been attracted to it because of his own samurai descent, it may also have reflected his view of history. Kurosawa has said, "When I look at
Japanese history what I see is how man repeats himself over and over again.” This perspective may account for the particular problem Kurosawa has with the playtext of *King Lear* and may account for the very specific historical location that the director gives to *Ran* and suggests way in which an essentially ‘foreign’ intellect has problematised and then reconciled and made sense of Shakespeare in terms of his own cultural location. The problem Kurosawa identifies is a product of his grounding in a world in which the strength of the human linkage of history gives meaning to the individual act. It is in terms of that history that he visualises the individual act of Kurosawa's Lear-figure, Hidetora: the conventions and themes of Noh drama and of Buddhist faith rationalize Hidetora's pain and identify the importance of Kyoami, the conduit of that experience for the spectator.

The specific act that sparks Hidetora's wrath is, as Kurosawa identifies in the opening scene, the breaking of the three arrows by Hidetora's youngest son, Saburo. It is such rash misjudgements, or evil acts such as those the spectator discovers Hidetora has committed, that leads to cruelty and disaster, not the cosmic arbitrariness one might infer in Shakespeare's play. By imposing an historical frame, the story takes on the meaning that Noh traditionally attaches to warrior tales: it distances the specific action and suggests the hell that is the world in which those warriors who die in strife are destined to endure throughout eternity. Indeed, Kurosawa has explained that the initial inspiration for *Ran* was not *King Lear* at all, but Motonari Mori.

There are a number of details in *Ran* that reflect this source, including the reference by Hidetora to the three arrows. Like Hidetora, Motonari rose to power by defeating two rival clans, one of them, incidentally, called Sué (Lady Sué in *Ran* is an innocent beheaded at the orders of the *femme fatale* of the production, Lady Kaede).
Kurosawa also appears to have drawn heavily on the struggle between the Heike and the Genji clans in *The Tale of the Heike*, more so than in filming *Kumonosu-Jo*, including references to the fox consort of the Chinese King-Yu, the rotting of heads in hot weather, a warrior who has his eye pierced by an arrow, and a fleeing prince who leaves behind his treasured flute, all of which are referenced in *Ran*. Kurosawa's reflections on the genesis of *Ran* suggest, however, that a complex web of cross-cultural associations propelled his idea forward and that there was more than a simple imposition of Japanese history onto a Shakespearian plot in the film-text's writing. Nevertheless, the historical specificity appears to locate the Fool-figure, and provides an example of the complex nature of the references that Kurosawa may have had in mind in casting Peter in the role of Kyoami.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the cult of Youth, known as *Shudo*, was "abnormally prevalent". *Shudo* was a euphemistic term for homosexuality, and Ashikaga rulers would arrange for their favourites to perform in Noh productions and delighted in seeing their young lovers taking on roles as important courtiers. So the decision to have a young, attractive male as the Fool-figure has an historical root, just as Shakespeare's had, the professional Fool at court not disappearing until a good thirty years after Shakespeare's death.

However, while the shoguns and the warriors are familiar icons of Japan's military history, and Kurosawa uses this period as his principal reference, the influence of Shakespeare's tales as global myths overlay themselves on the specifically Eastern story and echoes of *King Lear* resonate in the specific detail of *Ran*. The offspring of Hidetora, the old ruler, are not daughters but sons, and there is no 'love test'. Yet, the formal passing on of power to one specific offspring as Hidetora announces that he is tired of fighting, identifies the need for stability, and his shock at the response of his youngest son places the Western spectator on more familiar ground. That the old man is eventually
driven from his regal position by the military aggression of his two other sons, the second eldest of whom kills the eldest son, that Hidetora is forced to flee with his fast dwindling band of loyal warriors, eventually to run out into a wilderness which is a reflection of a tortured mind, accompanied by his loyal jester, is more familiar still.

There appear to be echoes too of the sub-plot, such as the envy which Jiro, Hidetora's second son, feels towards his older brother's primacy - a displacement of Edmund's feelings towards Edgar's privileged position, perhaps? Also, Gloucester's attempted leap to his death becomes Hidetora's actual leap from a high wall at the base of which he lies as if dead. Tsurumaru's blinding by Hidetora is not merely a mirror of Lear's foolishness but an echo that surfaces in both victims and in Hidetora himself, notably when he is at his weakest.

However, my chief interest, in mapping the play of intertextuality, is to explore in the nexus of cultural strands and pressures how traditional and contemporary Japanese artistic conventions are assimilated into and inform Ran. The referencing of the Noh theatre creates a gloss on the Fool as played by Peter which suggests the role of Kyoami may be seen to serve not just the individual, the old warlord, but also the universal, the spiritual, which Kyoami negotiates for the spectator, the bridging role illustrating the negotiation of worlds which Bennett and Woollacott identify takes place when spectator, text and cultural context constitute a structural relationship of meaning. The world of Kyoami becomes a world for the spectator via the mediation impelled by the mythical cultural motifs present in the text (ancient and modern, perhaps, in historical terms but equally contemporary and powerful in usage). What is especially interesting is that while some of the characters and relationships, speeches and plot turns simply echo the Shakespearian playtexts, there is no necessary one-to-one relationship in Kurosawa's adaptation of the motifs. In rearranging many of the
co-ordinates, the director is able to give the spectator the recognition of familiar elements and the strangeness of their transposed functions simultaneously.

*Peter: Double Drama*

A potent force at work in the nexus of oppositions and tensions in the casting of Peter is the character of his contemporary ‘fame’ and subsequent signifying potential. Kurosawa avoided the ranks of status-struck stage actors and went instead to the chorus lines of transvestite performers in the Shinjuku cabaret district of Tokyo. There he found the oval-faced and olive-skinned youth who insists on answering only to the name Peter. Peter was already an icon in Japanese popular culture at the time of his casting in *Ran*, a singer, dancer, and television entertainer whose public personality was, in the words of John Goodwin, 'celebrated for its childlike temperament, and its transvestism'. Peter followed in the footsteps of his father, and studied the *jiutamae*, the Noh form of dance and it is significant that Peter was the first member of the cast that Kurosawa signed up.

By employing a cross-dressing 'artiste' to play the part of the Fool-figure, Kurosawa found a Japanese equivalent for the performance function and status of the Fool in Lear's court. As the Fool has a position in Lear's court that permits him dual privilege: both to entertain and to speak the 'truth', so Peter is invested with the power to speak to the Japanese viewer and to circulate as a cultural signifier as well as to be positioned specifically within the film-text. Peter's power to speak is augmented by his ability to perform using a mythic framework, the tradition of the Noh theatre and of the *jiutamae* that underpins his spoken communication. It is a compound discourse that illustrates the power of culturally specific codes and shorthand.

Peter does not, however, fall into the category of ‘superstar’, a figure who drags (forgive the pun) associations with previous films into his part as Kyoami. Rather, Peter's fame lies in areas of the
popular, of mass culture, but not specifically of cinema. Kurosawa's purpose in casting Peter would appear to have been to call on the very fact that Peter was not an actor of renown or even an actor by profession, but rather that Peter was an entertainer. More than an actor such as, for instance, John Hurt, Peter's intertextual sign as Peter held him at a distance from the possibility of his being absorbed into the cinematic text. Hurt, for instance, is an accomplished and respected actor, so the spectator might be expected to accept his role within the production, be impressed even by the fact that such a 'name' was playing the role of the Fool. In _Ran_, however, Peter raises the question "Is he playing himself?" Kurosawa draws spectators into a dialogue with their own experience of this individual in the twentieth century and sets that popular myth against his playing a figure instrumental in the referencing of a trope of medieval elitism. Peter is a unique signifier, one who can manipulate an existence both interior and exterior to the film-text, drawing on a range of signifying discourses that are in constant dialogue, both contemporary and populist, and traditional and elitist. In the Shakespearian playtext the Fool may sing, in Kurosawa's _Ran_, the Fool, engaging in cross-cultural, trans-historical, play, can also dance.

Also, in positioning a well-known cross-dresser in a drama with thematic links to Noh, Kurosawa foregrounds certain similarities between the contemporary public popularity of Peter and his ilk and the elements of androgyny that lie in the Buddhist faith and from which the high drama of Noh theatre finds and deploys characters. That the figure Peter plays wears the androgynous costume associated with the court position of Lear's Fool may appear simply a curious example of cultural intertextuality given it is a signified potentially subverted for the Japanese audience by the reference it makes to Peter's professional identity. However, in the absence of a Cordelia in this male-dominated society in which Hidetora's offspring are all sons, Kyoami performs as Fool, as prophet, but also as feminine and loyal retainer. This permits Kurosawa to use the Fool-figure to take on the dramatic forces of both the Clown and Cordelia and gives a particular cultural spin to the
doubling of the loyal retainer and the youngest daughter identified as a potential in previous chapters. Thus, Kurosawa’s casting produces the effect of a ‘doubling’ which amounts to a challenging intertextual gloss of Shakespeare, Japanese popular culture, and the traditions of the Noh theatre.

Kyoami is central to the communication of specific messages in *Ran*, messages that, despite the bleak nature of the material, is still positive. It is Kyoami who makes clear that Hidetora’s madness is to be regarded as undesirable escapism. Kyoami’s function could be compared to that of Sambaso, a comic figure whose dance is used to exorcise visiting gods at the beginning of a day’s Noh performance. The fact that this fool outlives his master to mourn and to reflect on the warlord’s life and death: underlines the fact that Kurosawa’s Fool-figure mediates the tragedy. In *King Lear* the Fool is subsumed by the character upon whom he feeds; in *Ran*, the Fool subsumes the tragic protagonist into the culture that Peter represents. Thus, there is not only a coalescing and framing of Hidetora’s tragedy in the tears of Kyoami but also, via the cultural identity of Peter, there is a *mise-en-scène* that registers the contemporaneity of the tragic force for the 20th century Japanese audience. Kurosawa finds historical and cultural correlatives for the play’s bleak themes, correlatives activated by Kyoami. Indeed, Kurosawa’s particular and idiosyncratic reading of *King Lear* is like the Fool’s ‘reading’ of King Lear: it articulates the tragedy that is the play as the Fool articulates the tragedy that is the man.

*‘Noh-ing’ The Fool*

The Fool-figure, then, enables the director to voice and locate his culturally specific interpretation of *King Lear* and to do so I want now to reflect on the ways in which Kurosawa draws on particular tropes as a form of cultural shorthand to verbalise that discourse. Principal among these codes is the language of Noh drama.
Kurosawa has explained that he was drawn to Noh partly because ‘its form of expression is so far removed from that of film’ and a brief survey of *Ran* provides plentiful references to Noh. There is the stylised behaviour (particularly evident in the scenes involving Lady Kaede), and the appearance of symbols which are common in Noh drama, such as the symbolic gift of the stone fox head, the substitute-head and the fox-in-human-shape, frequent Noh themes. The facial appearance of both Lady Kaede and of Hidetora is modelled on Noh masks, with the blue colouring increasingly evident around Hidetora’s gills as the film progresses serving as an index of the old man’s descent into madness. (Of course, given that in Noh theatre all women’s roles are played by men, it is no surprise that there is a custom of wearing thick make-up.) Tsurumaru is another principal reference to Noh drama, his hut comparing to the witch’s hut in *Kumonosu-Jo*.

However, in addition to these superficial references one can identify more fundamental links between Kurosawa’s interpretation of Lear’s tragedy and Noh drama, for both Noh and *bushido*, the samurai code of honour, are rooted in Zen Buddhism. It is the view of this particular faith that seems to describe the message or meaning which Kurosawa gives to Hidetora’s tragedy, namely, that history repeats itself as long as man craves power.

The Buddhist belief is that there is a place called Naraku, where castles crown mountain tops and where all those who die in battle spend eternity, condemned to fight for ever, bound, one might say, on their respective wheels of fire. The group of Noh plays called *Shuamono* recounts the torment these souls endure. Perhaps most important of all, like the Noh drama, Kurosawa insists that there is no didactic purpose to his film and that the audience may learn what it wishes from watching. Nevertheless, as noted, in the very structuring of the film, the director’s text appears to speak using a specific syntax. Kurosawa describes Noh’s pervasive *jo-ha-kyu* structure as ‘introduction/destruction/haste’ and towards the end of *Ran*, after the death scene I described earlier,
There is an ironic coda which takes on the haste of the kyu. The spectator sees one of the guests at the boar hunt of the opening scene, attacking the First Castle, to suggest that the cycle of carnage is to continue. Given the specific meaning that the term has to Noh drama, one can identify in Kurosawa’s structuring of Ran a patterning that appropriates a trope to articulate a specific view of Lear’s story.

Hidetora’s past, and the referencing of the victims of the warlord’s lust for power, also all contribute to the spectator’s awareness of Hidetora’s crimes. Two victims, Lady Sué, and her brother, Tsurumaru, complement Kyoami and augment the links with Buddhism and Noh drama. These siblings represent a sense of the torment of life (and it is significant that ‘Sué’ means “end of the world”). It is a torment of which Hidetora is acutely aware given that he had been the instigator of their mental and physical suffering. It had been Hidetora who had burned down their family castle, who had married off Lady Sué to Taro, who had spared Tsurumaru but had gouged out his eyes as price for sparing his young life. It is in this context that Hidetora’s fascination with, or fixation, on Lady Sué’s ability to forgive is to be located. It is a backdrop of suffering which coheres in the fatalism Kurosawa’s fool communicates by references to the gods in general and the Buddha in particular. It is a character note of this fool that defines a principal difference between the Shakespearian ‘original’ and the Japanese director’s reading.

In this respect, Kyoami has in Tsurumaru a complement, a character in Ran who contributes to the same purpose as the entertainer. The blinded son of one of Hidetora’s defeated enemies shares with Kyoami an ambiguity of gender, but serves as much as symbol as active agent, in representing the victims of the warlord’s lust for power in the valley. When Hidetora stumbles on Tsurumaru’s ‘Hovel’, the young man plays on a flute for the ‘entertainment’ of his great lord, but the shrill notes that are seen to visually torment Hidetora, just as Kyoami’s words do, make reference to the Nohkan, the
flute, the only wind instrument used in Noh theatre. Its shrill, piercing sound is used principally at the opening, the climax and at the end of the drama to give expression to the mood of the characters. Kurosawa may have had in mind the first musical storytelling in Japan that was performed by blind, itinerant priests. More specifically, the character may have been referencing the Noh play, *The Miserable Beggar*, in which a son is exiled, becomes a beggar, goes blind and many years later wanders home without realising where he is.

In the context of Japanese culture one might suppose that Kurosawa is sandwiching Hidetora between personifications of elements of Noh theatre; in Tsurumaru, there is the formal tradition of music, while in Kyoami there is the iconoclastic disruptive element, of social commentary, the Kyogen.

Locating Kyoami in relation to Hidetora as Kyogen is related to Noh, would seem justified given that Kyogen is, after all, an adjunct to Noh, consisting of short comic plays interspersed between the more sonorous scenes of Noh. Kyogen's primitive realism and humour suggests a similarity to the origins of the court jester, with its link to public festivities, to carnival, to the Lord of Misrule and to the disruption of the status quo (ironically, a feature of the prehistory of the Noh itself). Kyogen was the name given to short periods of dramatic release used to divert audiences from the strain of prolonged Buddhist temple services. They were adapted to Noh to serve a similar purpose, providing a break from the sobriety and length of the formal Noh programs. Indeed, Kyogen means "mad words" and derives from a Chinese poem that expresses the view that by the power of Buddha, even a fool's mad words can be transformed into a "paean of praise". Like the Lord of Misrule's eventual downfall, there is in Kyogen a clear pattern of disruption but this necessarily includes the reassertion of the old order so that laughter can be generated in the secure knowledge that the familiar shall be restored and chaos will be short-lived. In short, Kyogen was Japan's first drama of social protest in
contrast to Noh's resignation. The history of the Kyogen also bears some comparison to Lear's Fool and his function in that much of the language of Kyogen was, until the 17th century, transmitted orally, a fact that reminds one of the proverbial, colloquial, quality of many of the Fool's speeches.

The story of Hidetora is appropriate to this rendering of King Lear because Noh theatre concerns itself primarily with the lives of personages of high rank. Indeed, the Noh theatre is considered in Japanese culture an index of the royal court. This association can be understood in the context of the history of Noh drama, that has remained as if a fly caught in amber for the last five hundred years since the time it was adopted by the warrior chiefs for their exclusive entertainment. It is in the context of this history, of a very specific mythology, that Kurosawa's references derive their signifying potential. In fact, this relationship of the Noh to the masses, when drawn on by a director drawing national and international audiences, figures an interesting situation, paradoxical even. The very mystique of the art form contributes to the ease with which it may be referenced as a trope, permitting Peter to act as (ironic) voice of that elitist reference.

The Fool-figure foregrounds, then, the difference in character of Ran to the 'original' that inspired it, an otherness that acts as a form of Verfremdungseffekt. It is an effect that may well explain the enduring popularity of Kurosawa's readings: he 'makes strange' Shakespeare's works because he reads and re-codes the plays using material that is quite different. Ran multiplies the sense of an alien world, of Shakespeare's pagan realm, by being both of another time and of another culture's history. In doing so, however, Kurosawa provides stimulating pathways for Western spectators fascinated by Orientalism as much as or in the same way as by the otherworldliness of Shakespeare. This permits the spectator to revisit the 'original' differently.
The development of the text from its conception through to its filming locates Kurosawa's discursive approach to the Fool. *Ran*, so obviously a period piece, a *jidai geiki* movie, is given a trenchant and didactic power and made very real and very relevant through the nature of the voice: of Peter. One can see that Kurosawa does in fact bridge two worlds. He echoes the temper of the liberal goals associated with the *gendai geki* and *keiko eigo* genre of Japanese cinema that dealt with modern life and expressions of radical liberalism that welled up in Japan in the 1920s as a result of economic crises and discontent with the injustices of industrialisation and capitalism.

The transcodification of late renaissance European drama, Japanese history, and twentieth century angst through the quotation of traditional Japanese dramatic narratives and pop culture iconography suggests in *Ran* a directing style and spectator reading habits that have a certain postmodern patterning in method if not temper: an understanding, indeed a Noh-ing of ways of cultural writing and reading.

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**Notes**

1 Quoted in *The Observer Magazine*, 24th March, 1985 pp. 34-39, p. 36

2 See *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance* ed. Kennedy, Dennis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Kennedy considers Shakespeare to be 'foreign to us all'. He believes that 'foreign productions of Shakespeare, freed from the burden imposed by centuries of admiring his language, have been more ready to admit that the door to the past is locked' (p. 116). In this respect, Godard's 1987 film, mentioned in Chapter III exemplifies the ways in which the play has been appropriated to pursue a contemporary agenda, in this case, Godard's intention to foreground the Shakespeare text as commodity. In having William Shakespeare Jr employed by the cultural division of Cannon films, the actual name of the company that produced the film, Godard plays with the borderline between art and culture, fact and fiction. With Godard playing Professor Pluggy, given the task of reconstructing the art, and Woody Allen as the Alien, the film constantly interrupts the 'storyline', a fracturing that is aided in the filming by the withdrawal of the writer, Norman Mailer, who left the set with his daughter, who had been due to play Cordelia, on the first day of production (though itself now part of the mythical narrative of this film, some have it that Mailer objected to Godard's suggestion that Cordelia and Don Learo should be played as having an incestuous relationship). This and the supposed contract for the film signed on a napkin at the 1985 Cannes Film Festival all illustrate the leakages that Godard appears to encourage both within, and about the film, a text that constantly refers to its own technical construction.

3 The proposed production of *King Lear* in the RSC's 1999 - 2000 winter season offers exciting opportunities to explore further these different kinds of intertextual mappings of the Fool and Lear. The Japanese director, Yukio Ninagawa will be directing Nigel Hawthorne as Lear, and a Japanese actor, Hiroyuki Sanada as the Fool.

4 Jan Kott, when asked by Marowitz "Can Kurosawa's *Ran* really be considered a version of *King Lear*?" replied, "Levi-Strauss once said 'Every interpretation of a myth is a new myth' . . we have to challenge Shakespeare. If Shakespeare is translated into Japanese or Hebrew, obviously the director's freedom is greater. If we change the medium from stage to screen, for instance, our freedom is greater still because it is impossible, or just silly, merely to transplant a stage production onto the screen . . Kurosawa's film *Ran* is much further away from the play than Peter Brook's film version of *King Lear*. In some ways, Kurosawa is more faithful to Shakespeare in his movie than Peter Brook is in his." Marowitz, Charles, *Recycling Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 109

The notion of Kurosawa's filmic style being markedly different in his 1980s films is dealt with persuasively by Kathe Geist, who suggests that there is a distinct difference in approach in these films to those of his 1950s **jidai-geki** films. Geist, Kathe ‘Late Kurosawa: Kagemusha and Ran’. *Postscript*, vol. 12 no. 1, (1989), pp. 26-36, esp. p.32

Kabuki is a popular form of Japanese theatre created in 1568 by Okuni, a priestess who gave dance performances with her all-female troupe in Kyoto. This early kabuki vulgarized elements of the Noh dramas and because of its erotic nature and the prostitution associated with it, led to women being banned from the stage in 1628. Female roles were then taken over by boys and young men, but they too were banned for similar reasons.

For a full account of this use of Enoken read Collick's excellent Shakespeare, *Cinema and Society* esp. pp. 171-174.

A Daei Production, 1950, scenario by Shinobu Hashimoto and Akira Kurosawa, English subtitles by Donald Ritchie. The film identifies ways of seeing and in relating the views of different characters on the same event, a murder, illustrates the central question: is there a truth to which man can refer for definitive guidance? In exploring the relativity of this reality, Kurosawa delineates man's role in the shaping of reality, and morality. In 1951, Rashomon won the top prize at the Venice film festival.


“People criticise me for a lack of commitment to contemporary society. But it's an illusion, perpetuated perhaps by my fondness for the period of Japanese history I prefer when there was none of the blind master-serf relationship that came later and when the samurai were not only warriors but patrons of culture: men of global outlook...It is better to have respect for the very old than to gain knowledge about the very new...If I were to make only contemporary films, about corruption, say, or the tyranny of the bureaucracy, or liberated sex, it would be overwhelming” *The Observer Magazine* op. cit. p. 39.

Dodes'ka-den was Kurosawa's first movie in colour and was considered both the director's most passionate and most severe film, centred on Tokyo's derelicts.


I felt desperate. Every minute of inactivity had become an eternity. Yet afterwards, I received so many messages from people abroad saying, in effect, that if Japan was so difficult for me, then please come and work in their countries. I was ashamed of myself. But I felt bad blood had been so plentifully shed that in some way I came through it purified*, Observer Magazine, op. cit., p. 38. One might consider these years to have been Kurosawa’s 'hell', from which, in his own words, he emerged “purified”, his views still intact but the fervency regarding the power of his work to influence somewhat tempered by his experiences: “I believe[d making Ran] that the world would not change even if I made a direct statement …the world will not change unless we…change human nature itself…I did not think so when I was young…I have realized, however, that it does not work, The world would not change” (Geist, op. cit., p. 30).

As with Ran, Kurosawa's 1980 film Kagemusha, another **jidai-geki** movie, was only funded after George Lucas and Francis Coppola persuaded Twentieth Century-Fox to support the project. Prior to this, Dersu-Uzala (1975) had been funded by the Soviet Union, Kurosawa co-producing the project with Mosfilm.

There were difficulties from the start with budget negotiations for Kagemusha. For a while it seemed that this work would never see the light of day. Exasperated, because I wanted people all over the world to understand what ideas I had for the film, I began to draw almost daily, turning these images into “still pictures”. I completed several hundred pictures at the time...The same thing happened with Ran. A long time passed before production got under way. As I had done earlier, I used this time to draw pictures illustrating the images I had in mind for the film” (Kurosawa, Akira, *Drawing and Directing* (Shueisha, 1984), trans. Margaret Menton).

Pamphlet of Ran, op. cit.

Richie, op. cit., p. 214


Brook and Kozintsev use the close-up to bring the spectator closer to the protagonists as individuals.


Parker, op. cit., p. 414

Grilli, op. cit., p. 14

Landscape and spectacle are key elements in Kurosawa's definition of the relationship between the Fool and Lear. These elements can also be used to define differences between Kurosawa's and Kozintsev's 'foreign' readings and the imagery spoken by Shakespeare's Fool that encompasses a world, and worlds, which are both familiar, and yet unnatural. In Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* the Prophecy provides an illustration of differing visions of hypocrisy. The director visualises this world by creating a landscape that is able to communicate to the spectator the bleakness and vastness of the metaphorical wasteland to which both the Fool and Lear give voice. Vital to Kozintsev's reading of *King Lear* is his sense of the world which Lear inhabited speaking the tragedy of the man, the nature of the environment a metaphor of the harsh reality in which man must survive. Kozintsev deliberately avoids the sentimentalizing of the Fool or of his relationship with the old Lear. Instead, both are subsumed in a landscape that demands immediate attention because of the harsh realities of living which it projects. Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) identifies that for Kozintsev the landscape held the key to articulating the individual characters. Its importance and potential as a means of communication is made clear in the director's observation on some of the locations that he explored in the Kazantip peninsula where the film was shot: 'The outlines of Lear's country began to stand out, to shine through the surrounding scene of collective fish-farms...If one were to remove from this stretch of land the few rocks which were of a
different shape from the others, the rhythm would become evident, one would see the succession of identical vertical outcrops. They became fragments of gravestones, an abandoned cemetery.’ (The Space of Tragedy). It was near to a shale-burning electric power station that Kozintsev discovered a landscape that suited the bleakness of the reading that he gives of the playtext. A quite unbelievable meadow stretched out before us. It was covered as far as the horizon with uniform light grey, almost white layers, curving a little at the edges, and the rhythm of this endless repetition of curving lines was so clear that it was as if molten lava had suddenly been frozen and the waves of ash had turned to stone... Nothing like it existed upon earth and yet there it was in front of us, an irrefutable reality. This scenery had been prepared for us over the decades by the outpouring of the ashes from the burnt shale... Now it was no longer only the wind machines and sheets of water which defined the image, but the very rhythm of this dead earth, in whose folds the tiny fingers of people were lost, pawns in the encroaching terror of emptiness.’ (The Space of Tragedy). The Fool is, then, signified in this film as much by the context in which the director chooses to place him as by the words that he puts into the character’s mouth. It is this metalingual frame that serves to provide the constant chorus to the actions and words both of Lear and of the Fool, foregrounding the battle with nature that underpins and shoots through the specific anguish of humanity. The landscape is the leveller, and the king is given to understand humility not simply through the words of the Fool but by the experience of the harsh reality of discomfiting experience. The ‘pagan’ world of Korol’ Lir is located also in the psyche of a people scarred by the upheavals of the 1917 Revolution, the brutality of Stalin’s Terror, and the horrors of the Second World War.

20 By contrast, in the Kozintsev film, the battle between the British and French forces is shown as a few skirmishes and is represented symbolically by burning buildings to emphasise the effects of war. Brook mutes the actual battle further by reducing it to the sounds heard by Gloucester, whose listening face is all that is seen.

21 See Beverley B. Buchner, Japanese Films (London: McFarland & Co, 1990) for a detailed history of the making of Ran. Kurosawa’s general dissatisfaction with colour was due in part to his disbelief that the medium could do justice to the colour range of traditional Japanese culture. It is the aspiration to create just such a depth and accuracy that underpins both Kagemusha (1980) and Ran.

22 This contrasts with Kozintsev’s decision to use a profile shot of the two in the Hovel scene to make them look like identical twins. However, Kozintsev and Kurosawa do share certain approaches in the treatment of the Fool, with both keeping the character alive to the end of their respective films. The Russian director’s suggestion that ‘I love him and did not want him to die’ (David Robinson, ‘Grigori Kozintsev, 1905-1973’, Sight and Sound, 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1973) p. 150) overlooks the more practical function that his Fool plays in tying the text together, as Kyoami does in Ran. Also, Kozintsev, like Kurosawa, identifies the Fool’s function as voice of Lear’s guilt: “The shadow becomes conscience. The Fool has begun to give utterance to Lear’s most secret thoughts.” Kozintsev, op. cit. p. 215.

23 The term jo-ha-kyu originally came from Gagaku, ancient concert music imported to Japan from China. Komparu explains the meaning of the phrase to Noh drama in the following terms: ‘Jo... is a spatial element. ..Ha... a disordering element. .. Kyu... is a temporal element... jo-ha-kyu unifies the contradiction of the essentially opposing concepts of space and time, binding them with a breaking element... it allows us to apprehend the spatial balance of heaven-earth-man within time, seeing position in space and speed in time as one’. Komparu, Kunio, The Noh Drama: Principles and Perspectives (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), trans. Jane Cordyrie.

Goodwin, believes ‘Jo can be... defined as preparation or beginning, and it often has the property of an elevated and refined style. Ha has the additional meaning of break or disorder, and it has properties of agitation and multiplicity. Kyu indicates a sudden finale to resolve the dramatic action, although it normally concludes in a condition of poise or rest.’ Op. cit., p.185.


25 Ibid., p. 9.

26 English adaptation: Anne Brave. Subtitles: Cinetitles LTC.

27 Masahito Takekana identifies ‘...the transformation of the shite, the main character after the nakairi (the point at which the shite disappears off-stage before re-emerging as a “new” and ghostly character in the second act of a mugen or phantasmal Noh play)’, ‘Ritual Epiphany in Noh and Shakespeare’, Shakespeare East and West (London: Japan Library, 1996) ed. by Minoru Fujita and Leonard C. Pronko, p. 106.

28 In early Japanese cinemas, the Bunraku model (with its silent puppets) was used as the benshi interpreted the action for the viewers. ‘The influence of the benshi on Japanese cinema was crucial. They emphasised the fact that... film was there to be “read” as a collection of symbolic images, not passively experienced as a transparent window on the real world. Because of the benshi, most Japanese films still retain a separate, didactic line of discourse that mediates between the audience and the events of the diagses.’ Collick, op. cit., p.169.

29 A draft of the Ran script includes a nightmare vision wherein Hidetora is hauntated by all those that he has killed. The vision was to have been subjective and stylised in treatment. A notation in the published Ran script states that the idea for the proposed sequence was taken from Funa Benkei.


31 See Chapter VII, on Hughes’s voicing of the Prophecy speech in the 1993 Noble King Lear at the RST.

32 The public release of Ran was promoted in Britain with newspaper articles that focused on the film’s links with Shakespeare’s text, a fact that would suggest that the distributors encouraged this association.

33 It seems that Ran falls into the latter part of that era as, firstly, muskets are used while only arrows are shot in Kumonosu-Jo (two of Hidetora’s sons are shot, while Washizu, the Macbeth figure, is killed by an arrow through the throat). Also, the samurai code of loyalty is openly flouted in Ran but such behaviour is only whispered of in Kumonosu-Jo.

51 “What has always troubled me about King Lear is that Shakespeare gives his characters no past. We are plunged directly into the agonies of their present dilemmas without knowing how they come to this point. Without knowing his past, I've never really understood the ferocity of his daughters' response to Lear's feeble attempts to shed his royal power. In Ran I've tried to give Lear a history. I try to make clear that his power must rest upon a lifetime of bloodthirsty savagery. Forced to confront the consequences of his misdeeds, he is driven mad. But only by confronting his evil head on can he transcend it and begin to struggle again toward virtue” (Grilli, op. cit., p. 1).

52 “I started out to make a film about Motonari Mori, the 16th-century warlord whose three sons are admired in Japan as paragons of filial virtue. What might their story be like, I wondered, if the sons had not been so good? It was only after I was well into writing the script about these imaginary unfilial sons of the Mori clan that the similarities to Lear occurred to me. Since my story is set in medieval Japan, the protagonist's children had to be men; to divide a realm among daughters would have been unthinkable” (ibid.).

53 Hapgood asserts that “Ran is very much of its historical moment” echoing as it does what Japanese historians have come to label this period of turmoil: gekokujo, ‘the overturning of those on top by those below’. Hapgood, Robert, 'Kurosawa's Shakespeare Films', in Shakespeare and the Moving Image (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 234-249

54 In researching Japanese culture of the Sengoku Jidai period, Kurosawa found information that shaped his conception of Kyoami and the function that the character should perform: “Warlords of the period had people in their entourage of very low birth. Depending on their particular skills, they would dance, tell jokes, entertain. But their main function was to be a conversationalist. Through them, the warlord would learn about what the people he governed were really thinking. And since they were not of samurai class - you will notice that Kyoami doesn't wear a sword - they were exempted from the majority of the rules of etiquette. So Kyoami can say anything he wants” (Kurosawa, Akira, Something Like an Autobiography (New York, 1982)).

55 As has been pointed out to me by David Cope, a member of faculty at North Western University, Michigan, Kyoami also substitutes for Edgar in the Gloucester sub-plot, the weeping boy at the close of the film echoing perhaps Edgar's agony at the passing of his father. This parallel is another example of the resonance that the very possibility of mapping Ran as King Lear encourages, to compound the sense of a tragic character to the detail of Kurosawa's production.

56 Goodwin, James, Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994), p. 208

57 Casting Tatsuya Nakadai, a theatre-bred talent, as Hidetora, also created an interesting tension and contrast in roles and approaches. Nakadai had worked with Kurosawa before, having been in Kagemusha, 1980, Kurosawa's study of a remarkable moment in samurai history when a collective death wish saw thousands of samurai warriors march to certain death. It is also worth noting that Kurosawa was under pressure to reduce the running time for Ran from its edited two hours and forty-five minutes but the director resisted and the film was shown as it was.

58 Parker, Brian, ‘Ran and the Tragedy of History’, University of Toronto Quarterly, 55 iv (1986) (p. 420)

59 Kurosawa denies that Ran has a religious side: “It has none. In religious matters, I’m almost an atheist. Like many samurai, I take an interest in Zen Buddhism, but more as a kind of stoicism. They used to say, you know, that even when a samurai hasn't eaten, he picks his teeth”. Observer Magazine, 24 March, 1985, p. 39.

60 They are introduced first when Hidetora leaves his eldest son, Jiro, for the castle of his second son, Taro. The old lord immediately seeks out Lady Sué's modest retreat and in searching for her opens the doors of her temple to reveal a burnished golden image of the Buddha. Sué is not there but Hidetora finds her close by chanting a prayer to “the eternal Western Paradise”, praising “the Eternal Buddha”, “Amitabha Buddha”.

61 The Amida Buddha or Amitabha, is the Buddha of Boundless Light whose great powers will bring believers rebirth in paradise. The sect has broad appeal in Japan.

62 Tsurumaru is first introduced when Kyoami, Tango and the distracted Hidetora seek shelter from the storm. Tango initially mistakes the shadowy figure of Tsurumaru for a woman, an impression created by the young man's kimono-like robe, his slender form and his long hair.

63 Of course, it is possible to see in this binary relationship a parallel with Bakhtin's notion of carnival. The function of Kyogen as an outlet from and a re-expression of the preoccupations of the 'official' drama by employing the language and spirit of the lower body, of the common people, maps the linguistic division that Bakhtin identifies in the radical character of public 'shows': ‘The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, co-existed in their consciousness ….. And so medieval culture of folk humor was fundamentally limited to these islands of feasts and recreation. Official serious culture existed beside them but strictly divided from the marketplace' Rabelais and His World (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968) trans. Helene Iswolsky, p. 96

64 Of the differing kinds of comic drama, Kyoami probably comes closest to Taro Kaja Kyogen, the prototypical Kyogen hero, the servant of a feudal landlord fulfilling a role not dissimilar to the harlequin in the Commedia dell’arte. It would, however, be inaccurate to interpret this type of drama as social protest. Instead, the similarity is worth considering in terms of the eventual scolding that the Kyogen figure in this type of drama receives given the conclusion to Ran I have described: a weeping Kyoami shouting at the gods for his master's death but berated by the loyal Kent-figure, Tango, for not realising
that it is Man who is at fault not the gods that watch the crimes men commit. Kyoami crosses the dramatic boundary, becomes involved in the tragedy; his is not a parallel text; he is not simply the means of providing light relief or an antithetical contrast to it. Indeed, both Tsurumaru and Kyoami serve as a means of placing Hidetora and more generally of positioning Man in relation to Nature’ (Komparu, op. cit., p. 99). The sense of suffering and of dis-empowerment is particularly poignant in the closing scene, the blind Tsurumaru standing on the edge of a cliff, embodying the Buddhist sense of mono no aware, ‘beauty in the sadness of life’. He is a solitary figure standing, literally and figuratively at the brink of a precipice, an image which expresses perfectly Kurosawa’s vision of humanity, teetering, blind to the totality of Nature, dis-empowered by its own flaws, on the brink of disaster.

Indeed, in the sixteenth century it was made illegal for Noh plays to be performed outside the courts of the powerful, officially denied to the common people. Those commoners caught staging Noh were punished with public floggings and their precious costumes were confiscated.

The language of Noh is virtually incomprehensible to even the most educated Japanese so the referencing of it by Kurosawa suggests that it is in many respects a gesture, a metalingual frame made up of clichéd or stereotypical signs. Nevertheless, as a frame it is as effective in locating the discourse for the occidental as it is for a Japanese. In effect, Kurosawa is offering a parody of Noh, not its actual theatrical detail - he is popularising what for the Japanese is a mythic code. However, this referencing of cultural myth is not the episodic ‘surfing’ of a director merely plundering the store of a nation’s psyche. Kurosawa’s use of Kyoami locates Hidetora. It references the thematic links to death and to the Buddhist religion that frames the specific tragedy of the old warlord. Umberto Eco’s explanation of the difference between parody and pastiche is worth noting here. He identifies that the parodist is implicitly acknowledging the validity of that which is being parodied, while in pastiche references are used without any genuflecting to cultural mores. See Reflections On The Name Of The Rose (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983).