



KUROSAWA

Stray Dog (Nora Inu)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In *Stray Dog* a young police detective, Murakami (Toshiro Mifune), has his gun stolen by a pickpocket. Humiliated by the loss and taking it as a personal slight, he sets out to hunt down the thief – a quest that gains in urgency when the stolen gun becomes a murder weapon. Tipped off by a prostitute that the gun may be sold on the black market, Murakami takes on the guise of an unemployed drifter and, in a virtuoso eight-minute dialogue-free montage sequence, roams through the sleazy underbelly of Tokyo, his casually slouching posture at odds with the fierce watchfulness of his eyes.

Though *Stray Dog* was one of Kurosawa's biggest successes prior to *Rashomon* (1950), he always spoke of it disparagingly – 'It's just too technical. All that technique and not one real thought in it' – and this montage sequence may suggest why. Powerful and visually inventive though it is, with a sense of documentary authenticity and backed by Fumio Hayasaka's atmospheric score with its snatches of nightclub jazz, it looks a little like bravura technique for its own sake. Half as long would have been just as effective.

Stray Dog, like so many of Kurosawa's early films, teams his two favourite actors, Mifune and Takashi Shimura, pivoting the action around their contrasting and complementary screen personas. Shimura plays Murakami's section chief Sato, calmer and more settled in his personal life and a steadying influence on his younger colleague. This seems a touch schematic, and we might also expect him to be the more tolerant of the two, with greater sympathy for human weakness. But Kurosawa shows us the downside of the older man's apparent good nature: to him, all the criminals he pursues are simply evil, to be eliminated. Murakami, for all his anger and personal resentment against his quarry, can't see it so simplistically. 'I can't think that way yet,' he says. 'In the war I saw men turn bad very easily.' (The war, still recent, casts a long shadow over the film. 'He changed completely after the war,' says the killer's mother, smiling helplessly.) Murakami's 'yet' is pointed. Give him time, and he may well become like his boss – outwardly more amiable, but with the crucial sensitive edge of his human sympathy eroded.

For the moment, though, as Sato notes, his young colleague has a lot in common with the man he's hunting. 'You understand him too well,' he warns, quoting a saying that 'Mad dogs only see what they're after.' Murakami, with his obsessive pursuit, is turning into a mad dog himself, slaving and panting in the heat. Eventually even Sato starts to share in the single-minded obsession; heat is a great leveller. But the pursuit gets nowhere until the weather breaks, the skies opening in one of those torrential Kurosawan drenchings. Yet though the case is solved, there's no easy closure to grant us release. When Murakami finally confronts and disarms him, the killer – who's no more than a youth – doesn't snarl defiance but howls abjectly like a punished child. We're left with a desolate sense of lives distorted and wasted.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, February 2002

While Kurosawa's depiction of life in the poverty, crime and disease-ridden slums in *Drunken Angel* creates a vivid portrait of the underbelly of occupied Japan, the political issues of the Occupation era are more precisely – albeit metaphorically – analysed in *Stray Dog*. Detectives Murakami and Sato explicitly identify the criminal Shinjiro Yusa, who has stolen the former's gun, as a representative of the *après-guerre* generation, so that the film associates crime with the post-war period and the cultural milieu of the Occupation.

But *Stray Dog*'s perspective is more complex than that; Murakami, the flawed hero, can also be interpreted as a critical personification of traditional Japanese values. The critic Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto interprets Murakami's desperate desire to recover his gun from a Freudian perspective: the gun is the phallus. While this interpretation is tenable, it's more rewarding to read Murakami's response in a political light. The policeman's particular devotion to his own weapon may be related to the values of *bushido*, the samurai code, according to which, in the words of the Japanese author Inazo Nitobe, the sword is 'the soul of the samurai'. Thus Murakami's despair at the loss of his gun and dedication to its recovery suggest a connection with *bushido* values: in this case, the gun is the 'soul of the policeman'.

These warrior values were, of course, the values promoted by Japan's military government of the pre-war and wartime era. In the context of the film's production during the Occupation, when that militarist ethos was explicitly repudiated, it's no surprise to find such values subjected to sharp critique, as when Murakami's superior questions his obsession with recovering his own weapon, neglecting the wider problem of illegal weapons traded on the black market: 'You should have tried to get all the guns, not just your own.' The suggestion is that Murakami's *bushido*-influenced attitudes are hampering his effectiveness as a detective. The militarist past, meanwhile, is explicitly evoked in a number of scenes: when Sato interrogates a fearful bellboy at a hotel, he reassures him with the words: 'The army officers may have beaten you, but we won't.'

But violence in *Stray Dog* isn't only associated with Japan's past. The criminal Shinjiro Yusa's associations with the new Japan are underlined by the nature and context of his crimes. Whereas the gangster boss in *Drunken Angel* inhabits a traditional Japanese house, in *Stray Dog* a similar old-fashioned wooden dwelling is where Yusa murders a woman; here, tradition is associated with innocence, and the post-war with crime.

This interpretation is strengthened by the presentation of Yusa's girlfriend, the showgirl Harumi, to whom he has given an extravagant Western-style dress, paid for out of the proceeds of his criminal activities. In a visually dramatic scene, she affirms her commitment to him by putting on the dress in place of her traditional Japanese yukata, and dancing frantically until her mother tears the garment from her body. In response, Harumi breaks down and embraces her mother, implicitly rejecting both the dress and the man who gave it to her. This rejection of a Western-style garment is soon followed by her rejection of her lover, whom she betrays to Murakami.

Stray Dog thus seems to embody a distinctly ambivalent attitude to both Japanese tradition and the modern values of the West. Its conclusion, however, seems to point to a way forward, reconciling Murakami's *bushido*-inspired commitment to his weapon with his successful performance of his professional duties in the post-war police force. In the film's final scene, he apologises for having been too obsessed with the recovery of his own gun;

Sato reassures him with the knowledge that his pursuit of his own weapon has led to the police’s capture of a whole stash of illegal weapons.

In the context of the post-war constitution, which pledged Japan to pacifism, it’s surely no coincidence that the focus of *Stray Dog* is on the question of disarmament. Despite the many ambiguities of these two late-1940s masterpieces, Kurosawa, it seems, did ultimately endorse the project of the Occupation.

Alexander Jacoby, *Sight and Sound*, July 2010

STRAY DOG (NORA INU)

Director: Akira Kurosawa
Production Company: Shintoho Eiga
Producer: Sojiro Motoki
Assistant Directors: Ishiro Honda, Zenju Imaizumi
Screenplay: Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa
Director of Photography: Asaichi Nakai
Lighting: Choshiro Ishii
Editor: Toshio Goto
Art Director: So Matsuyama
Music: Fumio Hayasaka
Sound Recording: Fumio Yanoguchi
Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Cast

Toshiro Mifune (Detective Goro Murakami)
Takashi Shimura (Detective Sato)
Keiko Awaji (Harumi Namiki, Honda’s girlfriend)
Eiko Miyoshi (Harumi’s mother)
Noriko Sengoku (Honda’s mistress)
Noriko Honma (Yusa’s sister)
Reikichi Kawamura (Detective Ichikawa)
Chôko Iida (Kogetsu Hotel owner)
Eijirô Tono (the old barrelmaker)

Katsuhei Matsumoto (drinks-stall owner)
Isao Kimura (Shinjiro Yusa)
Teruko Kishi (Ogin, the female pickpocket)
Minoru Chiaki (stage director)
Ko Kimura (Yuro, the criminal)
Reisaburo Yamamoto (Honda, the suspect)
Yûnosuke Itô (theatre manager)
Masao Shimizu (Nakamura)
Teruko Kishi (Ogin)
Ichiro Sugai (manager of Hotel Yayoi)
Kokuten Kodo (custodian)
Yasushi Nagata (Abe)
Kazuko Motohashi (Mrs Sato-Tomi)
Hajime Izu (lab assistant)
Kan Yanagiya (policeman)
Eizo Tanaka (old doctor)
Shiro Mizutani (punk)
Akira Ubukata (police doctor)
Rikie Sanjo (manager’s wife)
Asao Mie (woman in pachinko parlour)
Haruko Toyama (Kintaro geisha)
Haruko Toda (Azuma Hotel madam)

Japan 1949
122 mins

KUROSAWA

Stray Dog (Nora Inu)

Wed 1 Feb 20:35; Mon 13 Feb 18:10

Drunken Angel (Yoidore Tenshi)

Thu 2 Feb 18:20; Fri 10 Feb 20:40

The Silent Duel (Shizukanaru Kettô)

Thu 2 Feb 20:40; Sat 11 Feb 18:40

Sanshiro Sugata (Sugata Sanshirô)

Fri 3 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Sun 12 Feb 15:50

Sanshiro Sugata Part Two (Zoku Sugata Sanshirô)

Fri 3 Feb 20:45; Sun 12 Feb 18:20

The Gathering Storm: Kurosawa Study Day

Sat 4 Feb 12:00

Living (Ikiru)

Sat 4 Feb 17:50; Wed 15 Feb 20:15

Kurosawa and Shakespeare, Adaptation and Reinvention: An illustrated talk by Adrian Wootton

Sun 5 Feb 15:15

Ran

Sun 5 Feb 17:30 (+ intro by Adrian Wootton, CEO of Film London and film curator); Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Sat 25 Feb 17:20

I Live in Fear (Ikimono no Kiroku)

Mon 6 Feb 18:10; Mon 13 Feb 20:40

Dreams (Yume)

Wed 8 Feb 20:30; Sun 26 Feb 15:30

Red Beard (Akahige)

Sat 11 Feb 15:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn S Sun 26 Feb 17:25mith, season co-curator);

Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)

Sun 12 Feb 13:00; Fri 17 Feb 20:40; Tue 21 Feb 18:10

Dersu Uzala

Thu 16 Feb 18:10 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Mon 27 Feb 20:10 (+ intro by Doug Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager)

Yojimbo (Yôjinbô)

Sat 18 Feb 20:45; Thu 23 Feb 20:15 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia, season co-curator)

Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no Kyoshikoku)

Sun 19 Feb 18:30; Sat 25 Feb 12:40

Mâdadayo

Mon 20 Feb 20:20; Tue 28 Feb 18:00

Philosophical Screens: Throne of Blood

Tue 21 Feb 20:10

A.K.

Wed 22 Feb 20:50; Sat 25 Feb 20:45

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