



THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

PROTECTION OF AUTHOR'S COPYRIGHT

This copy has been supplied by the Library of the University of Otago on the understanding that the following conditions will be observed:

1. To comply with s56 of the Copyright Act 1994 [NZ], this thesis copy must only be used for the purposes of research or private study.
2. The author's permission must be obtained before any material in the thesis is reproduced, unless such reproduction falls within the fair dealing guidelines of the Copyright Act 1994. Due acknowledgement must be made to the author in any citation.
3. No further copies may be made without the permission of the Librarian of the University of Otago.

SAMURAI *LEAR*?
**THE CROSS-CULTURAL INTERTEXTUALITY OF AKIRA
KUROSAWA'S *RAN***

Karl Gorringe

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts

at the University of Otago, Dunedin
New Zealand

Date: August 20, 2007

Abstract

Much of the critical literature on Akira Kurosawa's film *Ran* has focused, whether in part or in whole, on its intertextuality. In particular, critical analysis of the film has largely focused on the intertextual relationship between *Ran* and its dominant Western intertext, Shakespeare's monumental play *King Lear*. However, the critical concentration on this intertext has had a number of effects.

In particular, it has meant that the role of other intertextual sources, specifically those of Japanese origin, has not been explored independently without reference to the Shakespearean intertext. It has also meant that the influence of Shakespeare's play has been overstated or presented in a misleading manner that distorts the actual impact the play has had on the film.

With this in mind, this thesis takes a particular approach, initially not discussing the Shakespearean intertext at all. Instead the thesis locates *Ran* in the wider context of Japanese samurai cinema and that genre's thematic concern with *bushidō*, the warrior code of conduct. In particular it is argued that the Kurosawa samurai films preceding *Ran* adopt a deeply critical attitude to *bushidō*, pointing towards its obsolescence and lack of usefulness as a valid method of engaging with the wider world.

Then *Ran* itself is discussed, and it is argued that the film uses a combination of intertextual sources, specifically Japanese history and the Kurosawa films, in order to demonstrate the devastating impact of *bushidō*. It is argued that the film exposes the brutal violence that underpins *bushidō*, in particular in a brutal battle scene that uses material from Kurosawa's other samurai cinema to make Kurosawa's most profound cinematic anti-war statement. It is

also argued that a discussion of gender roles, and the way that the code makes victims of both men and women, even the innocent, completes the critique by showing how a single act of revenge can destroy an entire society.

Having concentrated on the Japanese context, the thesis then returns to the dominant intertext studied in Western circles, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in order to reassess the intertextual influence that the play has had on the film. It is suggested that despite Kurosawa's denials of influence, that the play has had a definite impact, but one that has been overstated or presented in misleading fashion by critics who have adopted a largely comparative approach when assessing the intertextual relationship between film and play. This thesis suggests that the use of *King Lear* as an intertext is most helpfully understood in terms of its use as a framework for Kurosawa to build upon, adding his own material and adapting Lear's thematic concerns to his own ends. In particular, it is argued that the *King Lear* intertext, as well as Noh theatre, gives the film a structural and thematic unity that adds weight to Kurosawa's critique of the devastating consequences of *bushidō*.

Preface

The roots of this enterprise go back a very long way, in fact, back to my childhood. In the glory days of television, when films like *Ran* got an airing in timeslots that actually did them justice, I remember seeing this film. It was, in fact, a single image that inspired me, when the time came, to write about this film. The sight of Hidetora surveying the carnage that he has created, his face etched with the horror of self-knowledge, is something I have never forgotten.

This thesis has been a labour of love, and although at times I have felt very much like it would never be over, I am glad that I have stuck it out. It has been, without question, the most difficult, frustrating, soul-destroying, inspiring, intellectually rewarding, satisfying and exciting project of my life. A total emotional rollercoaster ride.

At times it has felt like I had spawned a monster that seemed to grow more uncontrollable with every passing day. Yet it feels good to know that I managed to tame it, and the words you have in front of you are the results.

That said, I have had a love hate relationship with the film, and have got to know it far better than I ever expected to. I have absolutely no desire to watch *Ran* again any time soon. I have joked many times about my half-serious plan to ceremonially melt my copy of the DVD to celebrate the completion of this thing! Thus far, I have resisted temptation, but you never know.

Of course, taming the beast was not entirely my own work, and there are many people to thank.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Alain Silver, Dr Stephen Prince and Dr David Desser, for their valuable advice and input.

I would also like to acknowledge David Cappel Rice, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, for his friendship and mentoring of me throughout my time in Dunedin.

Many thanks also to my friends in Dunedin and beyond, particularly Meg for her advice and support, and Carol for her invaluable help as a proof reader in the final stages.

I also need to acknowledge my fellow English postgrads for their companionship and company on this journey. It helped a lot to know that whatever I was going through, chances are that I was not the first person to go through it, and I certainly won't be the last!

Much gratitude to the staff of the Otago University Department of English. In particular, I am endlessly grateful to my supervisor, Dr Lyn Tribble, for her invaluable support, guidance and suggestions. Lyn, thank you so much. You are worth your weight in gold.

I would also like to thank Dr Paul Ryder, my seventh form English teacher, and my good friend, for his intervention in my life at a critical time.

Last, but definitely not least, thanks to my family, for being there in so many ways. I particularly dedicate this to my mother and father, who in more ways than I could possibly list on paper, made this possible.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Preface	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction: <i>Ran</i> in Context: Intertextuality, Film and Culture	1
Chapter One: <i>Bushidō</i> on film and pre- <i>Ran</i> Kurosawa	13
Chapter Two: <i>Ran</i> and the <i>bushidō</i> code	37
Chapter Three: Samurai <i>Lear</i> ?	62
Conclusion	89
Works Cited	93

Introduction

Ran in Context: Intertextuality, Culture and Film

The films of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa have long been a fertile area for critical enquiry, particularly in the Western world. This is perhaps unsurprising, for unlike the films of some of his equally celebrated but somewhat lesser-known contemporaries, Kurosawa's films show definite and well-documented Western influence. He is also one of a handful of Japanese directors whose films have been celebrated in Western film circles and have been hailed as seminal moments in world cinema. Such notable filmmakers as George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese hold Kurosawa in high regard.

Ran was one of the last films Kurosawa ever made. It was certainly the last samurai film he ever made, and that is significant in itself. In *Ran*, Kurosawa skilfully combines, as he does with many of his other films, Western and Japanese culture to create a work of art that is his final artistic statement about the samurai, a warrior class that was an ongoing source of fascination and inspiration for him throughout his long career as a filmmaker.

Serious critical study of Kurosawa's *Ran*, unlike that of some of his other films, is still evolving, and somewhat limited in scope. The film was only released in 1985, so it has only been in circulation for a little more than twenty years. Its combination of both Western and Eastern culture has meant that many studies of the film have focused in some form on its intertextuality, and study has tended to confine itself to a relatively narrow area of enquiry.

In particular, the vast majority of critical work thus far has focused, whether in part or whole, on the intertextual relationship between *Ran* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and its status as an adaptation of Shakespeare's play. The nature of that intertextual relationship is a source of much critical debate, but nonetheless it is next to impossible to find any critical

interpretation of the film that does not at some point make mention of the intertextual connection between Kurosawa's film and Shakespeare's play. Shakespeare as intertext has proved to be far and away the most fertile source of enquiry in Western critical circles.

To begin with then, it needs to be acknowledged that much of the critical literature on *Ran* is part of a much larger body of work that critically analyses films that are, whether, in part or whole, adaptations of Shakespearean plays. Rothwell, in his excellent *Literature/Film Quarterly* article on twentieth century Shakespearean film criticism, provides a survey of historical trends in the field. Rothwell identifies three stages in the criticism of Shakespearean film:

First, commentators rose to the bait of the impossible question: "Is it Shakespeare?"; next, they avoided it or manipulated it, and, lastly, ignored it altogether. It has been a movement from Victorian conservatism to modernist expansiveness to post-modernist permissiveness. A text-centric preoccupation with literal translation of Shakespeare's language into film has gradually and sometimes imperceptibly given way to a more open and adventurous foray by both auteurs and critics into discovering that which is special and unique about each movie. (82-83)

Rothwell's comment is a useful starting point for a brief discussion of the field of modern Shakespearean film adaptation criticism. Rothwell's observation of the progression from "text-centric" to "special and unique" is an observation of a general trend, although some recent critics can be situated at various points along that spectrum.

Because *Ran* was not released until 1985, late in the twentieth century, the large majority of critics writing about the film, from the perspective of Shakespearean adaptation, have presented it in a favourable light. Moreover, as critical approaches have become more sophisticated there has been a movement towards analysing cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare as cinema, rather than translations of plays. Writing in 1988, Davies (152-153) broke relatively new ground by discussing the visual language of *Ran* as well as the wider

thematic concerns of the film, although his analysis of *Ran* is limited because it takes the approach that *Ran* is Kurosawa's *Lear*.

The 1980s, the decade in which Davies's book was released, was also the decade in which a new mode of criticism emerged, what could be called "ideology-centred criticism":

Leaving behind the notion that film adaptation should passively "realize" Shakespeare, this critical mode conceived of film adaptation as an ideological process. Shakespeare films actively recast Shakespeare's text in the service of particular political or ideological ends, ends which the critic teases out for critique. Ideology - centred criticism has a specific and general horizon. In the act of re-interpreting a Shakespeare play, each Shakespearean film appropriates Shakespeare's considerable cultural authority for a director's or producer's political vision.

However, this approach still sees Shakespeare as the prime cultural authority:

The most productive recent criticism of Shakespeare on film has taken up this approach, asking not only "how have the formal features of Shakespeare's script been adapted to film?" but also "to what end (s) is Shakespeare being used in this film and "how does this film (re) produce, change or contest Shakespeare's cultural authority?" (Lanier 66)

Approaching *Ran* as an adaptation of Shakespeare is a valid critical tack to take, but for the purposes of this thesis, it has severe limitations. In order to better understand the problem with this approach to *Ran*, it is necessary to seek out critical opinion from Kurosawa's own country, Japan.

In one of the most recent studies of Kurosawa's entire cinematic output, published in 2000, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto offers a Japanese perspective on what it is easy to forget is a largely Western, and often Eurocentric, body of critical literature on Kurosawa. Yoshimoto points out what he sees as limitations of a whole range of critical interpretations of *Throne of*

Blood, also based on Shakespeare, in this case *Macbeth*, but his assessments could equally apply to critical appraisals of *Ran*. Yoshimoto is quick to point out that he has no difficulty with comparison, but that it becomes problematic when “used as a means of establishing or reinforcing a hierarchical relation between the original and the adaptation regardless of the specific value accorded to each term of the hierarchical dichotomy.” (251-252)

Yoshimoto argues that Kurosawa criticism aims to “assert the Japaneseness of *Throne of Blood*” (253) and that most critics of *Throne of Blood* only bother discussing it at all because of its contribution “to the self-production of Shakespeare’s play as a great canonical work” (261). Although Yoshimoto’s argument is somewhat reductive, he does give food for thought. Just as with *Throne of Blood*, it is not overstating the case to say that a lot of *Ran* criticism has focused on a comparative approach – spending much time pointing out similarities and differences between Kurosawa’s films and his Shakespearean source material, demonstrating how Kurosawa’s “version” of Shakespeare manifests itself on the screen, with some critics arguing that the results are inferior, others that the results are important in their own right. It is tempting to suggest that much less critical attention in Western countries would have been focused on *Ran* and *Throne of Blood* if they had not been based on Shakespeare.

Future criticism must take care not to fall into this trap, and the contribution that this thesis makes to this discourse is no exception. Above all, what criticism of *Ran* has not often done successfully thus far is to look at the film as a whole, in terms of how it is a product of not just Shakespeare, but a whole range of intertextual sources. Critical discussion about any of these elements is always going to be reductive and limited unless it is put in some kind of broader context that sees films such as *Ran* as something much more than masterful adaptations of works that have supreme status in the canon of Western literature.

In particular, *Ran* is notable for its use of a range of Japanese intertexts such as samurai cinema, in particular, it will be argued, the films of Kurosawa himself. The film also references Japanese history and like the other Kurosawa film based on Shakespeare, *Throne of Blood*, is also heavily influenced by Noh theatre, a traditional Japanese art form.

This is not to say that criticism of the film has entirely neglected discussion of these other kinds of intertextuality. There are studies of Kurosawa's that have looked at the wider contexts of *Ran*, and none of the intertexts discussed in this thesis are being examined for the first time.

However, the approach that this thesis takes is somewhat different because it deliberately takes Shakespeare out of the equation, at least initially, in order to more critically examine the other intertexts of the film, in particular those provided by Japanese culture and history, which are arguably just as important for developing an understanding of the film as the context of Shakespearean film adaptation which has inevitably dominated critical discussion in the Western world.

Before the intertexts of *Ran* can be examined, it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework for the discussion. This thesis will make no attempt to enter into the debate about intertextual theory, and in the interests of simplicity the concept will only be employed in order to provide a beginning point for a discussion of the intertextual nature of Kurosawa's *Ran*. With this in mind, a good place to begin is to offer a basic definition of intertextuality, and there can arguably be no better definition than that offered by Kristeva, who is credited with inventing the term. According to Kristeva, intertextuality is "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). At its simplest level, intertextual theory acknowledges that any text is a product of a multiplicity of other texts, and *Ran* is no exception, incorporating and transforming material from a wide variety of cultural sources, including, as has been already mentioned, Western culture, in the form of Shakespeare's *King*

Lear, and Japanese culture, in the form of film, traditional art forms such as Noh theatre, as well as history.

It must be added here that for the purposes of this discussion, “text” is given the widest possible definition. Kristeva’s original definition, of course, confines the terms of discussion to literature. When dealing with film as a text, of course, such a definition has to be widened. In particular as well as acknowledging that *Ran* interacts with specific intertexts already identified in the critical literature, it also interacts with and forms part of a number of discursive traditions.

The presence of these intertexts is not ever immediately obvious, and it is important to observe as Frow does, that any identification of an intertext is an interpretive act, and that “the intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading” (46). A critic identifies an intertext as being present in a particular work, and then establishes a case for the existence of that intertext, the nature of its presence and its importance to understanding the nature of that particular work. In order for that case to be robust, it ought to be based on substantial textual evidence. As will be demonstrated, some of the critical arguments presented for the nature of *Ran*’s intertextuality do not hold up under closer examination.

A discussion of *Ran* also needs to be put in the context of the theory of film adaptation. The film theorist Dudley Andrew has provided some useful categories by which film adaptation can be more easily understood in a theoretical sense. Dudley calls these three broad categories borrowing, intersection and fidelity of transformation.

In broad terms, borrowing is the most frequent mode of adaptation, and in this mode the artist uses in fairly extensive fashion the material or idea of a successful text. (98)

Adaptation of Shakespeare is in this category, including Kurosawa’s use of *Ran* as an intertext.

Intersection is a mode that works in direct opposition to borrowing. In intersection, the uniqueness of the source text is maintained to such an extent that it is intentionally not assimilated in the process of adaptation. Andrew uses Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* as a prime example, noting that such works are characterised by their refusal or fear to adapt their source text. (100)

Finally, Andrew deals with fidelity of transformation, a way of discussing adaptation which held sway over the first critics who encountered *Throne of Blood*, although there were some critics who when they first encountered *Ran*, adopted the fidelity approach, for example Peter Ackroyd, writing for *Spectator*, who rather scathingly and reductively assesses the film as "essentially Shakespeare ... stripped of its human dimension, and forced within a schematic framework derived from quite different attitudes or preoccupations" (37). Andrew calls this approach "tiresome" (100) because it assumes that the task of adapting a text for film is to cinematically reproduce the essence, or spirit of the original text. He argues that such an approach has little value, and assumes that film and literature, as disparate expressive mediums, can be adequately compared. He goes on to observe that:

Generally film is found to work from perception toward signification, from external facts to interior motivations and consequences, from the givenness of a world to the meaning of a story cut out of that world. Literary fiction works oppositely. It begins with signs (graphemes and words) building to propositions which attempt to develop perception. As a product of human language it naturally treats human motivation and values, seeking to throw them out onto the external world, elaborating a world out of a story. (101)

There are fundamental differences in the way that film and literature construct meaning, and hence fundamental differences in the way that they must necessarily be interpreted. In the most obvious terms, films use the visual to construct meaning, and

literature uses words. For example, when constructing the complex inner life of a character, literature uses linguistic techniques, for example metaphor and simile, or different narrative points of view, to describe in detail the complex interior world of its characters. Film does not have this luxury. Much of this interior life must be implied or suggested through the use of cinematic techniques, for example, the use of camera angles, or different kinds of camera shots, or through the expressive power of the actors portraying characters on the screen. Because linguistic and visual mediums use vastly different techniques to create this inner life, it is impossible to compare them adequately, and especially reductive to compare a cinematic rendition of a story to a literary one and suggest that one is superior to the other.

Keeping these contexts in mind, this thesis takes a deliberate point of view on *Ran's* intertextuality. It is a reading of the film that adopts a particular strategy. It has already been noted that the vast majority of criticism on the film has in some form mentioned the presence of Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a major intertext for the film. The difficulty with this particular approach to the film is that it has prevented an assessment of the impact of other kinds of intertextuality, and in particular those of Japanese origin.

In order to fairly assess *Ran* as a piece of Japanese cinema and look at the other Japanese cultural intertexts, it is necessary, at least initially, to take Shakespeare out of the intertextual equation. In order to achieve this, the first two chapters of this thesis avoid any discussion of *King Lear* as an intertext for *Ran*. Instead, they focus solely on the Japanese cultural context and making a case for how the culture of Japan, in several different forms, contributes to the film.

More specifically, this thesis looks at the film in terms of how it is representative of its genre, the samurai film, and where the film fits within the wider context of that genre. In particular, it focuses on the role of the *bushidō* code, the samurai code of behaviour that has attained mythic status in Japanese life, and examines how *Ran* responds to and is highly

critical of the historical role of *bushido* in Japanese society, as it is depicted on film. After doing this, the thesis focuses on *King Lear*, to re-evaluate the role of this intertext in terms of the way it interacts with Kurosawa's response to the cinematic representation of *bushidō*. There is also some discussion of the use of Noh theatre as an intertext.

Chapter One, "Bushido on film and pre-Ran Kurosawa" establishes a number of contexts for the further discussion of the film, although it does not specifically discuss *Ran* itself. The chapter gives a brief history of samurai cinema in Japan, in order to situate Kurosawa's films within that discourse. The chapter also explains some of the basic principles of the *bushidō* code, the samurai code of conduct that is essential to understanding samurai cinema in general, including Kurosawa's own samurai films. Following that discussion, the chapter examines Kurosawa's own samurai films, looking in particular at Kurosawa's artistic response to the samurai cinema tradition, and in particular his contribution and response to the representation of the *bushidō* code in samurai film. The chapter concentrates on four films: *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, *Sanjuro* and *Kagemusha*, showing how those films incorporate and respond to *bushidō*, in particular the *giri/ninjo* dichotomy that dominates the plot and themes of samurai cinema. In particular the chapter demonstrates how Kurosawa incorporates and adapts the traditions of Japanese samurai cinema in order to ultimately provide a critique of *bushidō*, demonstrating the hypocrisy and hopeless idealism of the code. The chapter also demonstrates how Kurosawa adopts the conventions and symbols of samurai cinema in order to subvert them. The chapter argues that Kurosawa ultimately rejects *bushidō* as a valid way of responding to the world, although avoiding devaluing it entirely.

Chapter Two, "*Ran* and the Bushido Code" focuses exclusively on the one film. Using the frames of discussion established in Chapter One, it looks in detail in *Ran* as a samurai film. It argues that *Ran* builds on the thematic concerns of Kurosawa's other samurai films

and takes those films' subversive strategies to an extreme that denude the *bushidō* code of almost any value whatsoever. In particular, the chapter illustrates how the film uses material from the films discussed in Chapter One, as well as other intertexts, particularly a famous story from the life of the legendary samurai warrior Motonari Mori, and an examination of gender roles, to provide a devastating critique of *bushidō*.

The chapter closely examines particular scenes in the film in the light of what they have to say about the dark consequences of *bushidō*.

In particular, the chapter devotes considerable time to a close reading of the much celebrated battle scene in the film, a visually stunning set piece that is Kurosawa's final statement on the horrors of war, and the bloody consequences of a code of behaviour that at its heart is not about honour and justice, but about violence and bloodshed. The chapter demonstrates how elements of the four films discussed in the first chapter have been incorporated into this scene and transformed in order to create a stunning statement about the human cost of *bushidō*.

In addition, the chapter examines how the film uses gender to complete its devastating critique of the code. There is a detailed discussion of the representation of Lady Kaede, both discussing her intertextuality as well as how the limits placed on her by the patriarchal system of *bushidō* prove to be costly for all concerned and also demonstrate the perverse nature of *giri*, one of the founding principles of samurai conduct. There is also a brief discussion of the role of the innocent victims in this scenario, the pious Lady Sue and her brother Tsurumaru.

Having concentrated largely on Japanese contexts for the film in chapters one and two, Chapter Three revisits *Ran* in relationship to its dominant Western intertext, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as well as looking at how, Noh, traditional Japanese theatre, has influenced the film. The chapter begins with an examination of Kurosawa's understandable reluctance to admit how much Shakespeare's play has influenced the film and suggests that this was done

in order to establish artistic autonomy. This is put in the theoretical context of Harold Bloom's much discussed theory of the 'anxiety of influence'. The chapter further argues that, to use Bloom again, there is an *agonistic* relationship between Kurosawa and Shakespeare, based on rivalry and conflict and a desire on the part of Kurosawa for his film to be seen as a separate entity from Shakespeare's play.

The second part of the chapter looks at critical responses to *Ran* in terms of the critical obsession with comparing the play and the film. In particular, it looks at how the discussion of the Shakespearean intertext has manifested itself. It gives examples of what results when this comparative mode of discussion is taken too far and the dubious critical conclusions that have been drawn about the extent of the influence of *King Lear* on Kurosawa's film. In particular it looks at critical arguments about the influence of *King Lear* on the characters in the film as well as the pointless critical tendency to compare Lear and Hidetora. In the light of the discussions of the earlier chapters of the thesis, demonstrates how other intertexts can also explain the film's form and content in wholly more satisfying and straightforward fashion, demonstrating how the material from the intertexts in Chapter Two provide more satisfying sources for the intertext of the film. There is also a discussion of the other theatrical context that must be taken into consideration when discussing *Ran*, that of traditional Japanese Noh theatre. The chapter argues that Noh is just as important a theatrical context as Shakespeare, providing the film with a thematic and structural unity that is appropriate to its genre and thematic concerns.

The final section of the chapter makes a case for what the film actually borrows from Shakespeare. It is argued that Kurosawa uses the basic plot outline of *King Lear* as a framework to build upon, but all the time adding to it and introducing elements that enrich it as a work of art, but more than that, add resonance to Kurosawa's examination and critique of the depiction of the samurai in Japanese film. The chapter includes some discussion of the

character of Kyoami, the Fool, suggesting he shows the influence of Shakespeare's character, and also compares the apocalyptic vision of both works, by looking at the apocalyptic set pieces of both, *Ran*'s battle scene and *King Lear*'s storm. It looks at how both works use these set pieces to symbolise social disintegration and give the work its thematic and structural unity. Some attempt is made to compare the endings of both works as well.

By first concentrating purely on Japanese intertexts for *Ran* and demonstrating how those intertexts inform our understanding of the film, then looking at the Western intertexts from the perspective of how these intertexts interact with the Japanese, this thesis hopes to demonstrate how taking a particular point of view on *Ran*'s intertextuality can enlighten and inform our reading of a film text. In doing so the thesis will examine the sophisticated and complex nature of the intertextual strategy that Kurosawa adopts in order to make his final artistic statement on the devastating impact of *bushidō*.

Chapter One

Bushidō on film and pre-*Ran* Kurosawa

The samurai films made by Kurosawa that precede *Ran* draw on a rich tradition of samurai cinema that dates back to the early twentieth century. This tradition has had a great influence on all of Kurosawa's samurai films, although it is a tradition that Kurosawa incorporates for a specific purpose. Kurosawa's films employ elements of this tradition in order ultimately to reject its values and principles. These films do in some measure endorse, but in large measure subvert and critique, the mythology of the samurai warrior and the code of *bushidō*, the samurai code of behaviour and ethics.

Kurosawa's films expose the realities behind the myth of loyalty, self-sacrifice and honourable conduct. It is no accident that most of Kurosawa's samurai films were made after the Second World War, and show increased disillusionment with the warrior code. They have central characters who are struggling to find their place in a world that no longer considers them valuable.

The titular characters of *The Seven Samurai* struggle to preserve traditional samurai values in a society that no longer has a respect for those values. Some are amoral like the samurai for hire in *Yojimbo*, where the idea of serving a higher cause or purpose is replaced with serving the highest bidder. In *Sanjuro* even behaving like a warrior brings not a sense of identity and purpose but alienation. Others, like the treacherous Washizu in *Throne of Blood*, find themselves in an environment where loyalty no longer exists, and the environment is one of suspicion and fear, where a warrior kills not out of duty, but a sense of self-preservation. In *Kagemusha*, for the titular character, acting dutifully is ultimately rewarded with social isolation and death.

Films such as *The Seven Samurai* and *Kagemusha* are part of a cinema form that is known as *jidaigeki*, or period film. Unsurprisingly, given the central role that the samurai played in Japanese society for hundreds of years, the activities of samurai are often depicted in *jidaigeki*. Samurai, a group of professional warriors that came into being in the eleventh or twelfth century in Japan, have attained mythic status in Japanese society. The *jidaigeki* made about samurai contribute to the mythology surrounding the samurai class.

Jidaigeki about samurai are largely set in the years from 1188-1868, covering the Kamakura, Momoyama, Muromachi and Tokugawa eras, a historical period that approximately equates to the rise and fall of the samurai warrior class. The contribution of the samurai film to the history of Japanese cinema was initially undistinguished; however some attention to the development of the genre is necessary to put Kurosawa's contribution in some kind of context.

The first really significant samurai films began to be made in Japan in the 1920s. They were the early examples of a type of samurai film known as the *chambara* or sword film. They skyrocketed to popularity after the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923. Their format was a direct result of the social upheaval that resulted from that event. These films had realistic violence and also featured a kind of hero that at this time was new to Japanese cinema, a warrior who was an individual, and refused to conform to societal norms. These early *chambara* were enormously popular with Japanese audiences, who liked not just the violence, but also the questioning of traditional authority.

In the late 1920s, the non-conformist samurai character was further developed with the introduction of the *ronin*, or masterless samurai. The *ronin* in these *chambara* took non-conformity to an extreme. They were loyal to nobody, even nihilistic. Among the most powerful and influential of these films was Masahiro Makino's *Street of Masterless Samurai*

(1928-1929), the story of men who questioned their feudal loyalty. The film had a lasting influence on a number of directors including Kurosawa. (Richie *Japanese Cinema* 19-20)

Chambara in this vein continued to be made throughout the early 1930s, although the government increasingly took notice of their popularity, as well as the increasing use of non-traditional Western-influenced filming techniques. By 1937 the government had seized total control of the film industry, and films critical of traditional Japanese society, including realistically violent *chambara* and other *jidaigeki* were banned.

With such iron-fisted control of the film industry by government, few *jidaigeki* were made in the 1940s. However, during the Second World War, as Davis (134) notes, a number of government sponsored films were released that sought to glorify traditional Japanese values, including those of the samurai, which was especially important for national morale during wartime. Davis sees these films as representative of what he calls the monumental style. Such films, which actually started being made in 1938, are to Davis “an attempt to sanctify the feudal heritage that was a permanent historical backdrop for the *jidaigeki*” (41).

Kurosawa himself produced a film along these lines, 1943's *The Most Beautiful*. Although the film was not a *jidaigeki*, its sentiments were similarly an endorsement of traditional Japanese societal values. The film was a documentary about a group of women making optical instruments for the Japanese war effort. It is an affirmation of the importance of the home front to Japanese success in the Second World War. Although essentially a piece of government-sanctioned propaganda like many films of its time, Kurosawa nonetheless manages to imbue the film with no small measure of humanity, and creates characters that are multifaceted.

At this point, an understanding of the warrior code, or *bushidō*, is essential to understand the samurai films that were made in the period following 1937. Prince defines it as follows:

Bushidō emphasised courage, integrity, fortitude and fealty. The warrior ideal focused on the development of the individual's capabilities for strength: physical, moral and spiritual. The ideal samurai combined athletic prowess with moral courage and unswerving allegiance to his lord. His martial skills received continual test in battle, and his moral development was expected to be no less rigorous. *Bushidō* achieved an imaginative and cultural dominance in Japanese life . . . (118)

Silver notes the complex fashion in which the bushido code evolved, and the long time frame during which this occurred:

As an unwritten code according to which a warrior should pattern his life, *bushidō* had an abstract power. The quasi-paradox of possessing a conception of appropriate lifestyle without specific organising principles reflects the complex, centuries-long process by which *bushidō* evolved: practically, on the field of battle, ideologically, through the guardians of the culture, aesthetically, among the poets and storytellers, and ethically, with the social and religious philosophers. (21)

It is also worth mentioning that the first serious written account of the code of *bushidō* did not appear until the seventeenth century, which was during the Tokugawa era, as mentioned already, a time of relative peace where the samurai were not often called on to be warriors. This means that the code of behaviour was recorded retrospectively.

Cinema's contribution to the discourse on the samurai was necessarily retrospective as well. Samurai films are as much a part of the mythology of the samurai warrior as any other medium. The films almost certainly present a samurai world that never existed in reality.

The plot of samurai films is based around two concepts that are fundamental to the warrior code. The nature of these concepts means they invariably come into conflict with one another. One is *giri*, or "right reason", which in practical terms is loyalty to one's family and lord, and the other is *ninjo*, which roughly translates as instinct, inclination or natural conscience, but is often defined as proper judgment. The potential for moral confusion that

these two concepts create is an underlying theme of most samurai films. This confusion arises because the samurai receives conflicting directions from two sources and struggles to resolve them. (Silver 23-24)

It is usually acts of violence that cause the tension between *giri* and *ninjo*, and it is also subsequent acts of violence that resolve this tension. By its very nature the warrior code glorifies violence, so acts of violence carried out onscreen are always glorified as well, given that they are carried out in the name of *ninjo* or *giri*.

The main weapon used to carry out such acts of violence is the sword, which is often referred to as “the soul of the samurai”. To a trained samurai, the sword is much more than just a weapon to be used in battle. It is an extension of the self. So when a samurai gives away, uses, breaks or otherwise is parted from his weapon it is a moment of great significance on the screen. Silver (33) gives a case in point:

It is no exaggeration for the clan retainers in Masaki Kobayashi’s *Hara Kiri (Seppuku)*, (1962) to be horror-struck upon learning that a *ronin* has pawned his swords to support his starving family. When he exchanges steel blades for those of bamboo, he reduces himself analogously, as for the retainers the true samurai is only as resilient and unbreakable as his blade: he *is* his sword. In selling it, he forfeits not merely his honour but, in their eyes at least, his very being.

Kurosawa is well aware of the significance of sword symbolism, and his samurai films often have scenes in which swords are important symbolic objects. The importance of the sword to the understanding of Kurosawa’s cinema will be covered in some detail in the individual discussions of films later in the chapter.

The significance of the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo* is well exemplified by Mizoguchi’s *Genroku Chushingura* (1942) which was made with government sponsorship. For Davis the film is the epitome of the monumental style defined earlier in the chapter.

Davis argues that “more than any monumental film, *Genroku Chushingura* sacramentalises Japanese tradition and perception” and that the film’s camera technique lets the viewer “learn to perceive in a way consonant with Japanese aesthetics and religion” (132).

Genroku Chushingura is one of the most acclaimed and famous screen versions of a samurai story that has attained mythic status through its endless retellings both in print and on film. A young lord attacks a master of ceremonies who has been slandering him. As punishment, the lord is ordered to commit *hara kiri*, or ritual disembowelment with his own sword. The retainers take revenge on behalf of their dead master, and assassinate the master of ceremonies, but their act is in direct defiance of their shogun. As punishment, they are ordered to commit *hara kiri* themselves.

Mizoguchi’s film is thematically a perfect illustration of the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo* that drives samurai cinema, although the film is much more of an endorsement of the *bushidō* code than samurai films produced after the Second World War. The warriors’ revenge is an act of *ninjo*, the proper course of action according to the code of *bushidō*, but of course in seeking to avenge their master’s death, they have ignored the *giri* that they owe to the shogun. Their death is the only possible result, but having acted with honour according to the code, they are permitted a death by *hara kiri*, which in the code of *bushidō* is still an honourable death.

Genroku Chushingura is also very interesting from a stylistic perspective. Although the film is all about samurai, it contains almost no violent acts, given that the action happens during the peaceful Tokugawa era. This means that when an act of violence happens, it is of major significance. The first, in the opening scene of the film, is the Lord Asano’s attack on the master of ceremonies, which provides the impetus for the rest of the film. However, his act of *hara kiri*, and the subsequent assassination of the master of ceremonies and the suicides of all the *ronin* are all off-screen events. The violence in the film is implied, rather than

demonstrated realistically. This is a bloodless film about warriors and the fact that none of the violence is ever shown adds to the mythologisation of samurai life as it is presented on screen. Mizoguchi's film never forces the viewer to confront the grim, violent reality of the deaths.

In fact, what takes up most of the screen time in the film is talk. Most of the movie is dialogue about the appropriate response to Lord Asano's death. In order to conceal their real intention the head of the samurai must persuade his clan that they do not intend to take revenge for Lord Asano's death. The great irony of this of course, is that they must be deceptive and pretend to be dishonourable in order to create the conditions to honour their dead lord. They must initially take no action; in fact do nothing for two years, before they can finally act.

However, it is overstating the case to say that the film entirely endorses the code of *bushidō*. There are a number of scenes that call into question the value of a code of conduct that willingly sends men to their deaths in great numbers. There are moments when Mizoguchi is subtly critical of the warriors' behaviour, and the film raises complicated questions about what price men are willing to pay for honour. But nonetheless the film stops short of overtly criticising, let alone condemning, the *bushidō* code.

Japan suffered a heavy defeat in World War Two and in the aftermath of the war was subject to a humiliating and prolonged occupation by American forces. The occupation had a huge influence on the Japanese film industry. Studios were strongly discouraged from making films that encouraged any kind of traditional values, including those of the samurai. Films like *Genroku Chushingura* became a thing of the past and were impossible to make in a post-war film climate hostile to the values that such films promoted. Yoshimoto (226) notes that tight controls over filmmaking exerted by the US nearly destroyed the *jidaigeki* genre, with only seven *jidaigeki* made in 1946. Controls were gradually relaxed, but in 1950

companies that had built their reputation on making *jidaigeki* were still limited to making one per month. In the light of the Japanese defeat there was also increased disillusionment with tradition, including the warrior ideal which had been the basis of Japanese society for hundreds of years, as Japan tried to make sense of itself in the traumatic aftermath of the Second World War. Kurosawa's post-war film output was undoubtedly influenced by these conditions:

Jidaigeki was also gradually losing its fundamental source of energy and vitality with the radical reconceptualisation of modern Japanese history. Until the end of the war, the pivotal point of historical disjunction had been the end of the Edo and the beginning of the Meiji. After the defeat, however, it was August 15, 1945, that became at least as significant as the Meiji restoration in marking a historical discontinuity. For the post-war Japanese cinema, what was more important was how to deal with the immediate past and contemporary chaos, and its disastrous consequences. Japanese cinema responded to the necessity of asserting the radical newness of post-war Japan, even if it turned out to be only imaginary, and to a lesser degree, the necessity of repressing the fact of Occupation. (Yoshimoto 227)

Post-World War Two samurai films concentrate most of their attention on the Tokugawa era, which creates a paradox that is at the heart of the samurai film and gives it its mythical quality. The Tokugawa era, from 1600-1868, was a period that was largely peaceful. Hence the great irony of the post-war samurai film. They are films about a warrior class that focus on a period in history when they are no longer functioning as warriors:

The obsolescence of the Samurai as a warrior class during the Tokugawa era is one of the key structural underpinnings of the Samurai film. Filmmakers' seeming unwillingness to situate their Samurai dramas in the more violent Momoyama or Muromachi period indicates the function the Samurai genre fulfils to the Japanese mind. The audience must confront, at every moment the film is on screen, both the obsolescence and eventual destruction of the way of life of which the hero is a part.

It puts the hero in the curious position of being unable to succeed no matter what course of action he takes. (Desser 22-23)

With this in mind, most of the samurai films of Kurosawa are atypical post-war samurai films. The heroes, or at times antiheroes, of Kurosawa's films exist in an ambiguous moral universe, and unlike the other directors of samurai cinema, Kurosawa quite deliberately chooses not to set any of his samurai films in the middle of the Tokugawa period. *The Seven Samurai*, *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* are all set in the Sengoku Jidai era of the early sixteenth century. *Kagemusha* is set slightly later, towards the end of the sixteenth century, just before the Tokugawa period begins. The two films that are set in the Tokugawa era, *Yojimbo* and its sequel, *Sanjuro*, are set at the very end of the Tokugawa reign, again a time of transition, just before the traditional feudal society gives way to the Meiji period, the beginning of the modern era.

The obsolescence of the samurai way of life is a key theme of Kurosawa's *chambara*. The films set in the Sengoku Jidai era as well *Kagemusha* depict environments filled with social and political turmoil in which the increasingly obsolescence of the samurai way is examined. The films set at the end of the Tokugawa period, *Yojimbo* and its sequel *Sanjuro*, are a demonstration of the irrelevance and incongruity of samurai values in the modern world. What all these films share is a concern with the alienation and lack of social identity that comes with obsolescence and all are set in times marked by huge social transition.

Perhaps the most famous and critically acclaimed of Kurosawa's post-war *jidaigeki* is his first, 1954's *The Seven Samurai*. The film is groundbreaking on many levels, and fuses together the humanist tradition of filmmaking espoused by Mizoguchi with the realistic violence of the *chambara* films of the 1920s to create a film that also makes much comment about Japanese society. It is also the first significant samurai *jidaigeki* not to be set in the Tokugawa era, which makes it a watershed moment in samurai cinema. As already noted,

Kurosawa instead sets it in the sixteenth century, the Sengoku Jidai period or time of the civil wars, an era which has become associated with the *jidaigeki* of Kurosawa. It was a time of enormous transition in Japanese society, which as well as being a period of destruction and chaos, also brought economic growth and social mobility. Prince (204-205) has also suggested that Kurosawa may have identified with this historical period because it mirrored the huge upheaval in Japanese society that he experienced during the Second World War and the post-war eras.

Kurosawa himself has pointed out that most samurai films tend to be set in the Tokugawa period, an era where the warrior's code and social function were vastly different:

I think there's a misunderstanding not only on the part of Westerners, but on the part of younger generation Japanese as to what a Samurai is. In fact, the profession of the warrior began around the eleventh or twelfth century and most of the films that you and I see are set in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, a period of peace when the professional warrior had an entirely different code of ethics and way of behaving. This was imposed by the Tokugawa Shogunate of that time and its atmosphere is entirely different from that of the period I'm much more interested in, which is the late sixteenth century The warrior class had much more freedom at that time; a peasant could still become a warrior then. (Yakir 56)

This sense of social mobility and change is a key thematic concern of *The Seven Samurai*. Like the warriors in *Genroku Chushingura*, six of the seven titular characters are *ronin*, samurai without masters looking for a sense of purpose in a society that is rejecting the values that they lived by, with the seventh being a farmer. Although they have some of the same qualities as their cinematic and literary forebears, the society they live in is in turmoil, so much so that the bandits that they fight and conquer used to be samurai themselves. Ironically, the assertion of their identity comes only by destroying their own kind. The film is

simultaneously a nostalgic celebration of *bushidō*, and a lament for its passing as a founding principle of Japanese society.

Victory against the bandits, when it comes, does not bring the assertion of the samurais' identity, but the destruction of it. They are only useful, only have identity while they are fighting, and at the moment when victory is achieved, they lose their sense of selfhood again. What is more, some of them have paid for the conflict with their lives, and all the samurai who are killed die not in direct combat with their enemy, but are shot anonymously, by an impersonal foe. We do not see who kills them, and in a sense it doesn't matter. The close fighting skills of the samurai have been made obsolete by a weapon that turns anyone into a warrior. Desser notes that the deaths of the samurai are ironic, observing that "men who live by the sword and see the sword as their 'soul' are killed by gunfire" (90).

Whereas *Genroku Chushingura* contained almost no violence, *The Seven Samurai* is a very violent film, and although in some ways the samurai of the film display traditional samurai values, the fighting in the film displays how out of place those values are in a time of war and social disintegration. There is very little traditional swordplay in *The Seven Samurai*, and the one instance where this does occur is treated in a fashion that undermines its importance. In an early scene in the film, Kyuzo, a master swordsman, is fighting a duel with bamboo swords. Both men claim to have won the fight. Kyuzo's opponent challenges him to a duel with real swords. Kyuzo wins easily. Desser notes that Kurosawa's use of an extremely long shot at the moment Kyuzo kills his opponent, "literally distances us from the action" (85).

There is very little at stake from an ethical perspective. Kyuzo is not fighting for any just cause, or even for his life, which is never in danger. The fight is all about him dispassionately proving his skill as a swordsman, and he is not very interested, at least initially, in helping the farmers, because, as he tells the group's leader Kambei, it offers no

opportunity to improve his swordsmanship. He does, in the end, join the fight, but his comments become deeply ironic, for in the final analysis his proficiency with a sword is not enough to save his life. He is one of a number of samurai who is shot to death, and even more impersonally, he is shot in the back, during the climactic final battle with the remaining bandits.

He and his fellow warriors to some extent die in vain, for although the battle is won, the loyalty the samurai have shown to the villagers is not reciprocated. When the battle ends and the village is saved the samurai are no longer useful or welcome in the village. As they realise with some sadness and regret, there is, unfortunately, no place for warriors in a time of peace. By faithfully and successfully completing their task they have made themselves useless. The only people that ultimately benefit from the battle for the village are the villagers. As the leader of the samurai, Kambei, puts it, only the villagers have won and he and the survivors of the battle have lost. In taking on the job they turned themselves into mercenaries, and once the task is complete they are cast aside again. They are left in the position of wandering on, to try to find another cause to champion, but with the burden of the knowledge that once the task is over they will be left purposeless again.

The Seven Samurai presents a world where the warrior ideal and its values are becoming outmoded, out of place in an environment where samurai are simultaneously the aggressor and the hired help, and the sword of a samurai is vastly inferior to the firearm, a modern weapon that turns even the least skilled fighter into a killing machine.

If the world of *The Seven Samurai* is one in which loyalty goes unrewarded, *Throne of Blood* (1957) presents a world where loyalty is a rare commodity indeed. Like *The Seven Samurai* the film is again set during the Sengoku Jidai period. The film is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The Macbeth character of the film, Washizu, is a samurai general in the army of a warlord, and at the beginning of the film is a loyal retainer, who after an

important battle is rewarded for his faithful service by being given command of a garrison, the film's equivalent of Macbeth's elevation to Thane of Cawdor.

However, under the influence of his wife, the evil Lady Asaji, Washizu is persuaded to commit the ultimate act of disloyalty according to the code of *bushidō*, and murder his lord. As Goodwin says, "in resisting his wife's first provocations, Washizu protests that samurai honour prohibits such actions, but she easily persuades him that their world does not in fact adhere to *bushidō*" (183). His wife convinces him that killing his superior makes perfect sense because his lord murdered his predecessor and that more over such an act is necessary as a pre-emptive strike. As Lady Washizu puts it, "in this degenerate age, one must kill so as not to be killed."

Kurosawa's framing of the scene skilfully conveys the moral universe and limited choices open to Washizu. In a sense, the character is confined inside the frame of the camera, almost trapped into making a decision he cannot make. He is full of doubt about committing what would be the ultimate act of betrayal, but the camera will not let him leave the room until he has decided one way or the other. He paces around the room like a caged animal while his wife stays unmoved, cajoling and manipulating him until out of fear for his life he gives in to her demands, and resolves to kill his lord.

Desser argues that the *giri/ninjo* dynamic is not present in *Throne of Blood*, because such a dynamic requires the exercise of free will, and he suggests this does not exist in the world of the film:

Free will, either in the form of choosing to obey a feudal lord or choosing to obey the spirit within the human soul is for the most part absent. In *Throne of Blood*, mankind does not seem to exist in communities, at least not established communities with specific laws. There is no central authority, nor is there a central movement to form one. (75)

Desser's argument is somewhat reductive, for Washizu still has the choice about whether to kill his lord or not. Even though his lord's rise to power was the result of his betrayal of his predecessor, Washizu still feels a strong sense of *giri* towards his superior. Ironically enough, Washizu's lord killed his predecessor because he believed his lord was plotting his death, and Washizu's wife uses the same argument to manipulate Washizu into doing exactly the same thing, thus perpetuating a cycle of betrayal that will be continued when Washizu's warriors kill him.

The choices open to Washizu are really a perversion of the eminently more noble choices usually open to a warrior faced with the *giri/ninjo* dichotomy. In a sense choosing to kill his lord is a kind of perverted act of *ninjo*, whereas choosing not to would have been a kind of *giri*. The film does have a law of sorts, for want of a better term, the law of the jungle, which is all about self-preservation.

Washizu does initially benefit from murdering his lord in the same way that Macbeth benefits from killing Duncan, as it does allow him to become lord of Cobweb Castle, but as with Macbeth it ultimately creates the conditions for his own destruction. When the film comes to its climax, in keeping with the perverted code of behaviour that has dominated the film, Washizu is likewise betrayed, by his entire army. Unlike in Shakespeare's play, there is no Macduff figure in *Throne of Blood* that comes to restore moral order. Instead, Washizu dies in a hail of arrows in the film's most justly famous scene, arrows fired by his own soldiers who in the final analysis, like everyone else in the world of the film, act out of self interest when they what appears to be a forest marching towards Cobweb Castle, realize that the prophecy has been fulfilled and Washizu is doomed.

Washizu's spectacular death merits further attention. By killing his lord he has sealed his fate. A samurai cannot get away with such an act of transgression. The laws of the samurai film prevent it, as much as the prophecy that determines Washizu's fate plays a hand.

His death is, like that of the samurai in *The Seven Samurai*, very impersonal and humiliating. We do not see the arrows that take his life. They simply fly into the film's frame, gradually entrapping him, restricting his movement until an arrow through his neck finally kills him.

Washizu's death is extraordinarily drawn out and with good reason. As Goodwin astutely observes:

The protracted death scene is an ironic manifestation of Washizu's tenacity and firm will to power, attained, finally, at the point of his own destruction. The baroque prolongation and overstatement of this event is a culmination of the visual figures for forces – the spinner-prophet's exposure of his inner ambitions, Asaji's manipulations, a heritage of political intrigue – that ultimately ensnare him. (183)

Washizu is not allowed, like Macbeth, to die in hand to hand combat, or granted the option of *hara kiri*, which would still allow him to die with honour. He is ambushed by his own men, a victim of a betrayal. The manner of his death also suggests that the bloodshed is not going to end with the death of Washizu. Betrayal is the norm in this world and it seems inevitable that the bloodshed is going to continue.

The whole moral scheme of *Throne of Blood* is a perversion of the code of *bushido*. Loyalty does not exist, and there are no reminders of it, except perhaps in the ghostly figure of Miki, who like Banquo, haunts Washizu to remind him how he betrayed his friend under the influence of his devious wife. Washizu is the antithesis of the warrior ideal, a stark contrast to the more idealised portrayal of samurai in *Genroku Chushingura*. He is a much more cynical figure.

The titular character of 1961's *Yojimbo*, which translates very ironically as 'bodyguard', is a similarly cynical creation, albeit one that, unlike Washizu, is intended to be blackly comic. Like the warriors of *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* is a *ronin*, a samurai without a master, but unlike them he is a man alone, and he does whatever is necessary for survival.

As a man without a master, and unlike the warriors of *The Seven Samurai*, a warrior with no quest, he has no loyalty to anyone, although he does have some redemptive qualities insofar as that at times he does act to protect the weak and helpless. The *giri/ninjo* dichotomy is not part of his world, for the only person he is loyal to is himself. Like *The Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* is a *chambara* and the central character Sanjuro, as he refers to himself, has much in common with the antiheroes of the *chambara* films of the 1920s and 30s.

Sanjuro survives by his wits. He is hired as a mercenary by the head of a gang to wipe out their competition for the lucrative silk trade in the town, but uses this information to extract a higher price for his services from the competition. He manipulates the situation, endlessly playing both gangs off against each other in order to get the best results for him. The manipulation of the two gangs is a source of much of the dark comedy of the film, as is the wide gulf between the ideal of *bushidō* that Sanjuro is supposed to embody and the reality of the self-serving nature of his character.

He has no loyalty to either of his employers, for they are even more morally reprehensible than he is. He may be a repellent figure, but the gangs are worse. As Desser notes, the moral and ethical positions of the two sides are not an issue, for neither side has the moral high ground (101). The whole film is a perversion of the *bushidō* code, where loyalty is a commodity, and doing the bidding of one's lord is not a noble act, but an economic transaction. As Russell (5-6) observes:

As the ronin casually sells himself to the highest bidder and laughs as the miserable town destroys itself, this is genre revision of the highest order. The selfish cynicism of the wandering warrior is a fabulous challenge to the glorified code of *bushidō*.

Unfortunately for Sanjuro, the two gangs eventually figure out what he has been doing, and try to eliminate him. Because he has antagonized both his potential employers, eventually

the only course of action is to annihilate all the members of both gangs. Prince makes some astute observations about the final scene. He notes that when Sanjuro heads to town for the final showdown with the remaining bandits, he carries the sword of a dead man. As noted earlier, the sword is a samurai's most potent symbol of his identity, and under no circumstances would he be parted from it. For Sanjuro to fight with the sword of a corpse is tantamount to being a corpse himself. (231)

However, now that Sanjuro is symbolically dead, it allows the scene to delve into the realm of the impossible. Sanjuro single-handedly slays ten samurai without incurring the slightest injury and to make it even more absurd, one of them has a gun, but never manages to fire a single shot. While Sanjuro is carrying out his massacre, there is a furious storm swirling around, a visual image that was first introduced in a battle scene in Kurosawa movie, 1943's *Sanshiro Sugata*, and will be returned to in later films, particularly *Ran*. It also confirms that this is an apocalyptic battle, with Sanjuro playing the darkly ironic role of judge, jury and executioner. Furthermore, the scene exposes the absurdity of similar scenes in which a single samurai manages to win a battle easily despite being grossly outnumbered.

Following the apocalyptic battle, Sanjuro is left in the same state at the end of the film as he was at the beginning, an alienated wanderer looking for a sense of purpose and identity in an amoral world where warriors are only useful as commodities, killing machines that are willing to sell their services to the highest bidder. Moreover, in destroying the gangs that make up the large majority of the town's inhabitants, he has, ironically, destroyed himself in the process, or at least the conditions that make his survival possible. He may have saved the town but he cannot save himself.

The sequel to *Yojimbo*, 1962's *Sanjuro*, finds the still nomadic ronin reluctantly acting as mentor and protector to a group of young and idealistic samurai who have no sense of self-preservation. Like *Yojimbo* the film is a comic critique of the code of *bushido*. It

demonstrates the dangers and problems that arise when a theory of behaviour, in this case the code of *bushidō*, proves to be impractical in real life situations. This tension between theory and practice is the source of much of the film's humour, although its comedy is much less black than that of *Yojimbo*.

In *Sanjuro*, as in *Yojimbo*, the titular character interacts with real samurai, but unlike the ruffians of *Yojimbo*, the young samurai have position and status and take pride in having both. Like all true samurai they would gladly die for their clan. However, it is this willingness to die, which is endorsed and even encouraged in the *bushidō* code that makes them reckless and foolhardy, and ironically, not very effective samurai. It takes the influence of the battle-hardened Sanjuro to prevent them from needlessly sacrificing themselves. He also has to rescue them from danger when they get themselves into trouble after ignoring his advice.

Taken at face value the grizzled, vulgar and unkempt Sanjuro does not fit the young samurai's ideal of the warrior; they are initially wary of him and are completely taken aback and horrified when he asks for payment after he rescues them from the superintendent's henchman. As Desser (106) notes, most of the young men are unable to trust him because he does not appear, on the face of it at least, to subscribe to their code of behaviour. They are expecting him to be polite, well-dressed, noble and self-sacrificing, and he falls far short of the mark. However, he is the only one who is able to save them from themselves, and their mistrust of him gets the young samurai into trouble and almost leads to the failure of their mission.

Their reliance on their code to the exclusion of all else prevents them from recognizing that Sanjuro is a powerful ally, despite his appearances and apparently unsamurai-like behaviour. It also prevents them from recognizing the enemy. They trust the young superintendent, because unlike the gruff Sanjuro, he is handsome, polite and well-spoken. The wily and experienced Sanjuro can smell a rat a mile off and is instinctively wary of the

man. Unlike the young men, who work from a theoretical premise and have never really been tested in real life, Sanjuro is a battle-hardened warrior who has learned the hard way not to judge a book by its cover.

This tension between theory and practice comes to a head in the final battle between Sanjuro and his nemesis in the film, the superintendent's henchman. Sanjuro has outwitted his opponent but instead of accepting defeat, the henchman challenges Sanjuro to a duel, forcing him to kill the henchman with one swipe of his sword. As the man dies, blood spurts spectacularly from his chest. It is the first time, but certainly not the last, that a man will die in bloody fashion in a Kurosawa samurai film. In theory battle is about skill, two master swordsmen pitted one against the other, and the defeated warrior dies with honour and a minimum of bloodshed. In practice, fights are a mismatch, they are over in a split second and death is horrible and bloody.

The duel is also proof of the gap between the ideal and reality. Earlier in the film the chamberlain's wife introduces Sanjuro to the paradoxical Zen concept of the "undrawn sword". She tells the young warriors that the most effective samurai is one who never uses his sword and keeps it in his sheath. This concept is fine in theory, but in practice it is an untenable position. If Sanjuro had adhered to this principle it would have meant defeat for the young samurai. Moreover, even when Sanjuro does not go looking for conflict, it finds him and he is forced to draw his sword in self-defence, as in the final duel with the henchman. The film illustrates "the paradox of the whole Zen swordsman sub-genre of the Samurai film, for there too, the heroes never manage to keep their swords sheathed – which is exactly the way the audience wants it"(Desser 109). Not using his sword also flies in the face of what defines Sanjuro and samurai in general. They are warriors, trained to use their swords in close combat. Swords define their identity.

His defeat of the superintendent and his henchman finally earns him the respect of the young samurai, who finally realise that he was on their side all along, but it does Sanjuro no good. He has played a role in restoring order to society, but there is no place for him now. Once again, by eliminating the threat to disorder, he has made himself useless. Just as at the end of *Yojimbo*, Sanjuro is left in a position of profound alienation, having demonstrated that behaving like a samurai brings no benefits either in theory or in practice.

Kurosawa's penultimate samurai film, immediately preceding *Ran*, 1980's *Kagemusha*, also deals with questions of purpose and identity, as well as exploring the values of *giri* and *ninjo*. The relationship between appearance and reality is also of great thematic concern. The central character of the film is not a samurai, but a thief who has been sentenced to death. He is offered a pardon by Shingen, a warlord, in return for standing in as his double. The outspoken thief is initially contemptuous of the warlord, accusing him of committing more heinous crimes than the thief. Shingen admires his outspokenness and sees some measure of character in the man, but also reminds him that his acts were intended to unify the war-stricken lands under his rule. Shingen orders his men to train the thief to impersonate him.

Shingen is unexpectedly mortally wounded by yet another anonymous sniper, and dies soon after. To his horror the thief is called upon to impersonate the warlord on a full-time basis for three years, in order to fulfil the terms of Shingen's will, and deceive his enemies into thinking that the sniper merely wounded him. They appeal to his sense of duty and loyalty to the warlord, to try to persuade him to help. It is, in a sense, an appeal to the thief's *giri*, although he is not a samurai. Initially the thief refuses, but happens to observe that some men from a rival clan have accidentally witnessed the disposal of the warlord's body in a nearby lake. Without his help, the clan will have to admit to their rivals that Shingen really has died. The thief realizes that the fate of the clan rests on his shoulders, and he begs the

men to make use of him to help the lord. For the first time in his life the man has a sense of purpose.

As an impersonator the thief is outstandingly successful. Many of the people that surround the warlord, aside from those who know the secret, are completely fooled into believing that the thief really is Shingen himself, and even some of them who know the secret find themselves becoming loyal to him as well. Despite his initial reluctance, the thief is gradually drawn into the world of the clan. He learns to love Takemaru, Shingen's grandson, and comes to admire and be admired by, Nobukado, Shingen's brother. He watches loyal retainers dying for him in battle, and realizes that the fortunes of his clan lie with him, and comes to accept his role. He must personify the values that Shingen stood for during his life in order to keep the clan together. By impersonating the lord the thief develops a loyalty towards him and a newfound respect for the responsibility he carried on his shoulders while he was alive. Ironically, in impersonating another man and taking on the values that he lived by, the thief finds a sense of purpose and identity and starts to believe those values himself.

Unfortunately his new sense of belonging is short-lived. When the three years have expired Shingen's rightful successor, his son Katsuyori, takes over as head of the clan and the thief is cast aside. Having gained a sense of purpose and identity by faithfully serving his clan he is all at once rejected. He also cannot bear to leave, and hangs around watching the activities of the clan. He is one of numerous others who are massacred in a foolhardy attack that Katsuyori makes on one of his rivals, in one fell swoop destroying the clan that the thief worked so diligently and loyally to maintain.

The battle scene is in many ways a direct precursor to that in *Ran*, although unlike in the latter film we are spared seeing the battle itself. All we see is the aftermath of what is to all intents and purposes a massacre. The scene is haunting. The battlefield is littered with the bloody corpses of the dead and the dying, and the music that is playing has a definite elegiac

quality, making it clear that the battle spells the end of the clan. Slow motion is used to prolong the attention paid to the scene, and the colour palette used is strikingly vivid.

The final act of the battle is the death of the thief. He has been watching the events of battle unfold from under cover and suddenly rushes out, carrying a spear, futilely charging into the battlefield that is littered with bloodied corpses of the dead and dying and is shot by a sniper. His final act is effectively a kind of *hara kiri*, for running out into the battlefield is to all intents and purposes an act of suicide. The thief is shot dead by an anonymous gunman, but his final act is not one of self-negation, but self-assertion. He wants, as he was asked to do, to die in the service of his clan. He is loyal to the clan to the bitter end, although in the final analysis his loyalty does no good for his clan or himself. With the death of the thief the clan is destroyed, and the poignant final image is the body of the thief floating on the water, as the now discarded banner of the clan slowly submerges next to him. The death of the thief is also the death of the clan and an end to the values that the clan stood for and the thief tried in vain to preserve.

The thief's death is also the final fatality in a film full of deaths by shooting. In fact, as Desser notes, *Kagemusha* is a film about samurai in which not a single character dies by the sword. He argues:

Kagemusha thus denies the myth of the Samurai film in one bitter stroke. Situated in the era just before the Tokugawa, *Kagemusha* already points up to the obsolescence of the true Samurai. That is, although the mythos of the Samurai film relies heavily on the obsolete warrior in time of peace, Kurosawa is pointing out that the warrior who carries a sword in time of *war* is also obsolete (a theme alluded to in *Seven Samurai*, of course). (128)

The samurai films of Kurosawa that precede *Ran* are part of a wider tradition of samurai filmmaking that dates back to the early stages of Japanese cinema. However, the

films also question the values upheld by that tradition. All of the samurai films Kurosawa made before *Ran* to some extent challenge and subvert the traditional representation of samurai warriors and the *bushidō* code. Each successive film explores the *giri/ninjo* dichotomy and to some extent rejects it, and by implication rejects the code of *bushidō* itself, and point to its obsolescence as a valid method of engaging with the world at large.

Kurosawa's samurai films all use plots and symbols derived from the samurai film genre but undermine and subvert them. For example swords are undermined as symbols by having them misused. Moreover, time and time again, the sword is rejected as an effective weapon by having character after character shot, an impersonal death from a weapon that makes the sword-wielding samurai obsolete.

Likewise, Kurosawa employs the *giri/ninjo* dichotomy in order to demonstrate its impracticality in real life situations. Adhering to these principles brings no reward, and at times the environment makes such principles impossible to abide by. The principles of the code are only applicable in a situation where conflict is involved, as in *The Seven Samurai*, not prized or ignored as in *Throne of Blood*, a tradable commodity, as in *Yojimbo*, work in theory but not in practice as in *Sanjuro*, or an outdated concept that cannot save a clan, as in *Kagemusha*. In each successive film Kurosawa's attitude to the *bushidō* code becomes increasingly cynical.

But all of the films that precede *Ran* stop short of outright condemnation and rejection of the *bushidō* code. All of the films before *Ran* seem to see some value in it, some character or characters that suggest that ethical and noble behaviour still exists in the world, even if the price of adherence to the concepts of *bushidō* is rejection and alienation. Moreover, it is their commitment to the code in some form, however limited, that allows the protagonists in Kurosawa's samurai films (*Washizu* excepted) to survive, or at least maintain their dignity in

death, in hostile environments that no longer uphold or revere the samurai way of life. The same cannot be said for the world of *Ran*.

Chapter Two

Ran and the bushidō code

Ran is a film that has its place in the tradition of Japanese samurai cinema, but like all of Kurosawa's *chambara* it uses conventions of that cinematic tradition to question its principles and ideals. Like Kurosawa's other samurai films, *Ran* uses a strategy of inversion and subversion to critique the warrior code, but *Ran* takes the criticism to a scathing level. Whereas the films that came before it question the *bushidō* code, and the later films, particularly *Kagemusha*, point towards its obsolescence, *Ran* goes further and takes the thematic concerns of Kurosawa's preceding *chambara* to a new extreme. The film exposes the dark side of *bushidō* – a world where bloodshed and violence is commonplace and where any attempt to try to create conditions that might put an end to it simply serves to create the conditions for further unrest. *Ran* presents a society pushed to its absolute breaking point by a culture of violence that brings absolute chaos. The film is an indictment of *bushidō*.

The central character of the film, the ageing warlord Hidetora, has abandoned the *bushido* ideals of *giri* and *ninjo* in favour of a ruthless quest for power. As a samurai warrior he has long ago stopped acting in an honourable fashion, and like Washizu in *Throne of Blood* he has betrayed his allies in his quest for dominance. His behaviour will prove to have a disastrous influence on all those around him, particularly his sons, two of whom will betray him just as he has betrayed his allies. The third will be forced to become involved in the conflict stirred up by Hidetora's lifetime of bloodshed and will pay for his involvement with his life. By the end of the film Hidetora and his sons will all be dead, despite his attempt to create the conditions for peace, which ironically enough only serve to create the conditions for further warfare that seems destined to continue at the end of the film.

Kurosawa's strategy for his cinematic critique of the *bushidō* code is necessarily an intertextual one. One of the major sources of the film's intertextuality is Kurosawa's own body of work. The film appropriates and transforms scenes and thematic material from Kurosawa's other samurai films. In particular this is most evident in the climactic battle scene that is the centrepiece of the film, an apocalyptic, nightmarish massacre that shows the results of the *bushidō* code at their most perverse and destructive.

In addition, Kurosawa appropriates Japanese history and retells one of its most famous stories, relating to a samurai warrior, Motonari Mori, in order to critique the mythic tradition of samurai representation. The story is used ironically in an inverted form to provide the catalyst for the destruction of Hidetora's family and society.

Like Kurosawa's other samurai films, *Ran* uses symbols of samurai warriorhood as recurring motifs in the film, but employs them ironically and subversively. In particular, arrows are a recurring motif that Kurosawa employs verbally and visually to illuminate and develop the themes of his film. Just as in many other samurai films, sword symbolism is also significant in *Ran*, although the way in which Kurosawa uses swords also undermines their sacred symbolic value espoused in the *bushidō* tradition. Also, the presence of firearms, as in many other Kurosawa samurai films, undermines the value of the sword in combat as well as providing the vehicle for one brother to betray and kill his own siblings.

Gender is also used to provide a critique of the *bushidō* code. The female response to a patriarchal society focused on the warrior class provides a further indictment of the brutal reality of its code. The scheming Lady Kaede plays a key role in this, especially as her manipulation of male society demonstrates the horrifying consequences of *giri*. Hidetora's nemesis, the manipulative and scheming Lady Kaede, incorporates a deliberate intertextual reference to another master manipulator, Lady Asaji, in *Throne of Blood*. Kaede's quest to avenge her family's death at the hands of Hidetora ultimately results in the destruction of the

entire society. Kaede's single-minded pursuit of revenge also reveals the destructive nature of the code of *bushidō* as her pursuit of *giri* for her family ultimately plunges the entire region into a war that seems destined to continue long after her death. Lady Kaede's counterpart, the innocent Lady Sue, provides another take on the price women pay for *bushidō*, an innocent victim of Kaede's ruthlessness and by association a further part of Hidetora's bloody legacy. In addition, the character of Tsurumaru, emasculated by Hidetora, is a demonstration that it is not only women who are victimised by *bushidō*.

Ran employs a complex intertextual strategy in order to explore the consequences of this culture. Kurosawa appropriates Japanese history and his own samurai cinema in order to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the *bushidō* system, and to engage in an act of demythologisation of the mythic tradition of *bushidō*. This intertextual strategy is employed both visually and thematically.

The first chapter traced Kurosawa's use of and subversion of the *bushidō* tradition in his samurai cinema. It showed how the samurai films leading up to *Ran*, while being part of a tradition of samurai cinema, nonetheless questioned and ultimately rejected the *bushidō* code as a valid way of dealing with the world, as well as pointing towards the obsolescence of *bushidō* as a valid social code. His films also exposed some of the realities that lay behind the mythology of the samurai. *Ran* builds on this and takes the critique of *bushidō* to an extreme on all levels.

To begin with the film appropriates and subverts stylistic traditions of samurai filmmaking. It can be seen to be the stylistic and thematic antithesis of a film such as Mizoguchi's *Genroku Chushingura*, which celebrates and valorises the *bushidō* tradition. Early in chapter one there was a discussion of a term coined by Davis, "monumental style" (41). Monumental style as defined by Davis refers to films that epitomise the *bushidō* code,

presenting the ideal in a specific and well-defined historical setting, albeit one that is heavily affected by a mythic tradition.

Davis uses this concept to discuss *Ran* in relation to more traditional evocations of *bushidō* tradition such as *Genroku Chushingura*, saying that *Ran* “deforms [monumental style], attenuating and inflating it into a carnivalesque ritual unmoored from its sacramental provenance.” He goes on to argue that instead of locating itself in a precise historical context, *Ran*’s sense of time and place is deliberately distorted:

The film’s costumes, castles and sets are recognizably Japanese, but they are abstracted and taken to excess. There are no specific locales, historical personages, or events, and no expository titles to situate the time, place, and predicament. Unlike *Kagemusha*, there is hardly a remnant of any genuine Japanese identity hiding in the wings of *Ran*’s grandiose vision. (237)

Davis does perhaps generalise somewhat. Although the film is not located in a specific time and place, as with *Kagemusha*, for example, there are enough markers of historicity, such as the use of arrows in warfare, the uniforms of the samurai and the presence of the arquebus, a very early form of rifle, to suggest that *Ran* is set in the Sengoku Jidai era.

However, this lack of an assigned time and place does have a curious effect on the film. It gives Kurosawa the opportunity to explore samurai behaviour in an environment unfettered by specifics. The film becomes an examination not of *bushidō* in any particular time or place, but of the behaviour of samurai in general, and the bloody consequences of an environment driven by a behavioural code that is underpinned by violence and death.

Davis also usefully identifies that *Ran*’s corruption of monumental style exposes its theatrical nature, and acknowledges the effect of this:

Ran unravels the indigenous associations of monumental style itself. Its excessive spectacle and presentational austerity loosens the tie that binds the monumental style to the Japanese aura most powerfully evoked by representations of its feudal period. Since monumental style is the most elaborate expression of Japanese period representations, demythologising it is also to debunk the imagination of traditional Japanese history. (244)

By questioning and subverting monumentalism as Davis defines it, *Ran* questions the tradition that it represents and the role that such a tradition plays in creating a mythic history of Japan. One of the powerful myths that the film reinterprets is that relating to a famous story about Motonari Mori (1491-1571), a legendary samurai warrior whose sons are still much admired in Japan as the epitome of family loyalty. This story is a very significant intertext and according to Kurosawa was a major source of inspiration for the entire film. It will be discussed again in the final chapter as part of the discussion of the intertextual relationship between *King Lear* and *Ran* but in this chapter only its significance as a mythic representation of samurai will be considered. The story is oft-quoted in Japan but is of dubious accuracy. Goodman (195) relates the basic story:

In a fabled incident attributed to him, Mori gives each son a single arrow to break in order to show the fragile condition that would result from any personal ambitions or political rivalry among them. The father then hands each one a bundle of three arrows to demonstrate that in combination power cannot be broken by an individual son.

This anecdote is an illustration of the power and importance of *giri*. The version of the story told in *Ran* will have the opposite effect, and instead provide the catalyst for betrayal and a violation of the *giri* owed by sons to their father.

The re-enactment of the Mori story is preceded by a boar hunt that establishes the warlike temperament of Hidetora, as well as introducing the arrow as a significant motif and

symbol of warriorhood. The first shot of him is medium range. The camera pans and his party rush past in pursuit of a boar they have just seen. Slowly the camera zooms in on Hidetora. In a close-up shot, we see him, bow cocked, honing in on his prey. He has the fierce look in his eyes of a battle-hardened warrior and for an elderly man he still appears agile and sprightly. The boar hunt, as Parker observes, “symbolically recapitulates the violence of Hidetora’s past” (87) and also offers an ironic glimpse of the future. It will not be long before Hidetora will become the hunted, with hundreds of arrows flying around him, unleashed at the orders of his treacherous sons.

Soon after the Mori story is re-enacted but in a radically revised form. The first shot of this sequence is a long shot which shows the meeting of Hidetora and his followers. The figures in the shot are a powerful image of unity, even of the *giri* and respect that the group has for Hidetora. His sons are sitting to the left. His allies Fujimaki and Ayabe are to the right. Seated in front of Hidetora are the rest of his followers. Hidetora occupies the position of authority at the head of the shot. The arrangement of the figures in the shot forms a kind of circle, an image of unity. But the unity of the group is not going to last.

Hidetora, shown in a long shot, announces he intends to cede power to Taro, sending shudders throughout the group, the first time that the tranquillity and strength of the group has been disturbed. There are a series of rapid cuts to medium shots of significant figures in the group so we can more clearly see their shock, followed by a rapid return to the long shot of the group. The disturbance to the almost continual long shot mirrors the disturbance in the group. As the sequence progresses the disturbances will become more pronounced. Saburo is clearly alarmed by this turn of events. Jiro and Taro both signal their approval by flattering their father.

Jiro uses arrow imagery, telling his father it is now their task “in order to make your remaining years peaceful, to stand in the thick of the world’s arrows” (*Ran* Screenplay 13).

Jiro's comment is deeply ironic given that it will be he, allied with his brother Taro, who will unleash hundreds of them on his own father in an attempt to kill him and his soldiers.

Hidetora finds favour with Jiro's pronouncement to begin his re-enactment of the Mori story but things do not go according to plan. Still in long shot, Hidetora hands each of his sons an arrow and asks them to break it. Of course they succeed. He then gives them the bundle Taro and Jiro fail the task, but his third son Saburo, who has just warned against what he considers as Hidetora's foolish decision to cede power to Taro, defies his father's attempt to give his sons a moral lesson and contemptuously breaks the bundle of arrows over his knee, to the frustration of Hidetora. Saburo comments that the unity of the family has already been broken. It is not long before the precisely balanced set of figures will be disrupted too. In a rage Hidetora denounces Saburo's behaviour and disowns him. In shock Saburo suddenly rises out of his seat, again disturbing the peace of the group. It is one of the darkest ironies of the scene that Saburo's act of defiance is also a demonstration of his loyalty to his father. He questions his father's decision, because he knows no good will come of it and has his father's best interests at heart, although his father sees it differently.

As the scene progresses Tango moves forward and begs Hidetora to reconsider his decision. Enraged, Hidetora tells him to be silent. Tango refuses, and for the first time the furious Hidetora leaves the circle. Significantly, when he returns, he comes back with sword in hand, and what remains of unity in the gathering is shattered with violence as he threatens Tango with his sheathed sword, although he does not draw it. Tango stands firm, telling Hidetora he can strike him but he will not move. The damage has been done. The circle has been broken and it will never be reformed. Hidetora banishes both Tango and Saburo, and as the scene ends still in medium long shot. Hidetora has rejoined the circle but he now has his back to the group, a powerful visual rejection of not only Tango and Saburo, but the unity the

group once represented. The other figures in the group are no longer settled, but instead are left in disarray, some standing, some sitting.

In the original story, Mori's lesson to his three sons was an illustration of the value of family loyalty and unity. Ironically, in *Ran*, the effect is inverted. The episode only serves to illustrate how easily a family can be broken up. The arrow becomes the device that sets in motion a chain of events that leads to the destruction of Hidetora's family and almost everyone around them. It was probably not the wisest symbol for Hidetora to choose, in any case, because as Goodwin notes "as an implement of the hunt and war, the arrow contradicts the symbolism Hidetora intends" (204). What he meant to use to demonstrate the importance of *giri* becomes a vehicle by which *giri* will be violated. In terms of the way the scene is framed, an image of perfection and unity is steadily undermined until it is destroyed, and thus the way in which the Mori story has been undermined is paralleled by how the scene unfolds visually.

In undermining and subverting the symbolism of the arrow that Hidetora was trying to establish, just as Mori did, Kurosawa deliberately undermines the symbolic and mythic power of the Mori family. The reality is that it is really quite easy for someone to break three arrows, as Saburo demonstrates, and by implication the ties that bind family members together are just as tenuous and fragile. Through the character of Saburo, Kurosawa is seeking to question the mythic significance of the Mori story, which as mentioned may not have happened. In presenting an alternate version of this particular myth, Kurosawa is calling into question the accuracy of the original story, which, it must be remembered, is of dubious historical accuracy in the first place although in Japan the story is told as if it was the truth. Intertextuality is used both to drive the story forward and to suggest that there is another story here that has never been told, or even contemplated. Such is the power of the Mori mythology in Japanese culture.

The scene also presents a subversive use of the sword, which is traditionally perhaps the most powerful and positive symbol of samurai identity. But the sword not a positive force in this particular scene. In fact, it is a negative influence, for it is the use of Hidetora's sword, or at least the threat of it, that finally destroys the unity of the gathering. Hidetora's use of the sword is a profound act of transgression, but it will not be his last. Every subsequent act of violence, or attempted violence, is going to further undermine his status and power.

A further use of the arrow, this time in an act of violence serves to show Hidetora is losing his status and power by his own hand. He is staying in the First Castle, the guest of Taro. In long shot, we see Kyoami singing a song that mocks Taro, to the delight of Hidetora's soldiers and the fury of Taro's. Enraged that the fool is insulting his lord, one of Taro's soldiers draws his sword and is about to kill Kyoami, which is probably allowable as an act of *giri* as it shows loyalty towards his lord, and Kyoami, it must be understood, is showing disloyalty and disrespect to Taro, his new master. Suddenly a single arrow comes into the film frame from above and kills the soldier instantly. As the soldier falls, the camera suddenly pans upward, and there is a cut to a medium shot of Hidetora, his bow in his hand. It is a strong visual reminder of the opening sequence of the film, with Hidetora sporting the same fierce, warlike and imperious expression he had when about to shoot the boar.

Hidetora is acting as if he still has power and authority, and behaving as he always has in the past. But he is no longer the Great Lord, and his killing of Taro's soldier has dramatic consequences. He has violated the *giri* that he now owes to Taro. Moreover, once again an arrow further accelerates his descent from a position of power and influence. He is summoned to meet with Taro on the pretext that his family is meeting to celebrate the transfer of power from Hidetora to his son. What instead happens is that Hidetora is asked by Taro, under the influence of Kaede, to sign a pledge of loyalty to his son in blood, confirming the *giri* that Hidetora now owes to him. The camera work in this scene subtly highlights Kaede's

role in this scenario, establishing that she, not Taro, is in control of the situation. As with the arrow scene, the use of space also indicates power relationships. This will be covered in more detail later in the chapter when the character of Kaede is discussed in depth.

Hidetora reluctantly signs the pledge with his blood and then furiously storms out of the castle, disowning his son and vowing never to return. Hidetora's reluctance to accept the authority of Taro sows the seeds of his son's betrayal of his father. Thus one act that violates *giri* will lead to a greater betrayal, the violation of the *giri* that Hidetora's sons owe to him. Soon afterwards Taro begins to plot the death of his father and his loyal warriors with the help of his younger brother Jiro and the assistance of Lord Ikoma and Lord Ogura, who were previously loyal vassals of Hidetora.

The final betrayal of Hidetora by Jiro and Taro comes in the form of the climactic battle scene which is the centrepiece of the film, and the focus of Kurosawa's subversion of the depiction of *bushidō*. The sequence is a profound anti-war statement, and a relentless visual indictment of samurai.

Just before the horrors of the battle are unleashed, Hidetora has taken possession of the Third Castle which has been abandoned by Saburo's men who have gone to join him. The scene begins inside the castle keep. In long shot Hidetora is shown sleeping with one of his concubines, but is stirred from sleep by noise outside. There is a cut to a medium shot of Hidetora looking shocked at the commotion he can hear. There is another cut and through the window we see a stream of soldiers in yellow entering the castle grounds. Another cut, this time to a long shot of Hidetora, still shocked at the window of the castle keep. Then there is another long shot of Taro at the head of his army, then another of arrows whistling past the window. We can see Hidetora in the centre of the frame, watching in disbelief. As in *Throne of Blood*, arrows have become devices of entrapment, and although none of them strike Hidetora, they still prevent him from moving.

Spaces that were once sources of power for Hidetora are about to be turned against him. The castle grounds, which were a symbol of Hidetora's dominance, territory he gained in warfare, are to become a battleground, and the keep a space where he will be trapped like Washizu and forced to watch the carnage unfold.

Following the shot of Hidetora at the window, there is another cut to inside the keep. In a medium long shot a soldier impaled with arrows, in a further vivid reminder of the death of Washizu in *Throne of Blood*, announces in despair that they have been tricked by Hidetora's former allies, and that they are now in hell. Hidetora will spend the majority of the rest of the battle trapped inside the keep. There is another cut, to a long shot of the sun being obscured by clouds, light being symbolically extinguished by darkness, a portent of the coming Apocalypse. Suddenly all is silent, save for the slow, elegiac soundtrack that is in vivid contrast to the fury of battle outside.

Instead of leading the attack as he is so used to doing, Hidetora the hunter has become the hunted. Moreover, he is being attacked by his own sons who now view him as a threat to their authority and seek to kill him, just as Hidetora did to so many rivals in his own quest for power. The single arrow Hidetora fired at the beginning of the film has returned, but as the scene progresses it will multiply into hundreds that will that will systematically wipe out all of his warriors and threaten his life. A symbol of his warriorhood that he hoped would unify his sons has been inverted and turned against him and become a vehicle for betrayal.

In terms of visual intertextuality, the battle scene is full of images and techniques that recall Kurosawa's other samurai films. It is the sum total of all of Kurosawa's years of filming samurai conflict. The death of the soldier in the opening sequence is only one of a number of images that recall the death of Washizu in *Throne of Blood*. Immediately after the sound effects are silenced, there is a cut to a long shot of mist covered soldiers in a watchtower, impaled with arrows. Then a slightly closer in shot, again of a soldier, again

impaled with arrows. It is a recurring visual image in the battle scene, a vivid reminder of Washizu's soldiers' betrayal of him, just as Hidetora has been betrayed by his sons. The connection is brought home by the next shot, a medium range view of Taro and Jiro acknowledging one another. Then there is a cut to a pile of bodies again impaled with arrows, which this time is also a vivid reminder of the battle aftermath in *Kagemusha*. The connection is reinforced by the use of *Kagemusha*'s vivid, almost unreal colour palette but taken even more to an extreme which heightens the redness of the blood. The shot that follows is a long distance view of horses streaming into the castle grounds in a movement that vividly recalls the final battle scene from *Seven Samurai*. In a short series of shots Kurosawa has quoted three of his major samurai works, and linked the bloody action unfolding to the treacherous Jiro and Taro.

Hidetora does initially try to take part in the battle but he is very quickly disarmed. The next shot is an extreme long view of Hidetora emerging from the keep, challenged by Taro's soldiers. He draws his sword and strikes, but it breaks in his hand. There is a cut to a medium shot of Hidetora staring helplessly at his broken sword, then throwing it away. He will not have a sword again for the rest of the film. It is a powerful signal that he has lost his masculine power, but more than this, with the loss of his sword, he loses his identity as samurai warrior. As already noted, for a samurai the loss of one's sword is akin to losing one's soul. With the loss of his sword Hidetora can take no further part in the battle, and he rapidly begins to disintegrate emotionally, psychologically and physically. Before our eyes the once proud warrior degenerates into a haunted, victimised old man.

Following the loss of his sword, Hidetora retreats into the castle keep, where he remains trapped for the rest of the battle. There is a medium shot of two concubines stabbing each other, their blood spilling out as they are locked in a deathly embrace and a cut to a medium close-up of Hidetora, his face full of horror. This is followed by a long

shot of more concubines being shot to death in front of Hidetora's eyes. There is a cut to the battle outside and the carnage still unfolding and then a cut back to the keep. There is a long shot of Hidetora, sitting, clutching at his empty scabbard, and the expression of his face makes him seem in a state of shock, almost oblivious to his surroundings. There are arrows flying behind his head, coming perilously close to striking him but he seems unaware or at least unconcerned of the danger. They are yet another reminder of the fate of Washizu, although on this occasion none of them strike their intended target. Perhaps it would have been better for Hidetora if they had. His family armour is behind him, a powerful symbol of the warrior status that has been permanently stripped from him. He is a powerful image of powerlessness, a man on the verge of total disintegration.

The battle that rages outside while Hidetora sits powerless is a visual statement about the violence and brutality that underpins the warrior code, presented entirely without honour or any glamorisation. We are worlds away from the rarefied depiction of samurai behaviour in *Genroku Chushingura*, in which not a single drop of blood is shown on screen. That film is marked by the absence of violence, whereas in *Ran*, the violence erupts onto the screen with terrifying force.

Never before in samurai cinema have such horrifying images of the realities of samurai warfare been shown, even by Kurosawa. In previous films with elaborate battle scenes such as *The Seven Samurai*, Kurosawa has refrained from showing how bloody and horrifying a battle scene really is, although he does manage to suggest some of its brutality in the merciless way that the peasants dispatch the bandits. *Kagemusha's* scenes are bloody but only show the aftermath of battle. *Ran* shows both the battle and its after effects and takes the horrors and bloodiness to another extreme unprecedented in samurai cinema. In *Ran*, he holds back nothing. Kott (148) vividly captures the scene:

The theme is fratricidal war. The castle gates are rammed open. The reds pour in like rivers of ants, while the blues pour out in another stream. Nothing but arrow-studded bodies remains on the ramparts and turrets of the castle, nothing but bodies are left speared to the floor. Kurosawa is the distinct and peerless master of battle scenes. Even the cruellest of them makes you gasp in amazement.

The ground is absolutely littered with corpses, and blood is everywhere, flowing freely. In fact, it may be inaccurate to call this a battle at all. Hidetora's retainers are grossly outnumbered, so what we are really witness to is a massacre, completely one-sided, which recalls the final battle in *Kagemusha*. The scene is packed with images that stick in the mind. There is a long shot of one of one of Hidetora's bloodstained soldiers holding his own severed arm in horror. Shot after shot of piles of bloodied corpses. A dying soldier, his back full of arrows, clearly in agony, crawling along the ground. A long shot of a dying soldier, his eye pierced by an arrow. One of Hidetora's loyal retainers slumped over inside the keep, rivers of his blood pouring down the wood to the lower levels. Perhaps the shocked, catatonic state of Hidetora is the only appropriate response to such carnage.

Perhaps more than in any other moment of the film, the use of sound heightens the intensity of the battle sequence, and in doing so only serves to heighten the horrific nature of the scene. As mentioned earlier, when the battle begins, all sound effects are muted, so that all that we hear is the film's score. The music, by renowned Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, was modelled on Mahler and is full of pathos and a sense of deep sadness at the violence that is occurring. It serves to make the scene more poignant and the battle scene more shocking. It is almost as if the battle is taking place in some kind of alternate reality, outside of time and space, taking on a universal, epic quality, and the music evokes a sense of deep mourning at the futility of it all. As Richie (*Films of Kurosawa* 218) observes, "the Mahleresque music speaks of the misery of all people, the hopelessness of the human state."

Kurosawa used silence and music to similar effect in *Kagemusha* and in that film the music also had a definite elegiac quality, mourning the loss of Shingen's clan in the aftermath of the massacre of his clan's soldiers. In *Ran* the use of the music evokes even more extreme feelings, for music is not used in the aftermath of battle, but in the battle itself. A huge section of the action unfolds with no battle sounds at all with only the sorrowful music in the background. The lack of aural distraction forces the viewer to concentrate fully on the relentless and horrifying visual images of battle that fill the screen.

The enforced silence of battle sounds comes to an abrupt end when in a long shot Taro is shown entering the castle grounds on horseback. There is a cut to a medium shot of Taro, his back to the camera, and suddenly the enforced silence is shattered by the sound of a single gunshot. A large red blotch appears on the back of his clothing and he falls dead from his horse. All at once the sound of battle erupts and the contrast between silence and sound is an assault to the senses. There is a cut back to the battle outside, and then a medium shot of Jiro and Kurogane. He tells Jiro that Taro is dead. Kurogane throws down his gun. It is clear he was responsible, acting under the orders of Jiro.

Taro is the first significant character to be killed in *Ran* and the manner of his death is the continuation of an established tradition in Kurosawa's samurai films. Like many characters before him Taro is the victim of a sniper rather than falling in direct combat with a foe. In both *The Seven Samurai* and *Kagemusha* many central characters fall victim to gunfire. It is an anonymous, indirect kind of death. The rifle has replaced the sword as the weapon of choice as it enables anyone to become effective in battle:

In many respects the classical samurai code seems to be no longer valid in Kurosawa's *Ran*: modern weapons (guns) have supplanted the traditional sword the 'soul of the samurai', and therefore the outcome of a war is no longer dependent on the prowess of the individual warrior, insofar as a victory has become the product of sheer force of arms. (Johansen 77)

As in *Kagemusha* and *The Seven Samurai*, the use of the gun rather than the sword to kill off characters is again a signal that the traditional samurai has become obsolete. Jiro's death is also much worse than others in Kurosawa's films because it is an act of betrayal, yet another violation of *giri*. Guns have allowed Jiro to metaphorically stab his brother in the back without using his sword.

After the sudden death of Taro, more soldiers pour into the castle keep where Hidetora has been hiding, protected by an increasingly depleted group of loyal warriors. The last of them is killed and with his dying breath he cries out to Hidetora that they have lost the battle. Hidetora suddenly wakes from his state of shock and for the first and only time in the battle scene we are shown his face in close up. There is a cut to a long shot of Hidetora about to commit *hara kiri*, or ritual suicide. He realises he has no sword and tries to find a sword to replace his own, but cannot and is thus denied the traditional and honourable death of the samurai. In medium shot, his face now blanched white, looking prematurely aged and fixed in an expression of blank horror, he starts walking deliberately out of the keep, dragging the scabbard of a discarded sword with him. There is a cut to a close-up shot of the scabbard, a further reminder of his loss of the source of his masculine power and his status as a warrior. Then the camera suddenly cuts to an extremely long shot, and almost ghostlike, Hidetora slowly and deliberately emerges from the smoke that has engulfed the burning keep as the massed armies of Jiro and Taro wait for him at the bottom of the keep's stairs.

He slowly makes his way down the stairs of and in an extremely long shot that lasts a considerable time he walks towards the assembled armies of Jiro and Taro. With some uncertainty, and somewhat awestruck by the apparition of Hidetora, the two armies part like the Red Sea and watch impassively as the elderly man, an expression of absolute horror still etched on his face, makes his way past the corpses of his dead soldiers and slowly heads out

through the massive doors of the castle grounds and to the treacherous terrain outside, his clothing billowing in the fierce wind that has begun blowing. Hidetora, shown in long shot, appears dwarfed by the hostile landscape that almost seems to swallow up his frail figure. His identity as warrior has been obliterated and his violent and treacherous past has caught up with him in the most spectacular and bloody fashion.

The final development of the arrow motif that expresses itself so powerfully throughout the battle is in a scene near the very end of the film. Having finally been reunited with his loyal son Saburo, Hidetora is looking forward to a future of peace and reconciliation. The scene is an inversion of the opening sequence. As at the very beginning of the film, Hidetora is on horseback, but he is now no longer a warrior. In a long shot we see him in hopeful conversation with his son, on whose horse he is a passenger, talking of peace and reconciliation. Hidetora is a much transformed man, quiet and humble. There is a cut to a medium long shot. There is no sound save for the movement of horses. Once again, just as in the battle scene, a single shot rings out from an off-screen source, shattering the peace of the moment and another of Hidetora's sons is killed. Saburo slumps over dead in his saddle, like Taro the victim of a sniper who we have learnt earlier was again acting under the orders of Jiro. As Crowl (116) observes, the arrow Hidetora fired at the beginning of the film has transformed into a bullet. Sadly for Hidetora, this time the innocent prey is not a boar, but his own son Saburo, killed at the order of his own treacherous brother, right in front of Hidetora's eyes.

With Saburo's death Hidetora realises, to his despair, that his son was right all along and that he was foolish to expect sons raised in an environment full of bloodshed and violence to behave peacefully once he stepped down. Instead his well-intentioned plan has plunged his world into further bloodshed and violence and resulted in the destruction of his

family. Having had his final epiphany, he dies, his body draped over Saburo's, leaving Kyoami and Tango to try to make sense of the death and destruction they have just witnessed.

As much as Hidetora plays a role in creating the conditions for the bloodshed unleashed in *Ran*, it is the chief female character Kaede, who is directly responsible for manipulating Hidetora's sons to betray their father, turn on each other and ultimately destroy their family as well as their society and plunge it into war that seems destined to continue long after their deaths. Through the characters of Kaede and Sue, "a compelling and influential female binary" (Buchanan 81) who have extreme, but starkly contrasting, responses to Hidetora's savagery, as well as the emasculated figure of Sue's brother Tsurumaru, Kurosawa uses gender to complete his devastating indictment of the *bushido* code.

As Johansen (79) points out, Kaede's quest to avenge the death of her family at the hands of Hidetora, in terms of the *bushidō* code, can be seen as an act of *giri*. She is seeking revenge for the destruction of her family, but the manner in which she carries out her revenge is ultimately an indictment of *bushidō*. The only way she, as a woman, can carry out revenge is to appropriate a male code of behaviour and signification and use it to her own ends, but because she is not a warrior she must do it indirectly by manipulating the men around her.

Kaede is also an intertextual creation. As Davis (238) observes, she is "a theatrical descendant of *Throne of Blood*'s Lady Asaji, a monster consumed by cold rage and a desire to consume others in blind vengeance for the death of her family." Like Asaji, she has a deadly effect on the men around her, manipulating them in order to serve her aims. Whereas Asaji manipulates Washizu in order to advance through the hierarchy, Kaede manipulates Taro and Jiro in order to destroy them and Hidetora. There are many other deliberate echoes of Lady Asaji in the characterisation of Kaede. She moves across the floor like her counterpart from *Throne of Blood*, and she is similarly single minded in the pursuit of her ultimate goal.

However, Kaede is a development of Asaji because despite similarities in their depiction, her motives are more complex and she is ultimately as much a victim of Hidetora as anyone else. Kaede is forced to appropriate the *bushidō* code in order to get justice for her family, but she destroys herself in the process.

The method of her revenge highlights the paradoxical and destructive nature of the *bushidō* code, especially in an environment where swords have given way to guns. The only way that Kaede as a woman can exact revenge for the death of her family is to manipulate the sons of Hidetora into betraying their father, and thus violating the *giri* that they owe to him. The battle scene that is the centrepiece of the film can thus be seen as the horrifying consequences of Kaede's *giri*.

Kaede employs samurai codes to reorganise authority within the Ichimonji family, a reorganisation that sets the stage for the destruction of the entire Ichimonji clan. Her attack begins within the reclaimed domestic space of the First Castle, which once belonged to her family. She first orders Hidetora's concubines to make way for her own women as Hidetora watches on in disgust from the tower of the First Castle. Later she scolds Taro for failing to claim the emblems of the Great Lord, telling him that without them, a symbol of power, he is "just a shadow" (*Ran* Screenplay 21). She demands that Taro retrieve the Ichimonji family banner. The retrieval of the banner further antagonises Hidetora by resulting in a threat to the life of his fool Kyoami. Hidetora reacts by killing one of Taro's soldiers which allows Kaede a golden opportunity to engineer the reorganisation of power within the clan.

Kaede and Taro invite Hidetora to a 'family dinner' for the purpose of humiliating Hidetora by asking him to sign over his authority. In this scene, Kaede's positioning within the space as well as the way in which she is treated by the camera, is used to illustrate her position of power. As the scene begins, the camera makes it clear who is responsible and in control of the situation. As Hidetora enters the room Taro disappears off the screen. In a long

shot Kaede is in a central position, with the bowed back of Hidetora significantly below her. Hidetora is humiliated and enraged to be sitting below Kaede and Taro, and Kaede further demeans him and puts him in his place by calling him father-in-law.. Hidetora seals the pledge with his blood as requested, but makes it clear that he knows that Kaede is behind all this, remarking contemptuously that “the hen makes the rooster cry” (*Ran* Screenplay 28). Most of the scene is in long shot and medium shots, with one notable exception. When Hidetora has left, Ikoma, who was once Hidetora’s advisor bows down in deference to Lady Kaede. During the scene Ikoma has been instrumental in persuading his former master to sign the pledge to Taro. She commends him for his loyal service and there is a cut to a close-up of Kaede, allowing her for the first time to dominate the screen entirely. As Howlett observes (123):

In the strategic reorganization of loyalties and hierarchical space – including the prominent display of the family banner on the wall behind her – Lady Kaede appropriates the forms of samurai power and authority. The result, for both father and son, will be the obliteration of identity.

Destroying Hidetora’s position as Great Lord has also enabled Kaede to reclaim her own family’s space and her identity. In an extended long shot we see Kaede and Taro sitting, each occupying exactly half of the screen. She tells Taro how she has longed to be back in her family castle, and now she has achieved that aim. For a moment Jiro loses his composure just slightly. In his face we see just a little fear. She also tells us that this is the room where her own mother took her life. The site of her mother’s suicide has been transformed into a space where Kaede has reclaimed her birthright and identity by manipulating codes of samurai signification. Kaede has also established herself in a position of power, and made it clear to Taro and Hidetora that she is a force to be reckoned with.

Similarly, Kaede obliterates Jiro's identity as warrior in her "seduction" of him. After the death of Taro, which of course Jiro was responsible for, Jiro presents his dead brother's hair to his widow Kaede, in what is meant to be a display of his power and authority. She ignores him, instead asking Ogura what has happened to Taro's body and armour. Jiro realises he has been insulted and angrily tells Kaede he is wearing the armour. She objects to Jiro's appropriation of these symbols of samurai power and identity, reprimanding him for wearing his brother's armour so soon after his death. In response Jiro strips them off, telling her he will soon be naked. He is symbolically also stripping himself of his identity as a warrior. We do not see the entire disrobing. Instead, in a further display of Kaede's power, the camera pans in long shot and watches as she picks up the hair, turns her back on Jiro and exits the room without being formally dismissed by Jiro, who, it must be remembered, is now the leader of the Ichimonji.

The next time he meets Kaede he wears nothing that marks him out as a warrior. He is now only the brother of Taro, the dead Great Lord. In a long shot Kaede enters carrying Taro's helmet, apparently in deference to Jiro. She kneels before him, apparently apologetic for her earlier insult. But she is only using it as a pretext for an attack. Having manipulated him into making himself vulnerable, Kaede seizes the moment to appropriate a masculine behaviour. In a long shot, warrior-like she attacks him with a knife which can castrate and feminize him. She cuts his neck and threatens him, to make it clear that she is in control, and forces him to admit that he was responsible for his brother's death. Then in a further display of power and a further emasculation of Jiro, she seizes his sword and throws it out of the room in contempt. There is a cut to a close-up as Kaede fiercely declares that this is her father's castle and she is not going to leave, even though her husband is dead and she has no right to stay there any longer.

She then cuts her own kimono in a further threatening gesture, telling Jiro to remember that she can destroy him, and then proceeds to kiss him, and licks his bloodied neck. She becomes much more than just a passive manipulator of Jiro, and actually indulges in violence which is combined with sexual overtones (Howlett 125). Her final act as she sexually overpowers him is to kick away Taro's helmet, yet another act of emasculation. The final shot of the scene is a close-up of the helmet.

In the next scene the camera first focuses on the helmet, then moves to Kaede and Jiro who are undressing. Kaede expresses her desire to be his new wife. She further manipulates Jiro by bursting into mock tears. In long shot the tearful Kaede notices a moth on the ground and does not miss a beat in crushing the defenceless creature. She tells Jiro that he must kill his wife Sue. Soon after Kurogane enters and Kaede instructs him to kill Sue and bring her the woman's head. Jiro raises no objection, now completely under her control. She dismisses Kurogane abruptly, turns her back on him and closes the doors of the room, shutting him out.

Kaede's final manipulation of Jiro comes near the end of the film, in a scene where Jiro is contemplating whether to go into battle with Saburo and his allies. Kurogane has warned against it. She accuses him of cowardice and lacking leadership. She is really calling into question his status as a warrior, and Jiro takes the bait. Foolhardily he ignores Kurogane's advice and orders an attack on Saburo's forces, resulting in a massacre.

Kaede appropriates and manipulates the signs and rituals, even the behaviour of *bushidō*, in order to exact her revenge. However, in doing so, she commits a transgression that effectively feminises the men that she comes in contact with. Once Taro and Saburo are dead, and Jiro has been tricked into a war with Fujimaki and Ayabe, she finally admits what her plans has been all along, but by then it is too late to stop her. In the scene of her execution, even at the moment of her death she remains empowered. In a final close-up she declares "I wanted to see all this!" (*Ran* Screenplay 106)

There is only one possible response to her treachery. In a rage Kurogane decapitates her with his sword, and her blood spatters on the wall. The blood spatter appropriately recalls the bloodstains of the room where Washizu's predecessor was killed in *Throne of Blood*, linking one treacherous character with another. It is also a reminder of the blood spurt from the final fight scene in *Sanjuro*, further associating one pointless death with another.

Her death is an empty act for it does nothing to restore order. The damage has already been done. Kaede's horrible revenge on Hidetora and his family has been exacted and the entire region has been plunged into war. Moreover, Hidetora has already proven that swords are useless weapons in the age of the firearm.

In the world of *Ran* they are only effective against defenceless women like Sue, who is one of the innocent victims of Kaede's scheming. Her only crime is that Kaede views her as a rival for Jiro's affections and for that reason she has to be eliminated. Sue's death makes it clear that in the bloody business of *giri* there are always innocent victims, and is a further indictment of *bushidō*. Ironically, like her vicious female counterpart, she is decapitated, although her death is not shown in the film.

Kurosawa's characterisation of Sue is limited and somewhat simplistic. As a figure she is not well-developed, and seems to exist as exemplifying one of two binary opposite responses to Hidetora's brutality. Between them, the two women are almost representative of a Madonna/whore dichotomy, although Kaede's characterisation is much more complex than that of Sue's.

As well as forcing women to behave like men in order to get revenge and to destroy other innocent women in the process, the bushido code also feminises and victimises men as well. We see this through Sue's brother Tsurumaru. Like Sue, her brother Tsurumaru is also an innocent victim of the violence of the warrior world and to make his suffering worse he is

victimised twice. Hoile (33) notes that Tsurumaru is the victim of both the masculine and feminine spheres of action.

In the masculine sphere Hidetora murdered the family of Tsurumaru and Sue, giving Sue to Jiro as his wife. He left Tsurumaru alive but blinded him. He now lives alone in a shack with little human contact apart from that offered by Sue and her maid. Hidetora's actions have stripped away Tsurumaru's manhood. He is presented on the screen as an emasculated, even androgynous figure.

In a scene immediately following the battle at First Castle, Hidetora comes face to face with Tsurumaru while sheltering in his shack. Tsurumaru is one of the most innocent victims of his warmongering and is now a fully grown man although little remains of his manhood. Tsurumaru unleashes his quiet anger on him, and plays his flute for Hidetora and his companions, but the music is deeply disturbing, almost tortured and rises steadily towards a hysterical pitch. The playing is all too much for Hidetora, and he reacts with horror. As Tsurumaru plays his tortured song the camera cuts away from him and focuses on Hidetora's reaction. In a close up shot we see the anguish on Hidetora's face at the musical representation of Tsurumaru's tortured soul. When Tsurumaru begins playing, Hidetora desperately tries to escape the sound of the flute by crawling into a corner, an action that recalls Washizu's attempt in *Throne of Blood* to escape his guilty conscience after seeing the ghost of his dead friend Miki by doing the same thing. The weight of his guilt is too much for Hidetora's mind to cope with, and overwhelmed, he tumbles through the hut's wall.

Tsurumaru is also victimised by Lady Kaede, and is thus a double victim of Hidetora's brutality. In the feminine sphere Lady Sue and her nurse are decapitated at the order of Lady Kaede after Kurogane has too late overturned the command. The death of Sue and the nurse leaves Tsurumaru without any support. They had gone to fetch his flute, which Tsurumaru had left behind in his shack.

The final scene of the film focuses on Tsurumaru, the victim of the brutality of both masculine and feminine responses to the warrior code. He stands on a precipice, completely alone, and oblivious to the fact that his sister will not be coming to get him. He stumbles and drops the picture of Buddha his sister gave him to keep him company. The shot of him slowly lengthens its distance until he is almost a speck on the screen. It is a final powerful image of the helplessness of the innocent in the face of the brutality of the warrior world.

Ran uses a strategy of inversion and subversion in order to offer a scathing assessment of samurai behaviour and to indict the warrior code as deeply destructive. Almost every aspect of the film is an extreme indictment of the warrior code. The film uses a complex variety of intertextual elements, drawing from the tradition of samurai filmmaking, in particular Kurosawa's own films, as well as Japanese history, and also uses gender to provide Kurosawa's most scathing cinematic indictment of the *bushidō* code. The film develops the thematic concerns of Kurosawa's samurai cinema and takes them to unprecedented extremes.

Ran is Kurosawa's final statement of his thoughts about the place of *bushidō* in society and its decline as a moral force. Precious few characters still uphold the traditions of loyalty and self-sacrifice that are at the heart of *bushidō*. Instead, the world of *Ran* is dominated by betrayal, manipulation, and needless violence and bloodshed. *Ran* is also a demonstration that at the heart of the warrior code is brutal violence that serves no-one. Even an act of revenge undertaken in the name of *giri*, which is often presented in samurai cinema as being a noble concept, albeit a source of conflict, is in the end perverse and destructive.

Chapter Three Samurai *Lear*?

The first chapter of this thesis concentrated attention on examining Kurosawa's samurai cinema up to but not including *Ran* in order to establish a context for a discussion of the film. The second examined *Ran* itself, looking at the film's intertextuality, in particular the way in which the film references Kurosawa's other samurai films as well as incorporating material from Japanese history in order to provide a devastating critique of *bushidō*.

Between them, the first two chapters have covered several aspects of *Ran*'s complex intertextuality but have solely concentrated on Japanese intertextual sources. These chapters have consciously avoided discussing the most significant and often-discussed Western intertextual source for *Ran*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Kurosawa himself confirms the play was a source for the film in many interviews that he gave at the time the film was released, although somewhat curiously he chooses to downplay its influence. His own attitude to the influence of *King Lear* on *Ran* is certainly at odds with the mass of critical literature devoted to tracing the intertextual relationship between *Ran* and the play.

As much as Kurosawa himself downplays the influence of the play on his film, critics at times tend to overstate the influence, or at the very least, try to focus on establishing parallels between play and film when such connections seem tenuous and unsupported by much evidence. Such a comparative approach denigrates Kurosawa's achievement in *Ran* and overlooks the fact that many of these details are better explained by referring to other intertextual sources. This tendency manifests itself whether critics are talking about basic elements of plot, theme and even in their description of characters, where character traits become evidence that Kurosawa is drawing heavily on Shakespeare for inspiration.

Characters in the film are reduced to versions of characters in *King Lear*, sometimes a combination of them, without considering them as cinematic creations in their own right. This approach also results in a condemnatory attitude towards Hidetora in comparison to Lear, a pointless blame game that does little to enhance our understanding of the film, or Shakespeare's play for that matter.

A discussion of the film's theatrical intertexts is also incomplete without taking into consideration the influence of traditional Japanese theatrical forms. Like *Throne of Blood*, the other Kurosawa film that borrows heavily from Shakespeare, *Ran* shows the significant influence of Noh theatre. . Many of the characters in the film show evidence of stock character types from Noh plays and the influence of Noh shows through in the staging and structure of the film. The use of Noh theatre is also highly appropriate for a film where *bushidō* plays such a key role.

Although Noh is undoubtedly a significant theatrical intertext, the mass of critical literature devoted to a comparison of the play and the film can leave no doubt that Shakespeare's play has had a significant influence on the work, both structurally and thematically. There are significant differences between the plots of the two works but there are enough structural similarities, as well as Kurosawa's partial admission of a debt to the play, to suggest *King Lear* has had quite an impact on the final film.

It is a key element of his complex strategy for critiquing the *bushidō* code. Thematically, both play and film share a concern with loyalty which, in the form of *giri*, is a founding principle of *bushidō*. Both play and film also examine the changing role of an ageing patriarch and most significantly, a sense of apocalyptic vision marked by a significant climactic event, in *King Lear*, a huge storm, in *Ran*, a bloody battle, that leaves the protagonist insane and signals complete societal breakdown. As with Noh, the choice of *King Lear*, setting aside Kurosawa's own denials, seems an eminently appropriate choice.

Kurosawa's appropriation of Shakespeare's play compliments and enhances its other intertexts, giving it a structural and thematic unity that strengthens its impact as a devastating examination of the destructive impact of *bushidō*.

When *Ran* opened in theatres across the Western world in 1986, largely to rave reviews, it was hailed for a number of reasons, not least for its strikingly original use of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Writing for *American Film*, Dave Kehr even labels it "samurai *Lear*" (20). A great many of the questions asked in interviews that Kurosawa gave as part of the huge publicity surrounding the film's release focus on the parallels between the film and Shakespeare's play. In spite of this Kurosawa firmly establishes that the original inspiration for the film was not *King Lear* but a famous story from the life of a samurai. The following excerpt from an interview with the *New York Times* typifies Kurosawa's stance on this issue:

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 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. (Grilli H17)

In addition to offering this disclaimer, in the same interview, in somewhat contradictory fashion, Kurosawa says that one of the intentions of the film was to answer a question that has always troubled him; namely how Lear came to be in the situation we are presented with at the beginning of the play. It must be noted that in making this statement, Kurosawa is admitting that Shakespeare's play did have quite an influence on the direction his film took, even if he denies that it was the original inspiration for the film:

What has always troubled me about *King Lear* is that Shakespeare gives his characters no past. We are plunged directly into the agonies for their present dilemmas without knowing how they came to this

point. How did Lear acquire the power, that, as an old man, he abuses with such disastrous effects? Without knowing his past, I have never really understood the ferocity of his daughters' response to Lear's feeble attempts to shed his royal power. In *Ran* I have tried to give Lear a history. I try to make clear that his power must rest upon a lifetime of bloody savagery. (Grilli H1)

This quotation asserts that even if *King Lear* was not the starting point for *Ran*, it did have an impact in terms of Kurosawa's intention for the film, and more particularly the character of Hidetora. It also gives much insight into Kurosawa's reading of the play, asserting that his decision to give Hidetora a past history is motivated by a feeling that *King Lear* is flawed because it fails to do the same.

To use one of Bloom's six concepts from *The Anxiety of Influence*, Kurosawa's attitude could be viewed as an example of *tessera*. Bloom's theory was applied to English poetry, but it seems like an apt concept here to describe the relationship between *Ran* and *King Lear*. *Tessera* describes a situation where "a poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom *Anxiety of Influence* 14). His claim that the play is somehow lacking allows Kurosawa to position himself as not merely imitating Shakespeare, but adding to him, even improving on his source material. It also allows him to establish himself as an independent artist interpreting another from an individual perspective.

Nonetheless, even the most cursory examination of *Ran*'s plot indicates how much of the basic story, not just the opening sequence, is drawn from the play. As Thompson (5) observes, it is "somewhat disingenuous" of the director to suggest otherwise. Despite Kurosawa's insistence that the opening sequence owes a lot more to the story of Motonari Mori than that of *King Lear*, it has striking plot and structural similarities, and as the film progresses, further similarities become apparent.

It might further be argued that the relationship between *Ran* and *King Lear*, to borrow another term from Harold Bloom, is *agonistic*, a relationship based on competition and rivalry. If we frame *Ran* as a revision, at least in part, of *King Lear*, then the idea of the *agon* is pertinent.

Revisionism, as Nietzsche said of every spirit unfolds itself *only in fighting*. The spirit portrays itself as agonistic, as contesting for supremacy, with other spirits, with anteriority, and finally with every earlier version of itself. (Bloom *Agon* viii)

Reader (178) employs this idea in his discussion of Renoir's *Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier*, in terms of its status as an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and the sense of rivalry between Renoir's film and Stevenson's story. There seems to be a similar rivalry between Kurosawa and Shakespeare. It is perhaps inevitable, given the overwhelming primacy of the Shakespearean canon in the English speaking world, that such comparisons would be made. Kurosawa resists fully subscribing to this comparative model in order to preserve his individual identity as an artist.

However, many of the critics writing about the *Lear* intertext have employed such a model. One manifestation of this is critical assertion that certain elements of Shakespeare's play have been brilliantly transformed by Kurosawa into cinematic images. Crowl's assessment of the opening sequence of *Ran* is a case in point. He gives a description of the opening sequence, and then makes the following claim:

In a striking series of introductory images Akira Kurosawa displays his cinematic assimilation of *King Lear*'s startling energy and relentless appetite. "The bow is bent and drawn/Make from the shaft" Lear insists to Kent in the play's explosive opening scene, and Kurosawa lifts that image as he once again releases the Shakespearean arrow of appetite and desire into a cinematic landscape that rivals his earlier imagining of *Macbeth* as *Throne of Blood*. (109)

Crowl's assessment of *Ran* is in a similar vein to Blumenthal's oft-quoted assessment of *Throne of Blood* (195). It is certainly a compelling argument on its surface, but it quickly unravels when we consider that Kurosawa has already acknowledged the importance of the story of Motonari Mori to the conception of *Ran*, and of course the retelling of the story of the three arrows that sets the whole story in motion. In particular, in Chapter Two this thesis has also provided a detailed account of the importance of the opening hunt sequence in establishing the importance of the arrow as a significant visual motif that is developed throughout the film. This opening sequence, as has been noted, is also crucially important for establishing the character of Hidetora as warrior, and the opening sequence ironically foreshadows the final horseback ride where Saburo is assassinated. It is also a curious argument to make, as it is very hard to prove that Kurosawa is directly assimilating Shakespeare in his use of arrow imagery.

Crowl further errs when trying to justify what he sees as Kurosawa's transformation of daughters into sons:

[Kurosawa] makes sons of Shakespeare's daughters partly in response to Japanese samurai tradition but also to make an even more daring gender reversal, as I indicated earlier, by collapsing Cornwall and Edmund into a single female character, Kaede, the wife of Hidetora's eldest son. (112)

The "reversal" that Crowl refers to is partly in response to what was traditional, but it is also done for a more obvious and practical reason. As with the arrow imagery, the presence of the three sons is a necessary change in order to use the story of Motonari Mori and his three sons as a significant intertext for *Ran*.

Crowl's claim about Kaede also demonstrates a predilection common among critics to try to suggest that the attributes of some characters in *Ran* are inherited from similar

characters in *King Lear*. The fact that there is at times little critical agreement on which attributes came from where indicates that such an enterprise is fraught from its outset, and also fails to acknowledge the role that Kurosawa played in the conception of the characters.

For the purposes of demonstration, a simplistic swapping of characters in *King Lear* for characters in *Ran* may produce the following results, although, as will soon be demonstrated, a model that uses such broad generalisations has severe limitations. Hidetora is Lear, and his three sons Taro, Jiro and Saburo are Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Tango is Kent, Kyoami is the Fool and to a more limited extent the blind Tsurumaru is Gloucester and Lady Kaede is Edmund.

However, looking at a survey of some critical opinions of Kaede, for example, trying to establish direct correlation between characters in play and film becomes a much more complicated matter. Goodwin (201) argues that “in its intertextual treatment of material found in the Shakespeare play, the film typically condenses, abbreviates or intensifies events and character traits. Lady Kaede possesses the same savage ambition as Edmund, but she has a motive of revenge that he does not.” Hoile labels Kaede as “Kurosawa’s Edmund” (31) but then further claims that Kaede “absorbs the otherworldly evil of the bemonstered Goneril, Regan and Edmund” (32). Crowl, as already indicated, thinks that Kaede is the result of combining Edmund and Cornwall, further observing that “both Edmund and Kaede feel themselves constrained by a hierarchical, patriarchal power structure they desire to displace or destroy” (112). Johansen argues that “in many respects, her position in the film may be compared to that of Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*” (79). The opinions of four critics have been cited here, and they have mentioned no less than four different characters from Shakespeare’s play and from slightly differing perspectives as sources for the characterisation of Kaede. As a final example, Grilli (H17), getting thoroughly carried away, suggests that “in its malevolence and vindictive ferocity [Kaede’s character] combines the qualities of Regan

and Goneril with all the accumulated evil of Lady Macbeth, Edmund and Iago.” It is impossible to know whose critical assessment is the more astute, or indeed if any are correct. It is not uncommon for critics to disagree on such matters, of course, but the fact that there is such huge variation in critical opinion on the possible Shakespearean sources for Kaede’s characterisation and the impact that such sources may have had casts doubt on the validity and usefulness of such an approach.

Moreover, in Chapter Two this thesis has already suggested that the character of Kaede is influenced as much by Lady Asaji from *Throne of Blood* as any particular character in *King Lear*. It is much easier to see Kaede as a variation on Asaji. She manipulates the men around her in the same fashion, and even some of her movements are reminiscent of her. She has a slightly different motivation than Asaji, driven by a desire to avenge the death of her family, rather than ambition but in many other respects the similarities are striking.

It is also difficult to see how Kaede can be treated as a direct equivalent of any character in Shakespeare’s play, as the subplot of *Ran* that Kaede dominates is vastly different to the Gloucester subplot in *King Lear*. It is equally easy to find a whole range of ways in which Kaede differs from all of those characters from *King Lear* that she has been compared to. In the final analysis it is extremely difficult to prove how the play has had any obvious influence on the characterisation of Kaede.

Assessments of the character of Lady Sue are equally problematic. At one point Hoile equates Sue with Cordelia, but he also assigns characteristics of Cordelia to Tsurumaru (33) and Saburo (30), giving the film no less than three separate Cordelia figures. Crowl, in keeping with his gender reversal argument, suggests that Sue incorporates aspects of both Albany and Edgar (110). Once again there seems to be a critical tendency to treat Kurosawa’s characters as an amalgam of characters, or even the attributes of characters, in *King Lear*. In Sue’s case, because her role in the subplot is, even more than Kaede’s, a very different one to

any character in the play's subplot, such comparisons seem rather pointless and do little to illuminate the role of Sue in *Ran*.

There are similar problems with Goodwin's assessment of the scene when Hidetora meets Sue's blind brother Tsurumaru in his hut, when Tango, Kyoami and the exhausted Hidetora are seeking shelter from the fierce wind. There is, of course, a similar meeting in *King Lear*, between Gloucester and Lear, but unlike the meeting between Tsurumaru and Hidetora, their meeting takes place outside on the heath, as opposed to indoors. It is inaccurate to suggest that the meeting between Tsurumaru and Hidetora is Kurosawa's "version" of the meeting between Gloucester and Lear, just as it is inaccurate to suggest that *Ran* is Kurosawa's "version" of Shakespeare's play. Goodwin suggests that "aspects of Gloucester and Edgar are to be found in the film's characterisation of Tsurumaru as a hermit living in exile" (208). However, the figure of Tsurumaru owes as much, if not more, to Noh theatre, the significance of which will be discussed in some detail later in the chapter. Goodwin's interpretation of the moment when Hidetora reacts in horror to Tsurumaru's playing and tumbles through the wall again demonstrates the perils of trying to find direct parallels, or translations of the theatrical into cinematic form. According to Goodwin, "Kurosawa's conception of this dramatic moment can be understood as a brilliant restructuring of Lear's instruction to the blind Gloucester; 'A man may see how the world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears' (4.6.152-53)."

However, this thesis has suggested in Chapter Two that this moment is more likely to be a reference to Washizu's attempt to escape from the ghost of Miki in *Throne of Blood*, an argument given more weight by the fact that like Miki, at this moment, the somewhat ghostly figure of Tsurumaru is the manifestation of Hidetora's past acts of atrocity. As with Crowl's interpretation of Kurosawa's use of arrow imagery, this is another instance where reference to

an intertext that is not *King Lear*, in fact a reference to one of Kurosawa's own films, seems to make more sense than trying to find a parallel with the play.

Things become even more fraught when dealing with the question of Hidetora; often unhelpfully and misleadingly referred to in comparison with Lear himself. A particular instance where there seems to be considerable critical consensus is presented by Goodwin (203):

Ran reverses the logic that underpins the tragic course of events in *King Lear*. In Hidetora's past quest for power he blinded Tsurumaru, Lady Sue's brother, in exchange for sparing the boy's life. In the play, the blinding of Gloucester, committed by Cornwall with the incitement of Regan, is an act of pure evil against an innocent man. In the film, the blinding of an innocent is reported as an atrocity committed by the Lord himself earlier in his rise to power. Rather than the tragedy's expression of a greatness of spirit in Gloucester and Lear born of their suffering, the film presents the political greatness Hidetora has achieved as the consequence of the horrible suffering he has brought upon others. By no means can Hidetora make the same claim to pathos heard from Lear as he wails in contention with the storm, "I am a man/More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59-60).

Many other critics tend to share Goodwin's viewpoint. Kishi and Bradshaw (144) feel that "Hidetora is a monster who has been as bad as or worse than any of the evil characters in Shakespeare's play." Rothwell (*Shakespeare on Screen* 198) asserts that "the characterisation of seventy-year-old Hidetora aligns him more with sadistic Cornwall than doddering old Lear", which again rather dubiously associates him with a particular character in the play in a fashion that is less than illuminating. Likewise, Prince (286) suggests that Hidetora is condemned as a bloodthirsty tyrant, a view shared by Johansen (76). In a similar vein Hoile (31) argues that "Hidetora's journey from castle to castle to hovel, unlike Lear's, brings to light only his past cruelties."

Goodwin and others seem to take the line that Hidetora is far more monstrous than Shakespeare's king because he is more overtly responsible for the carnage that he has unleashed than Lear or Gloucester. This whole moral blame game seems a particularly pointless exercise. Moreover, comparing Lear and Hidetora in this fashion requires one to adopt a fixed position on an attribute, in this case level of culpability, of the two characters that is overly simplistic and does no justice to the complexity of the situations in each work.

In this simplistic and reductive model, Hidetora is cruel, whereas Lear is simply foolish. In reality, the extent of Lear's (and Gloucester's) responsibility for the events in the play is the subject of much critical debate. Likewise, the question of Hidetora's level of responsibility for what happens in *Ran* is a complex matter, although one that has not been explored in the critical literature in any depth. Such debates really only make sense in the context of each individual work.

Thus far this chapter has cast a critical eye on a number of approaches to the intertextual relationship between play and film and raised serious questions about their validity. All of these approaches have two basic flaws. Firstly, they try to approach the two texts on a one to one basis, as if there is any way of adequately comparing an English play with a Japanese film, especially when one is most definitely not a direct version of the other. Secondly, they try to oversimplify the complex nature of the intertextual relationship between the film and the play.

But what really limits all of these critical approaches as far as this thesis is concerned, is all assume that *Ran* is in part or in whole, to some extent, Kurosawa's "version" of *King Lear*. Moreover, in terms of the contexts established in the previous chapters, none of these approaches deal adequately with the way that Kurosawa's concern with the *bushidō* code interacts with the Lear intertext. An understanding of this interaction unquestionably enriches our understanding of the film.

To put *Lear* to one side again for a moment, the critical concentration on the play also unfairly weighs the discussion about intertextuality toward a Western theatrical intertext when the influence of traditional Japanese Noh theatre is equally significant. To be fair, there are a significant number of critics who do acknowledge the importance of Noh, but nonetheless most critical analyses of *Ran* focus on comparing the film to *King Lear*. The influence of Noh can be felt in the film's style and structure, as well as its thematic concerns.

On a purely visual level the composition of many scenes in *Ran*, their sense of symmetry and asymmetry, shows the definite influence of Noh. In Noh the grouping of actors on stage is always formalised, and this formality of presentation that is a recurring feature of Noh drama can be seen in many of the film's scenes (Richie *Films of Kurosawa* 217). The influence is obvious in the very formal groupings in the first major group scene in which Hidetora announces to his family and followers that he intends to retire and cede power to his sons. As the scene progresses, this very formal group gradually disintegrates, mirroring the breakdown of social groups and family ties.

The use of Noh is also evident in the portrayal of major characters in the film. Arguably, Noh has more of a bearing on character in *Ran* than *King Lear* does. In particular, various Noh masks are used as an intertext to illustrate the particular broad characteristics of characters in the film. For example, two separate Noh masks are used to illustrate Hidetora's character and more particularly, his decline from fierce warrior to frail old madman. When he first appears in the film his face is made up to resemble the mask of *akujo*, or villainous old man, appropriate for someone with such a bloody past history. In the Noh tradition, this character can also have demonic aspects, so in addition he is portrayed as almost having supernatural powers when he first appears. After the battle at Third Castle when he emerges from the flames like a ghost, his makeup has been radically changed to now resemble the *shiwajo*, the wrinkled old man. As Hidetora continues to decline, the makeup becomes more

pronounced, until close-up shot finalise his physical and mental disintegration. His sunken eyes, deeply wrinkled skin and dishevelled hair strongly resemble the *shiwajo* mask of the elderly man whose sins condemn him to wander the earth forever. (McDonald 141-142).

Noh is also a significant influence on the portrayal of Lady Kaede. Her face resembles a blank Noh mask, and her acting style, largely cold and controlled, with occasional outbursts of extreme emotion, is typical of Noh (Parker 89). Her walk too is derived from Noh practice. Her feet are not lifted from the floor, but instead slide along it. Her acting style and movement, as with Lady Asaji in *Throne of Blood*, emphasise her evil and calculating nature.

On a somewhat lighter note, the behaviour and dialogue of Kyoami, Hidetora's jester, are a reminder of a *kyogen* actor for the comic interlude between two Noh performances. Kyoami's performances during the film, his song about the approaching rabbit in the opening meeting of Hidetora and his followers and his taunting of Hidetora for giving up his castle (which is somewhat more serious in intent) are very much in the *kyogen* tradition. Also, in the scene immediately following Hidetora's exit from Third Castle, Hidetora recoils from an inner image prompted by the sight of tall grasses blown by fierce wind. He begs for forgiveness, Kyoami recognises his reaction as being one of remorse for past violent deeds, and recites a grotesque variation on lines from a Noh play that puts Hidetora's feelings into words. (Goodwin 206-207)

The influence of Noh is also felt in the figure of Tsurumaru. As McDonald further observes (142), Tsurumaru's face is like that of the Noh mask called *yoroboshi* (literally translated as blind beggar). The fact that the mask is often worn in conjunction with a wig of long messy hair strengthens this connection. The influence of Noh comes through particularly strongly in the meeting between Tsurumaru and Hidetora. During this meeting, despite the horrors Hidetora has inflicted on his family and him, Tsurumaru then offers Hidetora and his companions "hospitality of the heart" by playing his *nohkan*, or Noh flute, with the deeply

ironic comment that playing music is the only pleasure left to him. As Goodwin (209) notes, the *nohkan* is the only wind instrument used in accompaniment in Noh theatre and normally expresses a character's state of mind. The playing that follows is deeply disturbing, almost tortured and rises steadily towards a hysterical pitch. The playing awakes Hidetora's guilty conscience (Parker 90), bringing home to him the enormity of his evil deeds.

The soundtrack in general also contains much that is Noh like. The first sound we hear is the sound of the Noh flute which will be related to Tsurumaru, as already discussed. This sound will also be the last sound that is heard and add much to the film's poignancy.

Likewise, Toru Takemitsu's soundtrack is a sophisticated pastiche of Noh, with its use of percussive sounds and irregular silences between them. There is also the various stomping of characters, and the sound of Lady Kaede's silks sliding across the floor.

The use of Noh is appropriate for a film that deals with suffering and characters involved with confronting moral crises. It is a film of great stylistic grandeur and philosophical sophistication, and Kurosawa is indebted to Noh for the film's formal and contextual strength. Noh conventions from other Kurosawa films come into play, such as the richly stylized world from *Throne of Blood*.

Above all, as well as its influence on the basic elements of the film Noh is highly appropriate for a film where the *bushidō* code is such a key thematic concern and major source of intertextuality. As Parker (90) observes, like Noh, *bushidō* has its roots in Zen Buddhism, "which sees the world as essentially an impermanent stage for constantly repeated actions, a fiery wheel of recurrence," which is a key thematic concern of Noh theatre, and a strong theme in both *The Seven Samurai* and *Kagemusha*. *Ran*'s concern with demonstrating how societal violence is perpetuates itself makes Noh a very appropriate theatrical tradition for Kurosawa to draw upon.

Returning again to *King Lear*, Kurosawa's use of the play likewise adds to the film's structural and thematic unity. Kurosawa's use of the play goes far beyond basic issues of characterisation and translation of the verbal into the visual. In a sense, as Dawson (160) notes, *Ran* demonstrates how Kurosawa has read Shakespeare's play and his reading and appropriation of it is very sophisticated. The relationship between the two is much more than "tenuous, intermittent and merely potty" as claimed by Kishi and Bradshaw (143) in their rather scathing analysis of the film. This relationship will be summarised, and then will be scrutinised by examining specific scenes from *Ran* in more detail to show how Kurosawa adapts and incorporates elements of *Lear*'s structure and supplements them with other elements. In some cases these scenes were examined in detail in the previous chapter, but it is well worth revisiting them in the context of their intertextual relationship with *King Lear* and the way that this interacts with the film's concern with the *bushidō* code.

In basic terms, the essential plot set up of *Ran* is strikingly similar to that of *King Lear*. The ageing ruler Hidetora, like his Shakespearean counterpart, has decided to divide his territory between his three children. His two eldest children are in total agreement with his plan and flatter their father. The third and youngest child, Saburo, like Cordelia, refuses to follow their lead. For his perceived defiance, like his Shakespearean counterpart, he is disowned by his father and banished. His faithful retainer Tango, like Kent, is banished too, for vehemently objecting when Hidetora disowns and banishes Saburo. Like Lear, Hidetora in turn visits the castles of his two eldest children and falls out with them over the conduct of his retainers, resulting in him severing contact with them both. Like Lear, Hidetora ends up mad and wandering alone in the wilderness with his jester, Kyoami, for company. Kyoami similarly acts as a foil to Hidetora as well as providing perceptive and at times ironic commentary on Hidetora's behaviour and the general action of the film. Hidetora expresses a similar, arguably even more pronounced, regret for his actions and has a similar

reconciliation with his youngest child that is cut short by the unexpected death of that child. Like Lear, the loss of that child kills him and at the end of the film, his world is in turmoil, ravaged by war, leaving a handful of survivors to try to make sense of what has just happened and find a way to carry on.

Both play and film are also structured around an apocalyptic event that is of major thematic significance and connected to the social disintegration caused by the rash judgment of ageing patriarchs. In both works, an ageing ruler's foolish decision to divide his territory among his children sets in motion a chain of events that destroys the fabric of society, destroying his family, plunging his world into war and ultimately destroying the ruler himself as well. The major device that signals the apocalypse is significantly different in both cases. In *King Lear* it is represented by the storm. In *Ran* it is a huge battle that leaves the world of Hidetora in absolute ruin. At the end of both works, the characters remaining struggle to come to terms with what has happened, and there is no easy resolution to the conflict, which in the case of *Ran*, seems fated to continue.

The first scene of *Ran* that shows the complex interaction between *bushidō* and *King Lear* is the scene following the hunt near the very beginning of the film where Hidetora announces, like Lear, his intention to retire and cede control of his territory to his children. In *Ran*, the three children are male, not female, for in Japanese tradition there would be no circumstances in which a warlord would cede authority to a daughter, or even for that matter, a daughter's husband. Moreover, such a change is also necessary in order to incorporate the story of Motonari Mori as a major intertext, which has been discussed in some detail in the previous chapter.

Saburo is more openly critical of his father's plan than Cordelia, but like her he refuses to indulge in flattery of his father, something that Taro and Jiro, like Goneril and Regan, have no difficulty doing. Unlike his Shakespearean counterpart, Saburo also raises the issue of his

father's past behaviour, warning that sons of such a treacherous warrior are not to be trusted. Hidetora has a history and it will have a huge impact on the events that follow. Saburo's attitude results in him being in much the same situation as Cordelia. Like Lear, Hidetora interprets his youngest child's attitude as a sign of disloyalty, although both of them in their own ways have been trying to demonstrate the opposite. Tango, his faithful vassal, leaps to Saburo's defence, and like Kent, he is banished for his honesty, and is forced to disguise himself in order to escape detection and execution. At the end of this opening sequence, the situation in *Ran* is remarkably similar to that in *King Lear*. Like Shakespeare's king, Hidetora has unwittingly banished the two people in his world who are most loyal to him and created the climate in which his other two treacherous children will ultimately plot his death, plunge their society into war and end up destroying themselves and their entire family.

Kurosawa takes the basic shape of *King Lear* and transforms it in order to make it appropriate to the Japanese cultural context as well as the thematic concerns of *Ran*. In keeping with the film's interest in interrogating and critiquing the *bushidō* code, his two treacherous offspring choose not to talk of how much they love him and instead praise his status as a warrior, but still in the end pander to his ego just as Lear's daughters did.

Hidetora's anger towards his vassal takes more direct form too. Lear's threatening of Kent stays at the verbal level, although he too threatens his vassal's life (1.1.174). It has already been established, firstly in the opening hunt scene, and in Saburo's words, that Hidetora is a merciless warrior, so it is no wonder when his word is questioned, he reacts violently. This rash display of violence, as well as establishing Hidetora's temperament, act as a catalyst that accelerates the chain of events that lead to the disintegration of the social fabric in his world.

Aside from the incorporation of the story of Motonari Mori as an intertext, the plot trajectory of this scene is almost identical to *King Lear*. The major difference between the

two is the scene's emphasis on Hidetora's past history of brutal violence and betrayal of those whose loyalty to him cost them their lives, and Hidetora's physical display of this by threatening Saburo. In this context, Saburo's warning to Hidetora about the consequences of dividing power among sons raised on a diet of warfare has no real equivalent in Shakespeare's play. This emphasis on Hidetora's brutal history is one of the most significant differences between *Ran* and *King Lear* and has a major impact on the plot trajectory of the film.

It is also worth noting the thematic similarities between the two works and the way that Kurosawa adapts this to his own ends. As in *King Lear*, loyalty, in the form of *giri*, is a key narrative construct and it is an act of perceived disloyalty on the part of both Lear and Hidetora that results in the banishment of those who have, ironically enough, demonstrated their loyalty. Cordelia demonstrates her loyalty by saying very little and refusing to follow Regan and Goneril's lead in pandering to her father's ego, Saburo by openly defying his father and trying to warn him of the inevitable bloody consequences of placing his trust in Jiro and Taro.

The following scenes also employ the basic plot structure of scenes in *King Lear*, although, as with the first scene, Kurosawa supplements plot elements from the play with additional material. Hidetora first visits his son Taro as his guest, in keeping with his plan, like Lear, of spending time with both his children in turn. While staying with Taro, as Lear does with Goneril, he falls out with his child over the conduct of his retainers who anger Taro by singing a song about his indecisiveness over whether to allow Hidetora's men to retain the Ichimonji banner. Taro also objects to Hidetora killing one of Taro's soldiers for threatening Kyoami, in much the same fashion as Goneril takes Lear to task for striking her servant Oswald (1.4.265).

The disagreement Hidetora has with his son, unlike that which Lear has with Goneril, is not enough to cause Hidetora to sever contact. Instead, Kurosawa adds to the plot by including a sequence in which the proud warrior Hidetora is humiliated by being forced to sign a pledge in blood to his own son, in other words, as discussed in chapter two, accept the *giri* he owes to his new master. It is this that prompts him to leave the castle, promising to have no more to do with Taro.

The film's emphasis on Hidetora's violent past necessitates another major plot change, but one that is definitely influenced at least in part by *King Lear*. Like the play, the film has a subplot based around a malevolent and destructive figure. In this case, it is a woman, the devious Lady Kaede. As already discussed, Kaede has been somewhat misleadingly presented by critics as incorporating some of the characteristics of the villainous men in *King Lear*, but her motivation is different. Kaede is entirely driven by a desire to avenge the death of her family. In this respect, she is similar to Edmund, but she has far more cause for wanting revenge. We learn in this scene that Hidetora lulled her family into a false sense of security and then murdered them. Kaede is significant inasmuch as she represents, along with Sue, one of two starkly contrasting responses to Hidetora's cruelty, and will be the driving force for the plot from the moment that she enters the film.

Hidetora's visit to his second son Jiro also follows a similar pattern to that of the play. Like Goneril, Taro has sent word to his brother that Hidetora's soldiers have been causing trouble. Consequently, when Hidetora's party arrives at the gates of Jiro's castle, he refuses to grant entry to his soldiers, much as Regan objects to having to feed and house all of Lear's soldiers. The end result is much the same. After a discussion with Jiro that quickly turns into a disagreement, Hidetora orders the massive gates of the castle open, and exits, once again promising never to see his son again.

Thus, at the end of this scene, Hidetora is left in much the same position as his Shakespearean counterpart, having disowned all his children and with nowhere to live. Unlike Lear, he still has his soldiers for company, but they are a millstone around his neck, as they need to be fed and kept occupied and he discovers to his horror that all of the villagers have been ordered by Taro not to help Hidetora and his men on pain of death.

Kurosawa's treatment of this the encounter between Jiro and Hidetora adds significant details that are appropriate to his slightly different treatment of the plot. There is an encounter between Lady Sue and Hidetora, whose family was wiped out by Hidetora in his past life as a ruthless warrior. She is representative of another, equally extreme, and overly simplistic female response to Hidetora's cruelty. Much as Kaede chooses revenge, she chooses forgiveness and reconciliation, in keeping with her adherence to the Buddhist faith.

The rest of the film also has a similar plot trajectory to the play. The film replaces the play's storm with a spectacular battle scene which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, but like Lear, Hidetora finds himself wandering in the wilderness with only his jester and loyal servant for company, and as time wears on, gradually loses more and more of his mind. He also has an encounter with a blind man, Tsurumaru, but this has a slightly different resonance in the film because Tsurumaru is the direct victim of Hidetora and brings home to Hidetora his bloody legacy. Lear does not make such a direct connection between the blind Gloucester's state and his own role in creating the disorder in the kingdom.

Near the film's end, Saburo's death, unlike Cordelia's, is shown and is all the more devastating for that reason. He is shot by Jiro's chief sniper, and like Taro, he is shot in the back, another act of brotherly betrayal. Unlike Lear, Hidetora watches his good child die right in front of his eyes, and his death is perhaps all the more shocking because it is his own brother who has given the order. With the death of Saburo any hope that the world of Hidetora will recover disappears as well. As with Lear, the shock of the death of his son kills

the elderly warlord, but unlike Lear, who seems to be in some denial about the death of Cordelia, Hidetora is in absolutely no doubt that his son is really dead.

Aside from Kurosawa's appropriation of the basic plot elements of the play, Kyoami, Hidetora's jester is one character that is almost certainly borrowed from *King Lear*. As Goodwin (207) notes, he does have a similar freedom of expression to that of Lear's "all-licensed Fool" (1.4.206). In an interview with the *L.A Weekly* Kurosawa outlined the Japanese historical background for the characterisation of Kyoami:

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. (Powers 45).

Kyoami is one character that gets away with questioning the behaviour of Hidetora without repercussion. Like Saburo and Tango he tries to make Hidetora see his folly. In the scene with the lesson of the three arrows Kyoami tries unsuccessfully to restrain Hidetora when he attempts to attack Tango for his vassal's objection to his plan to divide his territory amongst his sons. Kyoami also mocks Hidetora for surrendering the castle keep to Lady Kaede, trying to make him aware that it was a foolish decision.

Silver (79) suggests that Kyoami's character is heavily influenced by the Fool in *King Lear*:

It is in the character of Kyoami that Kurosawa comes closest to a Shakespearean personage. Both fools are permitted by their positions to give free rein to sardonic observations. Both are compelled to reverse roles with their maddened masters. As Hidetora is more profoundly unhinged, Kyoami is more burdened.

Along with Tango and Saburo, the character of Kyoami is one of a select few that have the best interests of Hidetora at heart. Like Shakespeare's fool, as madness takes full hold, it is Kyoami who becomes responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of his master. As they shelter in the ruins of a castle Hidetora burned down, he acknowledges that he has now become the voice of reason. As Kyoami says, "You speak of nonsense, I'll speak of truth." He also acknowledges, as Johansen points out, "the relativity of madness and sanity in an age where everything is out of joint" (81), by posing the question, "If a madman goes mad again, will he become sane?" (*Ran* Screenplay 78)

Kurosawa also uses the character of the Fool to emphasise Hidetora's mental decline in visual terms. In particular there is the scene where Kyoami has made him a helmet of flowers and grass, which of course echoes the crown that *King Lear* is reported to be wearing in 4.4 and we see him wearing in 4.7. The film turns the off-stage events of the play into an on-screen event, so we watch as Kyoami presents Hidetora with the "helmet" and puts it on the head of the doddering old man. The scene in the film has a strong feeling of pathos, and a sense of identity has being stripped away. Once more, a powerful symbol of *bushidō* is employed ironically. Hidetora is no longer a powerful warrior, just as Lear is no longer a king. He is now only fit to wear a fake helmet rather than the real thing.

One major difference between Kyoami and the fool is that unlike Shakespeare's character, Kyoami survives right to the end and after the death of Hidetora it is left to Kyoami to vent his frustration about what happens in the film. As Goodwin (214) has noted, his speech is similar to Gloucester's despairing reflection, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.36-37), although Kyoami's complaint is not that the gods are vicious, merely passive observers who do not intervene. For all his mocking and teasing of Hidetora, Kyoami is a moral force in the film, and so it is appropriate that it is left

to him to denounce the gods. With his comments Kyoami's transformation from comic relief to serious commentator is completed:

Kyoami: Is there no God or Buddha in this world? Damnation! God and the Buddha are nothing but mischievous urchins! Are they so bored in Heaven that they enjoy watching men die like worms? Damn God! Is it so amusing to see and hear human beings cry and scream?

(*Ran* Screenplay 99)

One other striking point of similarity between the play and the film is that both contain an apocalyptic set piece that is the climax of the action. In *King Lear* it is a storm that provides this function. In *Ran* there is a huge battle during which Hidetora's soldiers are spectacularly and brutally massacred, and his son Taro is assassinated at the order of his brother Jiro. During the battle, as in the storm in *King Lear*, Hidetora's mind breaks and at its conclusion he is left, like Lear, a doddering and senile old man with only his Fool and loyal servant for company. The battle is a much more literal event in the plot of *Ran*. In the play the storm is as much a manifestation of Lear's tormented mind as a physical event. It is difficult to see *Ran*'s battle in quite the same way.

What these two events do share, as do the film and the play, is a sense of apocalyptic vision. Once again, Kurosawa's choice of the battle to represent this in visual terms is eminently appropriate in the context of the film. Hidetora has defined himself as a warrior. Indeed, it is warfare that has allowed him to make sense of his world. But watching his own sons destroy his soldiers and threaten his own life, not to mention seeing one of his own sons killed in battle by a stray bullet, is more than his mind can take. The battle spectacularly strips him of his identity as a warrior, leaving him, just like Lear, without a recognisable sense of self, wandering aimlessly out in the wilderness.

As well as signalling the mental disintegration of the lead character, both storm and battle are very strong symbols for the disintegration of society. In *King Lear*, the societal destruction is signalled very early on, with Lear's deeply ironic comment to Cordelia that "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.99). Just as in the play, the sense of apocalypse to come is foreshadowed in *Ran* right from the beginning of the film. The opening of the film, the hunt, visually foreshadows the huge battle that is to come, and the film score in this opening sequence, with its drums and sparseness skilfully creates a palpable sense of unease. The sense of building tension is suggested by the use of shots of clouds after every significant plot event. Before the meeting of the sons there is a shot of blue sky clouding over and as the film unfolds there are more and more shots in this fashion. Just before the outbreak of the main battle, when the sound disappears, there is a cut again to the sky, and this time the sun has almost completely disappeared. As the battle continues the sky gradually clouds over, suggesting that the battle is paralleled by an almost supernatural change in the weather. As with the outbreak of the storm, as the battle rages, the world of Hidetora is entering a very dark time in which chaos will reign.

Likewise, the storm in *King Lear* is almost supernatural in its fury, and fury is the operative word, for it is fuelled by Lear's rage, and even encouraged by him at first:

Lear: Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, Blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.
 You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head. And thou, all-shaking
 thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world.
 Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once

That makes ingrateful man. (3.2. 1-11)

The force and unnatural nature of the storm is commented on by other characters; notably Kent:

The wrathful skies
 Gallow the very wanderers of the dark
 And make them keep their caves. Since I was man,
 Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
 Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never
 Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry
 Th' affliction nor the fear. (3.2.45-51)

What the play can do with words, with Lear conjuring up visions of the world at an end and Kent commenting on the unnatural extremity of the storm, the film must do in visual terms. The battle is a hellish event. Early on in the scene one of Hidetora's soldiers, his back full of arrows, compares the situation to hell. This chaotic scene is full of dying and dismembered bodies and results in the total annihilation of Hidetora's retainers, but it is more than that. The horrifying visuals being displayed take things to another extreme entirely. The totality of the destruction, its extremity and the epic nature of the battle sequence give it added symbolism. It is not merely a battle that is taking place. What is taking place is the annihilation of Hidetora's society. During the course of that battle we are witness to the end of the world as Hidetora knows it. Kaede's *giri*, in fact the *bushidō* code itself, results in, to use Kott's words, "a vision of the Apocalypse rendered with the highest artistic perfection" (148).

The end results of both storm and battle are much the same. The societies in *King Lear* and *Ran* are left in absolute ruin. The final apocalyptic event in the play is the death of

Cordelia, which is commented on by two characters. Kent refers to “the promised end” (5.3.316), that is the end of the world predicted in the biblical book of Revelations, and Edgar “the image of that horror” (5.3.317). The last innocent female victim of *Ran* is Sue, whose name, as Parker (90) notes, means the end of the world, linking her quite appropriately to Cordelia. The deaths of the innocent complete the process of social disintegration.

The prospects for rebuilding society vary in both works. They are slightly more optimistic in *King Lear* because at least Albany and Edgar remain alive. One of them will have to try to restore authority to the kingdom, although neither seems particularly interested in taking on the task. The situation at the end of *Ran* is arguably worse, because the war that started with the massacre of Hidetora’s troops is still raging. One of the final images of *Ran* is the First Castle engulfed in flames, with Jiro’s troops under attack from Saburo’s allies. History is already repeating itself, and the horror seems to be endless in the world of *Ran*. Unlike the storm, which is a finite event, the horrific situation in *Ran* seems destined to continue long after the death of Hidetora and his family.

Despite Kurosawa’s reluctance to admit that *Ran* is heavily influenced by *King Lear* it seems clear that the play had a substantial influence on the content and form of Kurosawa’s film. Kurosawa’s reluctance to acknowledge this debt can be explained as his attempt to maintain his individuality as an artist, wanting his creation to be considered as a separate work of art.

This is something that by and large, many critical analyses of *Ran* have not done with much success. Time and time again critics have used a comparative model to assess Kurosawa’s achievement in *Ran*, and such an approach really does not do it justice.

King Lear is also not the only theatrical intertext that Kurosawa drew upon in creating his film. The critical concentration on Lear as a theatrical intertext has also meant

that the significance of *Noh* has also been somewhat pushed to one side, but it has had significant impact on a number of different aspects of the film.

That said, this chapter has tried to assess the real impact of Shakespeare's play on the film. It is best to see the play as a kind of framework that Kurosawa built upon and added to in his own inimitable way. Kurosawa's borrowing from *King Lear* works in relationship to the other intertexts discussed in this thesis and is a key part of Kurosawa's strategy for his devastating indictment of the *bushidō* code. The end result is much more than just a samurai *Lear*. *Ran* is a visionary, enormously complex, and strikingly original film that uses intertextuality to illustrate in the most horrific fashion how a behavioural code founded on violence has the potential to destroy an entire society.

Conclusion

The intertextual nature of Kurosawa's *Ran* has been, and continues to be, a source of fascination for critics in the Western world. Given that one of the major intertextual sources for the film is Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a play critically acclaimed as one of the Western world's great literary achievements, it should come as no surprise that the critical analysis of *Ran* has focused on the intertextual relationship between the play and the film. It has also been argued that criticism has often adopted a comparative approach that unfairly weighs the discussion away from Kurosawa and towards Shakespeare.

Yet the intertextuality of Kurosawa's *Ran* is far more complex than the overemphasis *King Lear* would suggest. Understanding the intertextuality of *Ran* also requires an understanding of the impact of the cultural context that produced the film. *Ran* is, first and foremost, a Japanese film, and more specifically, a Japanese samurai film and needs to be understood from this standpoint, albeit one that draws on a wide variety of intertextual sources.

With this in mind, this thesis has, initially at least, entirely taken Shakespeare out of the *Ran* equation in order to examine in more detail the Japanese contexts for *Ran*, concentrating on examining the film in the wider context of Japanese samurai cinema and that cinema's thematic concern with *bushidō*, the samurai code of conduct that is essential to understanding samurai cinema in general, as well as Kurosawa's contribution to that genre.

In particular, it has been argued that Kurosawa's samurai films are atypical of their genre. Although in some respects they follow the conventions of the genre, they often employ such conventions in order to subvert them. It has also been argued that Kurosawa's samurai films, although like other samurai films, show a thematic concern with *bushidō*, adopt an attitude towards the code that often points towards its obsolescence and even adopts a critical

and increasingly attitude towards its historical role in Japanese society, exposing the hypocrisy of a code of behaviour which in the final analysis is focused on violence.

It has been suggested that *Ran* is best understood in the context of the samurai films that preceded it. Having demonstrated that the samurai films made by Kurosawa that preceded *Ran* pointed towards its obsolescence and lack of value as a valid method for engaging with the wider world, this thesis argued that *Ran* built on the films that preceded it, taking the critique of the historical role of *bushidō* in society to an extreme level to in order to devastatingly critique the code. It was demonstrated that the film used an intertextual strategy to expose in no uncertain terms the dark underbelly of the code, the violence that underpins its philosophy. In particular, it was shown that the film demonstrated the bloody consequences of revenge that in the terms of the code is often viewed as a noble act, often celebrated in samurai cinema.

Having concentrated solely on Japanese contexts, the thesis then revisited *Ran*'s intertextual relationship with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the intertext that, as already discussed, has dominated intertextual discussion of the film. The thesis examined, using Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence' and concepts that developed from that theory, Kurosawa's reluctance to acknowledge the extent of the influence of the play on his film, as well as his rather contradictory statements about that influence. It was suggested that this may have been due to his understandable desire for his film to be judged on its individual artistic merit.

The question of the critical analysis of *Ran*'s intertextual relationship to *King Lear* was also examined. It was argued that much of the critical literature on *Ran*, although interrogating the nature of *Ran*'s intertextuality from a variety of standpoints, has in general adopted a comparative approach that has tried to identify how Kurosawa has translated the language of the play into visual images, or what Kurosawa's 'version' of Shakespeare's story

looks like on screen. This thesis has questioned the value of this approach in illuminating the nature of *Ran*'s intertextuality.

It was also argued that a discussion of the theatrical intertexts of *Ran* was incomplete without giving some attention to the role of Noh as an intertext for the film, something which had been dealt with by some critics but not in any depth. In particular, it was argued that Kurosawa's use of Noh gave the film a unity of theme and structure, and was entirely appropriate for a film concerned with *bushidō*, as both *bushidō* and Noh had their roots in Zen Buddhism.

Finally, the thesis came full circle, returning to where it began, by making a case for the nature of the intertextual relationship between *Ran* and *King Lear*. It was suggested that *King Lear*'s influence could be felt in a number of ways. Firstly, it was demonstrated that the play's basic plot structure and thematic concern with loyalty was used as a framework for the film, with Kurosawa adding and adapting it to make it relevant to the Japanese cultural context and the film's particular concern with *bushidō*. It was also suggested that Shakespeare's Fool had been borrowed by Kurosawa and adapted to his own ends. It was also argued that both play and film were structured around a dramatic set piece, in *King Lear* a storm, in *Ran*, a bloody battle, that was thematically linked to the main character and was a symbol of social disorder, and ultimately, apocalypse. In general it was that, above all, that Kurosawa's borrowed from *King Lear* in such a way as to complement the film's critique of a society founded on warfare, and like Noh, his borrowings gave the film an added structural and thematic unity that strengthened its overall impact.

This thesis has aimed to demonstrate the critical limitations of unfairly favouring a single source of intertextuality for a text, especially when that work of art is, in the case of *King Lear*, a product of a cultural context that is, as has been argued, not the dominant

cultural context for that text. It has also aimed to demonstrate the value of re-examining the impact of that intertext after first positioning that text within the dominant cultural context.

But above all, it has hoped to show that the intertextuality of Kurosawa's *Ran* is incredibly complex, and an understanding of it must take into account a range of contexts, both Japanese and Western. This is the only sure way of doing justice to Kurosawa's achievement.

Ran was one of the last films Kurosawa ever made. It was certainly the last samurai film he ever made, and that makes it a milestone. In *Ran*, Kurosawa skilfully combined, as he does with many of his other films, Western and Japanese culture to create a film masterpiece that was his final artistic statement about the samurai, a warrior class that was an ongoing source of fascination and inspiration for him throughout his long career as a filmmaker.

This thesis was inspired by the memory of a single scene in the film, and it seems like an appropriate place to end. Hidetora, his face full of horror and blanched white like a ghost, staggers down the stairs of the keep. The two armies of his treacherous sons part like the Red Sea as the now frail old man makes his way out of the castle grounds to an uncertain fate.

When writing began nearly eighteen months ago, I had no idea that analysing a single scene of a film would be such a complex matter. Even now I find myself astonished at the complex nature of the film's intertextuality. The more I examined, the more I found, and I feel like I have in some respects only scratched the surface of the film's complexity as an intertextual document. It is my hope that this thesis, in some measure at least, has done it justice. The complex nature of *Ran*'s intertextuality will probably ensure that the critical fascination with this film is not likely to end any time soon.

Works Cited

Books and Periodicals

Ackroyd, Peter. "An Oriental Lear." *Spectator* (15 March 1986): 37.

Andrew, James Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1984.

Bloom, Harold. *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.

---. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.

Blumenthal, Jerry. "Macbeth into Throne of Blood." *Sight and Sound* 34 (Autumn 1965): 190-195.

Bradshaw, Graham and Tetsuo Kishi. *Shakespeare in Japan*. New York: Continuum, 2005.

Buchanan, Judith. *Shakespeare on Film*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005.

Crowl, Samuel. "The Bow is Bent and Drawn: Kurosawa's *Ran* and the Shakespearean Arrow of Desire." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 22 (1994): 109-116.

Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.

- Davis, Darrell William. *Picturing Japaneseness: monumental style, national identity, Japanese film*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Dawson, Anthony. "Reading Kurosawa Reading Shakespeare." Henderson, Diana E., ed. *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Malden: Blackwell, 2006.
- Desser, David. *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1983.
- Frow, John. "Intertextuality and ontology." Still, Judith and Michael Worton, eds. *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.
- Goodwin, James. *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Grilli, Peter. "Kurosawa Directs A Cinematic Lear." *New York Times* (15 December 1985): H1, H17.
- Hoile, Christopher. "King Lear and Kurosawa's Ran: splitting, doubling, distancing." *Pacific Coast Philology* 22 (1988): 29-34.
- Howlett, Kathy. *Framing Shakespeare on Film*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 2000.
- Johansen, Ib. "Visible Darkness: Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Kurosawa's *Ran*." Skovmand, Michael, ed. *Screen Shakespeare*. Aarhus, Den.: Aarhus UP, 1994.

- Kehr, Dave. "Samurai *Lear*." *American Film* 10 (September 1985): 20-26.
- Kott, Jan. *The Bottom Translation*. Trans. Daniela Miedzrzecka and Lillian Vallee. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1987.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Ed. Leon S Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Kurosawa, Akira, Hideo Oguni and Ide Masato. *Ran*. Trans. Tadashi Shishido. Boston: Shambhala, 1986.
- Lanier, Douglas. "William Shakespeare, filmmaker." Cartmell, Deborah and Imelda Whelehan, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.
- McDonald, Keiko. *Japanese Classical Theater in Films*. London: Associated UP, 1994.
- Parker, Brian. "The Use of *Mise-en-Scène* in Three Films of *King Lear*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (Spring 1991): 75-90.
- Powers, John. "Kurosawa: An Audience with the Emperor." trans. Audie Bock. *L.A. Weekly* (4 April 1986): 45.

Prince, Stephen. *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.

Reader, Keith A. "Literature/cinema/television: intertextuality in Jean Renoir's *Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier*." Still, Judith and Michael Worton, eds. *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990.

Richie, Donald. *Japanese Cinema: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.

---. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Third ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.

Rothwell, Kenneth S. "How the twentieth century saw the Shakespeare film: is it Shakespeare?" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 29 (2001): 82-95.

---. *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Russell, Catherine. "Men with Swords and Men with Suits: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa." *Cineaste* (Winter 2002): 4-13.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square P, 1993.

Silver, Alain. *The Samurai Film*. Rev. ed. Woodstock: The Overlook P, 2005.

Thompson, Ann. "Kurosawa's *Ran*: Reception and Interpretation." *East-West Film Journal*

3.2 (1989): 1-12.

Yakir, Dan. Yakir, Dan. RAN / A Japanese 'Lear' Caps a Genius' Career / Akira Kurosawa's

new visual masterpiece." *San Francisco Chronicle* (22 December 1986): 31.

Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: film studies and Japanese cinema*. Durham: Duke UP,

2000.

Films

Genroku Chushingura. Dir Kenji Mizoguchi. Perf. Yoshizaburo Arashi, Utaeman Ichikawa, Daisuke Sato, Chojuro Kawarasaki, Kunitaro Kawarasaki. Koa Uzumasa Studios/Shochiku, 1942.

Kagemusha. Dir Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Tatsuya Nakadai, Tsutomu Yamazaki, Kenichi Hagiwara and Kota Yui. Kurosawa Films/Toho, 1980.

Ran. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Tatsuya Nakadai, Akira Terao, Jinpachi Nezu and Datsuke Ryu. Greenaway Film Production/Herald Ace Int./Nippon Herald Films, 1985.

Sanjuro. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Toshiro Mifune, Tatsuya Nakadai, Keiyu Kobayashi, Yuzo Kayama, Reiko Dan. Toho, 1962.

Sanshiro Sugata. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Denjiro Okochi, Susumu Fujita, Yukiko Todoroki, Ryunosuke Tsukigata, Takashi Shimura. Toho, 1944.

Street of Masterless Samurai. Dir. Masahino Makiro. Perf. Komei Minami, Toichiro Negishi, Umeko Obayashi, Tsuyako Okajima, Juro Tanizaki.

The Most Beautiful. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Takashi Shimura, Shoji Kiyokawa, Ichiro Sugai, Takako Ire, Yoko Yaguchi, Sayuri Tanima. Toho, 1943.

The Seven Samurai. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Takashi Shimura, Toshiro Mifune, Yoshio Inaba, Seiji Miyaguchi, Minoru Chiaki, Daisuke Katô, Isao Kimura and Keiko Tsushima. Toho, 1954.

Throne of Blood. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Toshiro Mifune, Isuzu Yamada, Takashi Shimura, Akira Kubo, Yoichi Tachikawa, Minoru Chiaki and Takamaru Sasaki. Toho, 1957.

Yojimbo. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Toshiro Mifune, Eijiro Tono, Kamatari Fujiwara, Takashi Shimura. Kurosawa Films, 1961.