1. Hiding in Plain Sight:

False Identity and the use of Space in Akira Kursawa's The Hidden Fortress

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Abstract:

While often cast aside as merely a commercial film without much substance, The Hidden Fortress (Kurosawa, 1958) actually works within late-1950s Japanese society as a subtle critique on national and individual identity. The film functions as a morality tale, questioning the motivating factors behind character actions. The Hidden Fortress clearly distinguishes between morally pure and morally corrupt characters, yet the judgment is based on similar actions. Each character in the film pretends to be something that they are not. Yet, within the use of false identity lies a deeper purpose behind the action. Makabe (Toshiro Mifune) and Yuki (Misa Uehara) are continually contrasted with Tahei (Minoru Chiaki) and Matashichi (Kamatari Fujiwara) because the motivation behind each character's façade is different. The former characters fight for nationhood and self-sacrifice while the latter characters are only interested in self-preservation and monetary gain. The importance of identity continually appears within the narrative structure of the film, but The Hidden Fortress also visually represents this theme through costuming and camera technique. Director Akira Kurosawa continually uses off-screen space (even though the film is shot in wide-screen) as a "hiding place," that allows identity and spatial location to be masked until it becomes surprising and alarming.

Keywords: *Akira Kurosawa, Hidden Fortress, film studies, Japanese film, cinema, cinema studies, auteur, giri, ninjo, cinematography*

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Much of the scholarship on The Hidden Fortress (Kurosawa, 1958) fails to handle the film with the same social and aesthetic critique that academics afford many of Akira Kurosawa's other works. This failure is a result of the fact that scholars do not place The Hidden Fortress on the same artistic level as Rashomon (Kurosawa, 1950), Seven Samurai (Kurosawa, 1954), or Yojimbo (Kurosawa, 1961) even though it chronologically falls within what is considered the film director's most important creative period. Comments on The Hidden Fortress relegate the film to mere entertainment status without any intellectual substance. Three of the most prominent writers on Kurosawa's films supply little more than a meager summary when analyzing this film. Stephen Prince considers the tone of the film to be "frivolous" in his short paragraph devoted to The Hidden Fortress (Prince, 1999, p. 220). Similarly, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto labels the film as "trite," "formulaic and shallow," while expressly stating that it lacks "a kind of textual density found in Kurosawa's other jidaigeki entertainment" (Yoshimoto, 2000, p. 272). Noel Burch calls the film an "unremarkable example of the picaresque samurai parabole" that adds "little to the crowning achievements of the 1950s" (Burch, 1979, p. 318). The only importance given to the film by much of the scholarship is its status as Kurosawa's first use of wide-screen and the fact that it was a direct influence on the mega-blockbuster Star Wars (Lucas, 1977).

The incredibly narrow focus that The Hidden Fortress has received is often excused by citing Kurosawa's "intentions" in making the film. Writers quote the director as saying that he wanted to stay away from "heavy themes" and desired to "make a 100% entertainment film, full of thrills and fun" (qtd. in West, 2006, p. 19). Thus, Kurosawa scholars have collectively shunned The Hidden Fortress as rudimentary because, in their opinions, "Kurosawa was not trying to be profound" (West, 2006, p. 19). This line of reasoning makes two very questionable critical leaps: first, that directorial intention (in this

case, Kurosawa's) is the main factor in interpreting a film; and second, that nothing of substance can take the form of popular genre entertainment. In response to the over-reliance on Kurosawa's "intentions" in making the film, it is important to note that "reading the [film] as the speech act of the real author is too simplistic to account for the semantic complexity of many texts" (Chatman, 1990, p. 76). Finished films can produce and may warrant numerous interpretive readings that were never intended by anyone involved in the production of a film, including the director, and limiting critical scholarship to the thoughts or insights of a film's director will lead to lackluster scholarship. Likewise, in avoiding serious study of the film because it is a "genre" picture, scholars have neglected the aesthetic and thematic qualities that distinguish The Hidden Fortress from other, standard "chambara" pictures, ultimately ignoring the techniques that make Kurosawa as distinct as they claim he is in his other works.

For all of its genre excess, The Hidden Fortress actually deals with questions of morality, individualism, and heroism. It takes seriously the choices made by its characters and does not offer easy answers as to which characters are "right" or "wrong." The Hidden Fortress visually expresses moral and psychological confusion through its use of wide-screen technology, especially with the use of off-screen space. After studying these aesthetic and thematic qualities in depth, it becomes apparent that The Hidden Fortress has been undervalued in Kurosawa's filmography. It is actually, as opposed to the accusations of being "shallow," an important work that deserves to be revisited in Kurosawa scholarship. As Donald Richie, one of the few scholars that has actually dealt seriously with The Hidden Fortress, has written, it is a film that has been "beautifully made…imaginative, so funny, so tender, and so sophisticated, that it comes near to being the most lovable film Kurosawa has ever made" (Richie, 1996, p. 135).

One of the dominant themes in The Hidden Fortress is the dichotomy between social duty and individual emotion. In Japanese culture this dichotomy has been labeled through the "dual concepts of giri and ninjo, terms that embody a range of polarities, but refer most

immediately to the contradiction between obligations to society…and individual, 'authentic' human feelings" (Russell, 1995, p. 117). Interestingly enough, Yoshimoto writes that these concepts, "which are so important for Japanese film melodrama" are actually "antithetical to the world of Kurosawa" (Yoshimoto, 2000, p. 312). Yoshimoto's understanding of giri and ninjo is that they articulate "the contradiction of the communal system" because ninjo "is not the inner feeling of an autonomous individual but the communally shared feeling," leaving no room "for an autonomous, individuated self" (Yoshimoto, 2000, p. 312). He correctly notes that the typical Kurosawa hero rejects "this logic of communalism based on the differential use of giri and ninjo" and fall "into a momentary impasse not because he…is torn between giri and ninjo but because he tries to see through a communal dilemma as an independent individual" (Yoshimoto, 2000, p. 312).

Even though Kurosawa typically handles his narrative heroes in the way that Yoshimoto describes above, it is precisely the conflict between societal duty and the communally shared feeling that makes The Hidden Fortress both unique and important amongst the director's works. This dichotomy is at the heart of each character's struggle in the film. For Tahei (Minoru Chiaki) and Matashichi (Kamatari Fujiwara) the attainment of riches becomes an obsession so that they can return to their hometown without bringing shame on their community. Theirs is a struggle between returning to their family after the war (an obligational duty) and returning from the war with money (the communal feeling/expectation). Both Tahei and Matashichi become so consumed with monetary gain and fulfilling both giri and ninjo that, when reminders of the war are introduced, they appear as complete surprises to the characters. Kurosawa uses off-screen space as the main method to convey this reality, and introduces it in the first moments of the film.

The opening credits begin in the vein of generic epic chambara films. They start "off big with a stirring march under the credits, full orchestra, full percussion, big, empty phrases, grandiloquence itself" before abruptly ending by both stopping the music mid-note and cutting from the black back-grounded credits to the very bright and desolate landscape

inhabited by two lone wanderers (Richi, 1996, p. 135). These wanderers are Matashichi and Tahei who are framed from behind and are followed in a tracking shot as they walk aimlessly amidst a seemingly endless terrain. By starting the film with these two peasants in this manner, Kurosawa is both playing with genre conventions and playing with the visual perspective of the audience. These characters, in "other films of the genre…would have remained as mere comic relief," but Kurosawa both begins and ends the film with their story, placing the audience directly in their perspective as the camera moves along the dirt road with them (Howe, 2010, p. 91). Donald Richie points out that the "ordinary period-film would scarcely have begun with these two scruffy characters" and would have instead begun with the story of "the general and the princess," taking it very seriously (Richie, 1996, p. 135). Positioning the audience in direct correlation with the peasant farmers makes their eventual connection with the more societally powerful characters more surprising. The audience, along with Matashichi and Tahei, travel along the road in complete oblivion to the seriousness of the chaos that surrounds them.

This oblivion is visually introduced by the first cut of the film, and explains why Kurosawa will continually play with the visual perspective of the audience. As the two peasants argue with each other over who smells worse and why the other character is more wrong, the tracking shot from behind the characters is replaced by a stationary shot from the right side of Matashichi. This shot reveals the vast expanse that surrounds these characters to their left, just as the previous shot had done for the space in front of them. Placing the camera at this location also offers further assurance that these characters are alone in this wilderness, left to their constant arguing without interference from the "war" that they speak of in passing. However, as the two characters are about to come to blows, the sound of horses riding in the distance is slightly heard on the soundtrack. The new sound causes both Matashichi and Tahei to turn their head in the direction of the camera, signaling that the off-screen space that has not yet been shown may contain dangers that could pose a threat to these characters. Of course, in the barren landscape that they are

traveling in, there is no realistic way that Matashichi and Tahei would have been unaware of the approaching horses, yet the introduction of the dying soldier and violent riders indicates how oblivious these characters are to the important political situation prevailing around them. Their obsession with the money they do not have and their inability to return home without some renders them unable to see beyond themselves unless they are overtly confronted.

Kurosawa uses this technique again in the following scene. After Matashichi and Tahei part ways, a wipe reveals Tahei climbing a steep hill by himself. The camera remains stationary as the peasant moves past the camera toward the top of the hill. Again, just as in the opening scene, the entire landscape is barren except for the lone character. As the camera pans with the movements of Tahei, the top of the hill blocks any view of what lies beyond until the lone peasant nears the very top of the hill and is confronted by three men running down the hill in what appears to be an escape from a dire situation. Tahei is quickly informed that he will not be able to cross the path beyond the hill because it is heavily guarded by soldiers. In his attempt to go back home he has failed to remember that the war is still taking place and that the borders may be guarded. He, like the audience, only finds out about information when it challenges him. His actions are actually reactions to his surroundings rather than calculated maneuvers.

Later in the film the off-screen space is used similarly as Matashichi and Tahei are introduced to General Makabe (Toshiro Mifune). The two characters are again shown to be alone in a deserted area. A series of shots has shown the peasants on a search for gold hidden inside sticks. After they come across a second piece of gold, the two begin arguing over who has the right to the newly found "fortune" just as they had argued over who smelled worse in the film's opening shot. The sequence begins in a medium shot of the two as they examine the quality of the gold. As Tahei steals one of the pieces from Matashichi and quickly moves to a slightly higher ground the camera pans with the action. A large rock formation covers the entire frame, thus apparently taking away any possible intrusions

from behind the characters. However, as Matashichi and Tahei move to the right of the frame, the camera both pans right and tilts upward, revealing Makabe at the top of a very large slope in the rock formation.

Makabe's presence is another intrusion of the political war taking place and, just as the soldiers in the first scene and the blockade in the second scene, represents the obliviousness of these two peasants as it relates to the war around them. Their ever-present desire for monetary wealth, which is being driven by both their societal duty (giri) to return home and their personal desire (ninjo) to return as a hero rather than as a failure, so clouds their vision that they literally cannot notice the effects of the war around them unless they are obviously confronted with them.

Throughout the film it becomes evident that Matashichi and Tahei are embodiments of ninjo defeating giri; societal desire supplanting societal duty. Their method of living is sharply contrasted with the character of Makabe who practices societal duty above all else. Makabe's societal duty is to Princess Yuki (Misa Uehara) and the survival of her clan. In order to achieve this survival Makabe does not hesitate to utilize all forms of trickery and deceit. Questions of morality are pushed aside for actions based on obligation. This is why, throughout the entire film, Makabe acts as someone that he is not and attempts to persuade Princess Yuki to do the same. It is also why he can, without reservation, put Matashichi and Tahei through somewhat torturous situations without feeling any guilt.

The contrast between ninjo and giri is visually represented early in Makabe's relationship with the two peasants. As Makabe leads Matashichi and Tahei along the base of the large rock formation, he stops at (presumably) the same incline that he appeared the night prior and tells his two new followers that he believes the large deposit of gold lies at the top of the incline. Of course, the incline is filled will jagged rocks and does not appear to be climbable. The wide-angle shot of the three characters at the bottom of the incline is replaced by a full shot from the side of the incline as Matashichi and Tahei struggle up the hill. Sounds of rocks shifting under their feet and groans of struggle fill the soundtrack.

Makabe, of course, has disappeared from sight in another instance of Kurosawa utilizing off-screen space to make a point.

After a quick cut moves the camera closer to the characters, Kurosawa cuts again, framing the two in a full shot for an extended period of time as they try to ascend the hill. Their efforts do not get them very far. As the time passes, another cut moves the camera into a medium shot, followed by another cut to a close-up of Tahei's face. The film then alternates between close-ups of Tahei and Matashichi as the amplified sound of the rocks and groans grows louder. Just as the two peasants reach the top of the hill, Kurosawa cuts to a long-shot from behind the characters and lowers the volume of the soundtrack, aesthetically capturing the easement of tension that the struggle up the incline had caused. This sequence again connects the audience with the plight of the peasants, placing the viewer directly in line with the actions and thoughts of Matashichi and Tahei (just as was done in the opening shot of the movie).

After the characters (and the audience) realize that Makabe is no longer at the bottom of the hill and that he was not following the peasants, the film again makes a character appear out of seemingly nowhere. With Matashichi and Tahei crouching near the ground at the top of the hill, Makabe emerges from the "hidden fortress" at the bottom of the incline. Kurosawa frames this scene in an over-the-shoulder shot from the top of the hill, making Makabe unrecognizably small. His positioning both mirrors and inverts his introduction a few scenes earlier. The camera, on both occasions, remains on the level with Matashichi and Tahei and frames Makabe in a long-shot. However, instead of being at the top of the hill, now Makabe is at the bottom, and instead of being on the right of the frame, Makabe is now on the left. The visual connection between the two scenes suggests that no matter what angle Matashichi and Tahei are at, Makabe is going to hold physical and psychological control over them. The positioning at the top of the hill, in this scene, is actually a position of weakness both because they have just exerted untold energies on their

ascension and because the fortress's positioning is meant to protect it from invaders attacking it from above.

Makabe's pleasure at the trick he has just pulled on the two peasants is powerfully asserted after the two descend the hill toward the fortress. He quietly and calmly walks through a secret passageway as the peasants follow him until they emerge at the same spot they started at on the bottom of the hill. Makabe's laughter at Matashichi and Tahei's expense exemplifies his disregard for their feelings and his ability to perform any action as long as the eventual outcome results in the fulfillment of his duty. Richie points out that the Japanese title of the film is literally translated as Three Bad Men in a Hidden Fortress (Richie, 1996, p. 136). This title, of course, suggests that the most obvious examples of "bad" men (the two peasants) are not alone. Their "badness" is joined with the "badness" of another. This other "bad" man must be Makabe. Even though he acts like a somewhat prototypical masculine film hero who "is properly impassive, properly loyal, [and] properly active with the sword," he must be considered bad because the worldview of the film (and of Kurosawa) does not align with the duty obsessed worldview of giri (Richie, 1996, p. 136). Therefore, the ninjo of Matashichi and Tahei along with the giri of Makabe are, in Hidden Fortress, viewed as incomplete. In this way, the ultimate "heroism of the male protagonist" is not, as James Goodwin argues, "relatively uncomplicated," but very complicated (Goodwin, 1994, p. 165). The film's worldview and portrayal of heroism is actually not aligned with Makabe, but is aligned with a fourth character: Princess Yuki.

The contrast between Yuki and Makabe is clearly evident after Makabe tells Yuki of his most powerfully "giri" action in the film. He relays the news that his sister has pretended to be the princess, was delivered over to the enemy by Makabe, and was executed in the princess's place. The scene is preceded by a series of shots following Makabe to the secluded hideout of the Princess. In these shots Makabe is framed in both long shot and close-up. The close-ups reveal sadness in the previously jovial samurai that is narratively unjustified until he tells the princess of his sister's actions. Once inside the

hidden cave, Makabe is framed in a medium close-up as he matter-of-factly tells Yuki that his sister has "performed her duty." Kurosawa cuts to a reaction shot of Yuki and the "Lady in Waiting" (Eiko Miyoshi), revealing anger and astonishment in the eyes of Yuki. Makabe is again framed in a medium close-up as he continues to speak, advising the two women that their moment has arrived to escape since the "enemy will relax their guard" with the princess supposedly dead. The film then cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of Makabe, capturing Yuki's anger-filled eyes as she questions the actions of Makabe as being heartless and emotionless. She wants to know what difference there is between her own soul and the soul of Makabe's sister.

Yuki's reaction to Makabe is one reason that she is considered the most "consistently down-to-earth and sensible" of all the characters and the one who is "not blinded by her sense of loyalty," making her able to "adapt to her changed status with ease" (Howe, 2010, p. 91). It is through Yuki that "Kurosawa's humanism is elegantly articulated" in The Hidden Fortress, most powerfully in a scene after she and Makabe have been captured (West, 2006, p. 19). The captured characters are framed in a long shot over-the-shoulder of General Tadokoro (Susumu Fujita) as Yuki gives a long dialogue, captured in one take, about how this ordeal has allowed her to see "people as they really are" in all of their "beauty and ugliness." By shooting this scene in one take, Kurosawa foreshadows the method that he will later utilize in films such as Red Beard (Kurosawa, 1965) and Madadayo (Kurosawa, 1993), allowing the "teacher" figure ample time to offer his or her lesson in front of an intently listening set of pupils. The camera captures Yuki's lesson in real time, further emphasizing the connection between camera and audience that had been established during the opening shot of the film. Yuki not only offers a humanistic life lesson during her speech, she also reveals her true identity and delights in the fact that she was able to see others as they truly are.

Yuki's comments on identity oppose the constant façade that Makabe upheld throughout the film (and that he forces upon Yuki), and foreshadows the revelation of social

status and character during the last scene of the film. In this final scene Kurosawa again aligns the viewer with Matashichi and Tahei as they are brought before an unknown judge. The peasants are first framed from the perspective of the judges, again withholding images from the characters and the audience in off-screen space. A reverse shot positions the camera behind Matashichi and Tahei at a far enough distance to keep the true identities of the three characters in front of them from being revealed. A third cut offers a medium close-up of Makabe in full warrior uniform. Princess Yuki then makes a comment about how she does not blame the peasants for not recognizing Makabe since his uniform "actually becomes" him. The final scene, then, is a solidification of Princess Yuki's worldview in which people both act as they are and are accepted for what they are. Matashichi and Tahei are not punished for their constant attempts to steal the gold from Makabe and Yuki, but are welcomed as friends. Their acceptance has nothing to do with either giri or ninjo and everything to do with compassion and humanism.

Thus, while often cast aside as merely a commercial film without much substance, The Hidden Fortress actually works as a subtle critique on national and individual identity, questioning the long-standing Japanese ideals of giri and ninjo. The film functions as a morality tale that explores the motivating factors behind character actions. The Hidden Fortress, much like other Kurosawa films, acknowledges that the separation between the "good" and the "bad" or the "strong" and the "weak" is not as distinct as many would like it to be. Each character in the film pretends to be something that they are not, yet within the use of false identity lays a deeper purpose. Tahei and Matashichi are contrasted with Makabe, who in turn is contrasted with Yuki because the motivation behind each characters façade is different. Ultimately, both Matashichi and Tahei's alignment with ninjo and Makabe's alignment with giri are defeated by the humanistic outlook of Yuki. The Hidden Fortress powerfully visualizes how these distinctions affect each character's outlook on life through the use of off-screen space. It is not until the final frame of the film that the tension of off-screen space is resolved and true identities are restored.

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