AKIRA KUROSAWA: APPLIED SPINOZISM
[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 01: SPINOZA]

The possibility of reading the bodies depicted in the cinema of Akira Kurosawa through the philosophy of Spinoza is not necessarily obvious (he is usually associated with authors like Dostoevsky or Shakespeare) and my interpretation of it might be somehow shallow and incomplete. I suppose, however, that good ideas are based on intuitions and, for this reason, the latter should be explored!

Having watched of Kurosawa films these last four years, I noticed that we often see in them one or two characters who are struggling to climb up an earth slope. That is the case in The Bad Sleep Well (1960), The Hidden Fortress (1958), Rashomon (1950), High and Low (1963) and probably in more that I forgot or did not watch. The almost obsessive care that Kurosawa takes to film those scenes of various length leads us to think that there might be something important to be observed in them. These scenes do not bring anything to the plot in terms of additional information, and an inattentive reading of them could let us think that a flat land would pretty much depict the same action; but, again, the slope seems to be a crucial element in Kurosawa’s cinematographic (and therefore conceptual) toolbox.
It is important to stress the fact that those slopes are not symbolic. In the four films I indicated above, the reasons that force the characters to climb up them are all different. In *The Bad Sleep Well*, the character climbs up a volcano to kill himself while in *The Hidden Fortress*, the two buffoons/protagonists experience the difficulty of the slope during their trip. In *Rashomon*, the two main characters are climbing up the terrain of the forest so that one can rob the other, while in *High and Low*, the slope is used in the context of a police investigation. Kurosawa’s choice to insist on this type of scene is thus strictly “material” in the sense that there is no meaning that would be expressed in indirect ways through these scenes. The difficulty of the bodies climbing up the terrain seems to be a perfect illustration of the necessary struggle a body has to face to adjust the material assemblage (s)he is to the material assemblage that surrounds her (him), as we said in the preceding chapter. The stones that occasionally tumble down along the slopes as the body attempts to climb them could even be seen as a “wink” from Kurosawa to Spinoza’s repeated example of the stone (see chapter 2), but again, that might be strictly coincidental.

Such a struggle towards the harmony of the body and the surrounding matter can be seen in various other moments in the cinema of Kurosawa. The most expressive example of it is probably the ultimate moment of the battle in the village of *Seven Samurai* (1954) as the rain, the earth and the blood are mixed into an ubiquitous mud with which the bodies have no choice but to compose. Again, such conditions were not necessary for the film’s plot; quite the contrary, the fights acquire a slowness that is at the antipodes of what spectacular cinema requires. Kurosawa’s cinema, however, is different. He does not want to liberate the bodies from the weight of things including their own. The beauty comes precisely from the way the bodies engage with the matter: some of them
are cruelly left in the first mode of perception where the surrounding matter remains a site of violent encounter that the body has to experience. His heroes, however, are bodies which embrace matter and thus achieve the second mode of perception. Sometimes they even approach the third one, usually in fights, when they seem to read almost perfectly the surrounding movement of speed and slowness of the matter which, of course, includes their opponent.

I would like to conclude this article with a last example of Kurosawa’s Spinozism by invoking a film I already wrote about, *Throne of Blood* (1957), a cinematographic adaptation of Macbeth. (just as in Shakespeare’s text, here the final battle involves an army camouflaged by a multitude of trees that they cut and transport with them. The graphic effect, and therefore the camouflage’s goal, appears as a moving offensive forest that comes to claim its rights against Washizu/Macbeth’s castle. Leaving the symbolic and animist aspects of this story aside, let’s focus on the strict physical characteristics of this fantastic scene: the hybridization of human bodies with others, the trees, in a sort of literal interpretation of becoming-nature as Deleuze could have theorized it (he more often evokes becoming-animal). Despite the fact that trees are usually the paradigmatic fetish of a Cartesian nature, as opposed to the world of artifacts, we have to understand the notion of nature in a Spinozist way. Nature is the material world, it is the substance, it is God and nothing can exist outside of it. A concept of becoming nature is therefore an acknowledgement of the existence of bodies within this nature and the possibility for them to construct harmonious, if not entirely hybrid, relations at the material level of their own composition. Such a philosophy requires an imaginary that the Deleuzian metaphors and the films of Kurosawa contribute to construct.

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Originally published on March 31, 2013