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The Role of the Chorus in Akira Kurosawa's 1990 *Yume* (Dreams)

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Abstract

This article attempts an analysis of Akira Kurosawa's 1990 *Yume* (*Dreams*) based on the idea that each one of the eight episodes that the film depicts have got a group of people (or animals) that seems to be the equivalent of the ancient Greek theatre chorus. Thus, the article is an effort to establish a basis upon which the film may be understood differently that it is until now. Moreover, as the last sentence of the article declares, the actual intention of the article is to create a basis upon which further academic research may be conducted.

Keywords: chorus; Kurosawa; Japanese cinema; Greek drama; cinematography

The Role of the Chorus in Akira Kurosawa's 1990 Yume (Dreams)[1]

Lampros Papagiannis

Introduction

To Japanese society dream is perceived as important in aesthetics and literature where dreamlike motives are systematically employed in order to explore states of reality and feeling (Botz-Bornstein 2004). *Dreams* (*Yume*, 1990) is one of the last of Akira Kurosawa's creations, a film that participated in the 1990 Cannes Film Festival and has received rather mixed critiques. Possibly owing to the lack of a specific narrative or to the fact that the eight stories are based on actual dreams by the director, many have considered the film to be unmatching Kurosawa's earlier masterpieces. Serper praises the film and considers it to be strongly Japanese, but includes some not so dithyrambic opinions such as that Kurosawa "gives up the drama for the sake of the message" or that "*Dreams* is Kurosawa's twilight" and that "had it not been for the last four episodes, the film might have been a masterpiece" (Serper 2001).

Deeply personal and at the same time bearing universal messages the stories are the depiction of the director's dreams, but the focus of this article is the role of the chorus in the narration of the stories. Thus, an analysis of the story, the characters, or the context should not be expected here, unless it is essential for the build-up of the topic of the article. More specifically, this article attempts to demonstrate that in each of the eight stories/dreams of the film there is always a

chorus very similar to the one found in the Greek drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, mutatis mutandis, of course. Let it be highlighted that the main interest of the article is to show how the chorus is a substantial part of the narration and thus it will not explore the possibility of the impact of Greek drama on the film.

There are many opinions about the role and the function of the chorus inn Greek drama. The stasima, the choral intervals, act precisely as that, as intervals among the episodes, the part that is acted by the protagonists. Nonetheless, the chorus plays a crucial role in the evolution of the plot. Sometimes the chorus explains, sometimes it gives away hints that are related to the story, while almost certainly it represents the spectators. Schlegel, for instance, claimed that the chorus is the "ideal" spectator expressing the emotions that the spectator is supposed to feel (von Schelegel et.al. 1846, 70).

The main part of the article is divided into eight sub-chapters, each one for each episode of the film.

Sunshine through the rain

A young boy is warned by his mother not to leave the house as there is sunshine through the rain, a weather particularly preferred by the foxes to perform their matrimonial ceremony. The boy disobeys, witnesses the foxes' wedding, and is later denied access to his house. The mother gives

him a traditional knife with which he is required to commit suicide as one of the foxes came to the house and notified the mother. The mother, strict, but loving, advises the boy to ask for the foxes' forgiveness and the boy sets out to the mountains under a rainbow hoping to meet the foxes.

Foxes are important in Japanese folklore; they symbolize longevity, magic, and intelligence, while the foxes' wedding may refer to various legends, differentiations of which exist depending on the region. They seem to originate from the Edo period. The episode of the film does not focus on the symbolism or even on why the foxes don't want any uninvited guests to the ceremony and moreover it is rather given as vaguely as a dream could be described. Coincidentally or not, the chorus of the foxes in the episode are fifteen (two lines of 7 foxes and one at the end), which according to the sources was the exact number of the classical Greek tragedy in old tragedy and again in Sophocles and Euripides (Aeschylus had in the meanwhile lowered the number to twelve) (Weiner 1999). The synchronization of the movements is flawless and combined with the traditional music in the background, Kurosawa gives a brilliant spectacle both visual thanks to the masks and acoustic thanks to the music[2]. If we were to associate the chorus of the episode with a chorus from a Greek play, we could say that the best match would

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not come from a tragedy, but from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the comedy the chorus of which consists of the frogs that sing in the underworld (Hades).

The role of the chorus of the foxes here seems to be of much greater importance to the extent that it should be seen as the protagonist. Unlike the function in traditional Greek drama, the fifteen members of the chorus here do not assist the viewer to understand or to feel, but rather they are part of the story. It is the foxes that were insulted by the boy's action to sneak in the wedding ceremony, and it is the foxes that have demanded his capital sacrifice. The boy goes to the mountain in order to ask for their forgiveness and thus it can be said that it is the chorus that "runs the show" instead of fate, or the protagonists' weaknesses, or the divine element, that traditionally construct the story in Greek tragedy. In addition, it is important to mention that the episode ends with the boy walking towards the rainbow between the mountains without finding out whether he was forgiven or not; the emblematic, colourful landscape that balances between reality and fantasy is the last image we see as the screen goes from colourful to black. Perhaps it is a means of demonstrating that the end of the story, if, indeed, there is one in a dream, is not what matters. What does matter is left to our imagination as was left in Kurosawa's dreamy subconscious.

The peach orchard

The second episode follows a young boy who serves his sister and her friends food, while he spots a young girl that no else can see. Following her outside he finds himself before men and women dressed in dresses of different colours, which are proven to be the spirits of the peach trees that the boy's family chopped down. The spirits are the judges that wish to sentence the boy until they realise that he is truly sad for what his parents did; the spirits decide to allow the boy one last look at the peach trees that he so much loved. Sadness accompanies the boy, and his eyes are full of tears.

The chorus of the spirits are dressed in different colours and step on four different levels implying a hierarchical structure. The first stage (from bottom to top) consists of spirits holding farming tools dressed in green, white, golden, and purple; on the second stage there are spirits dressed in purple (but different clothes than at the first stage); on the third stage we see female spirits dressed in white and orange, while the royal family, dressed in fancier clothes, are at the peak of the hill. The spirits of the first three levels have been divided allowing a direct optical connection between the boy and the royals imitating a court of law where the defendant speaks to the judge.

Volume 12.1 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.585 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The king and the queen in agreement with the rest of the spirits find the boy innocent. As far as the role of the peach-tree spirits is concerned, one can notice that there is no coryphaeus, the leader of the chorus. Instead, there is a hierarchical structure, entirely unrelated to the Greek drama. Nevertheless, the king and the queen on the top step have acquired the role of the coryphaeus. Another obvious difference to the Greek chorus is that there is distinction between the talking and the singing part. In Greek tragedies the chorus talks through singing, while the spirits of the peach-trees perform a ritual (dancing and singing) and afterwards they continue in prose. Moreover, the viewer is left to wonder whether the girl that led the boy to the field is part of the chorus, a medium (the connection between the boy and the chorus) or just a creation of the boy's imagination.

The main theme of the episode is the connection to nature; the spirits represent man's consciousness bringing to mind the Dryads, the followers of Demeter, goddess of nature and cultivation. The love for nature is given, as was in the first episode, through the plethora of the colours with green dominating, but also through the boy's tears at the end. Lastly, let us point out that the use of the colours, the music, and the hierarchical structure of the spirits indicate the social status, the emotion or the character of the hero, things easy to understand through the theatrical experience, claims Richard Schechner (1985, 242).

The blizzard

This dream follows the adventure of four mountaineers trapped in a tremendous blizzard on a snow-covered top. As three of them are disheartened, the leader pushes them to move on, when he is visited by a female ghost who tries to convince him that the snow is warm. As he wakes up from this fantasy, the mountaineer notifies his companions and they are all happy to find out that they are only a few metres away from their camp.

The number of the actors involved in this episode is too small to distinguish between protagonists and chorus. The uniformity of the mountaineers (same clothes covered by a thick layer of snow), however, leaves the case open as to consider them as chorus rather than protagonists. From the four mountaineers one stands out as the leader; he sees the woman, a spiritual figure, and after that he wakes up. In this respect, what the viewer sees is a dream within a dream.

The tunnel

The tunnel is the story of a Japanese commander who walks through a tunnel (obviously) and meets his platoon only to find out that all his soldiers are dead. The commander walks near a tunnel in what seems as a deserted, industrialized area when an anti-tank dog (understood by the

Volume 12.1 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.585 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

explosives on the dog's body) pushes him into the tunnel. The tunnel symbolizes the passing to the other side and the confirmation comes when the commander meets the ghost of one of his soldiers, Noguchi. The symbolism of death is reinforced by the dog, which is to be taken as the guardian of the Greek underworld, Cerberus, the three-headed dog that allowed everyone to enter Hades, but pushed back inside anyone who attempted to escape. The placing of the camera at 00.49.40 showing the two characters opposite from each other demonstrates the antithesis of life-and-death: the commander is alive, whereas Noguchi is dead. Before going into the issue of what constitutes the chorus in this episode, another aspect of Greek drama should be pointed out. The viewer can distinguish the alive (commander) from the dead (Noguchi) thanks to the ghostly figure of Noguchi who is depicted extraordinarily pale, almost white. He is not quite sure of his condition, but he suspects that he has passed away; it is his commander that confirms it. This is the case of "tragic irony", a technique often used in Greek drama, in which the protagonist ignores a fact that the viewer knows. A characteristic example is Sophocles' *Electra*, in which the heroine, Electra, hears that her brother, Orestes, has died, whereas the viewers know that he is alive. The recognition comes later, and the siblings execute their plan to kill their mother, Clytemnestra, and their uncle and Clytemnestra's lover, Aegisthus[3], in revenge for their father's murder.

Back to the film, the rest of the platoon appears later (00.55.00) from the tunnel. This repetitiveness connected to collective trauma creates an effect of the uncanny, argues Svenaueus (1999). Up until then, the episode was a philosophical debate between life and death with a very strong touch of Kurosawa's antimilitaristic spirit with the two men showing their opposition to the catastrophic consequences of the war: the commander in a scrupled manner for the fact that he has survived and Noguchi pointing to the house of his parents feeling for them as they were hoping that he would return (00.53.00). However, with the appearance of the commander's soldiers, all of which with the ghostly look of Noguchi, it is apparent that we are dealing with a type of Greek chorus, though not without a violation of the rules. The leader of the chorus (coryphaeus) appears separately from the rest of the chorus. In this case, the coryphaeus is Noguchi, who engages with a direct dialogue with the protagonist, the commander, only after which the platoon appears. In addition, there is a second coryphaeus, the leader who orders the platoon (Halt!, Salute the Commander, Present arms!, At ease). The second violation is that the chorus would normally be aware of the situation and thus could not face a tragic irony phase; nonetheless, this is precisely the case here: in 00.56.00 the "second coryphaeus" reports *No casualties*!, although to the viewer it is crystal clear that they are all dead[4].

Volume 12.1 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.585 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

To sum up, the tragic aspect is obvious to the viewer alone. The tragedy of the platoon will start only if they realize their situation. Likewise, Camus saw Sisyphus' constant climbing from an unexpectedly positive point of view. Sisyphus must be considered lucky for his ordeal, because happiness is never an ultimatum; it is rather the endless struggle for its conquest (Camus 2005, 145).

Crows

A visitor at a Vincent Van Gogh Museum magically enters one of the paintings and finds himself in a field having a conversation with the Dutch painter. Van Gogh (played by Martin Scorsese) confesses that during the painting of a self-portrait he couldn't get his ear right and thus he cut it off. Firstly, we ought to observe that this technique of magically entering a painting bears a great deal of resemblance to Woody Allen's 1985 *The purple rose of Cairo*, though the other way round. In Allen's film it is the film-in-the-film protagonist (Jeff Daniels) that comes to life and walks around the streets of New Jersey, while in Kurosawa's *Crows* it is the visitor that enters the painting. It is here that the viewer finds himself reflecting upon the accuracy of the term "magical realism" characterizing the genre under which *Dreams* is categorized.

Secondly, one might wonder what could constitute the chorus since there are only two persons in the episode (apart from the women who were doing their washing up at the river and directed the

visitor as to where he could find Van Gogh and whose role is far too small and insignificant to be considered the chorus). The answer is revealed just before the visitor reenters the real world watching the painting *Wheatfield with crows*. In this episode the chorus is the flock of crows. Odd as it may sound, the chorus plays an important role to the story; not only do the crows fill the sky as Van Gogh walks away, signifying the end of the story, but they also bring the protagonist back to the real world (the museum). No Greek tragedy had a chorus of crows (or birds, for that matter), but the chorus of Aristophanes' *Birds* unsurprisingly consists of birds.

Mount Fuji in red

This episode describes a nuclear catastrophe due to the explosion of a nuclear power plant near the mountain Fuji. People are running for their lives and the remaining three become the protagonists of the episode: a young man, an older man in a suit, and a woman with her two young children, who remain silent. People fall in the ocean in a desperate attempt to save themselves, while the older man puts the blame on man's stupidity for the disaster. Eventually he admits that he is one of the people responsible for the explosion and throws himself into the ocean. The woman runs away as the nuclear vapours come closer and the young man tries to fend off the vapours with his jacket.

Volume 12.1 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.585 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The episode is a clear depiction of Kurosawa's (and all peoples') fear for a nuclear holocaust. The intense red color of the air around the mountain adds to the despair, while the three protagonists form a symbolic triptych of reaction to the disaster: the young man represents the agony for survival, the older man represents the guilt, and the woman represents the innocence of those who were told that nuclear power is safe only to realise the hard way that this is not the case. The guilt of the older man is accompanied by the admittance of human responsibility and stupidity; instead of making the power plant safer they added different colour to each nuclear isotopes so as to distinguish it (red for plutonium-239, yellow for strontium-90, purple for cesium-137). The futility of this action is reinforced by the fact that its only practical use is that one can know what will come first: cancer from plutonium, leukemia from strontium or reproduction problems from cesium[5]. Apart from the apparent concern about the consequences of nuclear energy, it is logical to assume that the director had the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in mind, although the accident in the city of Pripyat (Chernobyl nuclear power plant, reactor 4) was much more recent and closer to the story of the movie (April 1986)[6].

The gravity of the story is built thanks to the exquisite performance of the three actors to the point that the chorus is at the background. Nonetheless, the feeling of despair is given by the terrified crowd running towards the sea. The screams of the people and their anxiety to evacuate the place highlights the importance of the situation even before we learn what the situation is.

This feeling is intensified by the use of red on the screen, while the explosions behind the mountain are a constant reminder of man's guilt. The explosions could be taken for volcanic eruptions, but we soon learn that it is not nature to be blamed for, but man alone. The feeling of guilt is implied later, too, when the older man categorizes the effects of the isotopes: cancer will kill soon enough, but the effect of cesium is monstrosities and mutation, an indirect declaration that today's mistakes will influence the children of tomorrow.

To sum up, the role of the chorus in *Mount Fuji in red* doesn't add much to the plot, but it adds to the escalation of the emotions of the viewer and in this respect, it can be matched to the chorus of Euripides' *Trojan women* and *Ekavi* (chorus of the enslaved women of Troy) or *Iphigeneia* and *Helen* (chorus of enslaved women of Greece).

The weeping demon

A young man is found wandering around a post-apocalyptic/dystopian scenery until he meets a demon, who explain that there has been a nuclear holocaust, which has resulted in a deserted environment with gigantic dandelions and men with horns. The demon, dressed in old, worn-out clothes, explains how the landscape -used to be a meadow of flowers- turned into a desert owing to nuclear bombing, in which the yellow dandelion is the only thing that still grows

Volume 12.1 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.585 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

only now in titanic proportions. In a way this episode is a vague continuation of the previous one, as they both explore the consequences of the nuclear energy and human effect on nature.

The landscape resembles hell, though a man-made hell without animals, without trees and flowers, without food, where the remaining demons eat one another with the weak being first on the menu. The episode doesn't lack the social criticism: the demon admits that as a farmer he used to waste food in order to keep the price up; he threw milk in the river and buried potatoes and cabbage, a tactic often used in agriculture in order to create a monopoly, as described in John Steinbeck's 1939 *The grapes of wrath* (in the novel it was peaches). The demons, who used to be humans, have not abandoned their need for a hierarchical structure of their new society and are divided according to the number of the horns on their heads. Nevertheless, with high ranking comes high cost; the demons with two or three horns cannot die and are condemned to eternal punishment.

The dialogue between the demon and the man is followed by the climbing up the hill (in a scene that brings to mind Sisyphus' ordeal or the closing scene from 1957 Ingmar Bergman's *The seventh seal*) so that the young man can see the immortal demons howling from the excruciating pain and the hunger. The demons around the two brooks filled with red water (possibly blood?) screaming in agony is the chorus of the seventh episode. Without engaging in the story whatsoever, without serving to the plot, and without a coryphaeus, the group of the

weeping demons is the nearest thing to a Greek tragedy chorus the viewer can ask for. Regarding the connection to the Greek drama, it can be said that he weeping demons chorus matches the Bacchae from Euripides' homonym play, in which the chorus consists of women dancing and screaming like wild beasts under the spell of Dionysus.

Village of the watermills

The final act of the film is set in a peaceful village full of watermills, an ode to the connection to nature that man owes to oneself, beyond the constructed necessity of corrupting technology. Oddly enough, the story that circles around a funeral is a celebration of life. The two protagonists discuss the joy of life, and the young man learns from the older one that the funeral should be seen as a celebration for the life that has been lived rather than grief for the death. The old man, after teaching the young one a lesson of how life should be lived, dresses up and goes to the funeral of a woman who lived up to her ninety-nine (and was the old man's first love). The chorus of the episode appears slightly later: the villagers that accompany the woman to her last residence singing, playing musical instruments, and (children) throwing flowers. Here we experience another twist in the rules of Greek drama: the old man from a protagonist becomes the coryphaeus of the chorus and leads the chorus in his red robe. If we are to match the Japanese

Volume 12.1 (2024) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2024.585 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

chorus with its Greek equivalent, we should probably turn to the second part of Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy, the *Choephoroi* (*Libetation Bearers*), in which the chorus consists of women in black (Electra, Orestes' sister, among them) who throw sacrificial products (olive oil, wine, honey) into the grave.

Lastly, it must be highlighted how the funeral has moved the young man and probably made him realise the words he had just heard from the old man, as the former pays his respect to the deceased leaving flowers to the stone of the village as an offer before departing from the village.

Epilogue

This article has attempted to demonstrate the relationship between Akira Kurosawa's 1990 *Dreams* (*Yume*) and the Greek chorus. Indeed, there seem to be quite a few similarities depending on the way one may perceive the role of the groups appearing in each episode. The aim of the article has not been to show the influence of Greek drama on Kurosawa (if any), but to explore a different approach of the film indicating that the choice of the director to include a group of people (or animals) in each dream may have been related to the chorus as it appears in 5th century drama in Athens. Moreover, the fact that it has been suggested that the film is based on actual dreams that Kurosawa has had repeatedly, complicates any effort to establish something specific (Prince 1999, 303). Lastly, let it be said that the intention of this article is to

create a basis upon which further academic research may be conducted on one of the cinema's most pioneer and innovative figures.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's note]: Other interesting perspectives on Akira Kurosawa's cinema can be found in books and articles by Reider (2005), Linton (2006), Goodwin (2013), San Juan (2018) and Magnan-Park et.al.(2018).

[2] There are many references to the origins of the masks of Noh theatre that focus on the similarity with the grotesque comic masks of the Hellenistic era. see Benito Ortolani, *International Bibliography of Theatre*, 1985, p. 326.

[3] Aegisthus was Agamemnon's cousin.

[4] It is not specified to which war the episode refers, but based on the clothes and the rifles, one may assume it is the WWII.

[5] It is unclear why the film makes the distinction between cancer and leukemia since leukemia is a type of cancer anyway.

[6] Coincidentally the only nuclear accident equally serious to that of Chernobyl took place in Fukushima, Japan in 2011, which, of course, occurred after the death of Kurosawa.