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The poverty trap or the political trap? Ideology and methodology in Garland's *Culture of Control*



David Garland. *The Culture of Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 336 pages.

How does one describe a book that combines an insufficient understanding of sociology, a tainted account of criminology, an even more appalling grasp of cause and effect, and a biased, politically-charged presentation of evidence that might leave a censor in Orwell's Ministry of Truth blushing? Fortunately, the venerable *Times Literary Supplement* provides an answer to guide the intellectual lilliputians of the lay reading world: 'Garland's analysis of the profound social and cultural shifts of recent decades... is a tour de force.'

In his new book, *The Culture of Control*, David Garland describes changes in crime control and criminal justice in the United States and Britain during the past half century. Detailing the new politics of law and order, he argues that controlling less fortunate citizens has become the priority in these 'so-called liberal, non-oppressive states.' By vilifying the undeserving poor, increasing incarceration rates, imposing mandatory sentencing, and more frequently executing criminals (US), contemporary society contemporary society is more an 'Iron Cage' than an open democracy.

Two social forces, he argues, shaped contemporary crime control arrangements: the distinctive social arrangements of what he labels 'late modernity,' and the politics of free markets and social conservatism that gained prominence in the 1980s in the UK and the US. Garland compares present-day policies and practices to those before the 1970s to create what he calls 'a history of the present.' He describes his approach as holistic rather than piecemeal. This method attempts to create a single framework for viewing drastic changes in criminological theory, penal philosophy, penal politics, policing sentencing, punishment, private security, crime prevention, and the treatment of victims.

Not surprisingly, Garland claims Michael Foucault as his greatest inspiration and *Discipline and Punish* as the prototype for his argument. Garland, unfortunately, mimics Foucault's propensity to provide tenuous evidence and his willingness to disregard competing facts at his own discretion, but he does not always share Foucault's ability to generate original, provocative interpretations. While Garland's thesis has promise, his overarching argument and evidence is more becoming of a political pundit's op-ed in *The Guardian* than as the work of a disciple of the great French structuralist.

Garland describes the decades of crime policy immediately following World War II as the 'Golden Age' of penal-welfarism. This period consisted of two fundamental ideas: (1) 'social reform together with affluence would eventually re-

[*culture*' continued on page 4]



'At war with the critics': Kurosawa and his films

Joan Mellen. *Seven Samurai*. BFI Film Classics Series. London: British Film Institute, 2002. 79 pages.

Roy Stafford. *Seven Samurai*. York Film Notes Series. London: York Press, 2001. 91 pages.

Akira Kurosawa's legacy of devoted and insightful filmmaking has made him one of the world's greatest directors. A global reputation and an undiminished popular reception have not, however, secured him and his work from general attacks in film criticism. Many studies of Kurosawa's work, for example, involve the analysis of his films in the context of a critique of his national character, and as a result he is often accused of being overly Western in his technique, his ideology, and his influences.

A second and equally dominant theme in Kurosawa criticism is the tendency to construct from his life and work a narrative of continuous descent into political and artistic failure, and into intellectual isolation. Ultimately, such comprehensive accounts of the nature of Kurosawa's 30 films misrepresent, under overloaded terms like 'humanism', what is in fact a dynamic and complex commitment to the creation of

[*kurosawa*' continued on page 8]

FROM THE EDITOR: the 'Tunnel Vision' of the academy?

Maybe our goals in producing *The Oxonian Review* can be approached through a couple of comments on a book I've just been reading: *Tunnel Visions: Journeys of an Underground Philosopher* (Fourth Estate, 2001).

The 'Underground Philosopher' is Christopher Ross, an ex-lawyer and, he tells us proudly, a philosopher only in a non-academic sense: 'I do not mean a philosopher in the western modern academic tradition — an arena which often seems devoid of contemporary and practical relevance'.

The book follows the loose narrative of Ross training for and then taking up his job as a London Underground Station Assistant, but his real interest is in providing bite-sized nuggets of insight for 'philosophical' contemplation. Gathered during his months of working part-time in the Oxford Circus station, and generally applicable to the plight of the individual in contemporary western society, his observations and anecdotes range widely in style and quality.

After describing some different, characteristic gaits he noticed while working in the station (the 'Pimp Roll,' the 'Forward Fall,' the 'Knee Flick'), Ross then finds himself questioning the artificiality of shoes ('they come between you and a consciousness of what you are doing...with your feet'). He then descends further into triviality ('The British Standards Institute, I had just learned, was pressing for women's platform shoes to carry a safety warning following an "epidemic of killer shoes"') and finally ends the series of observations with a rant against 'compulsive self-ornamentation,' which, he earnestly tells us is 'driven by the consumer society,' and in the end 'relies on being able to induce a deep fear of inadequacy in the initially ornament-free, in those in the pre-ornamental state.'

Too often this well-meaning but insubstantial 'philosopher' leaves you feeling as if he's replaced the arcane 'western modern academic tradition' with a hackneyed banality all his own. Ross borders on naïveté at many points in *Tunnel Vision*; he suffers from an acute but inchoate desire for non-conformity that too frequently surrenders itself to platitude.

Despite its low moments, I found the book fascinating. His off-the-cuff dismissal of academic thinkers as self-indulgent, irrelevant dabblers in the obscure resonates with more than a few contemporary critiques of the academy. And if Ross on the one hand embodies all the vices of a coffeeshop intellectual, he remains inspiring in his faith in the power of

the involved intellect to observe and consider itself and the world around it. He considers it to be possible without the oversight of any intellectual, political, or religious institution. Ultimately anyone who criticises the spotty work of a 'philosopher' like Ross is responsible to present a better alternative.

We who write for and produce *The Oxonian Review* are academics, at least as long as we remain at Oxford, and our challenge, posed by books like *Tunnel Visions*, is: Can we present a better alternative?

The distinction of an academic life is, ideally, the discipline of thought

it demands and the freedom of thought it encourages. Creativity and discipline of thought are hardly limited to the academy, but I would still hope that the academy could play a crucial role in preserving a space for original ideas and attentive, well-reasoned discourse. Our 'better alternative' would be to present writing that avoids banality while steering clear of cynicism; that scrutinizes issues carefully and thoroughly without being weighed down by technical terminology; that is clear in expression but substantial in content.

I'm excited to be able to offer this inaugural issue of *The Oxonian Review of Books* as a first, modest step in that direction. In these pages, **Brad Henderson** grapples with the methodological and ideological bias of a book dealing with our society's conception of criminality; **Céline Vacher**

reviews a French historical novel suggesting ways to imagine the process of 'growing up' for both individuals and societies; **Len Epp** comments on a recent British Film Institute retrospective of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, as he surveys the career of this great

filmmaker and fills in a history of his politicized and turbulent critical reception; **Jeff Kulkarni** chases an island, and a philosophical, utopia in *Hunting Pirate Heaven*. In addition, two poets, **Carmen Bagan** and **Phil Clark**, offer some of their poetry: Carmen's poems question and disturb her own sense of nostalgia, while Phil's 'Bitten,' explores the mix of antipathy and apathy with which nature views humans.

I hope you'll be challenged and provoked by all of these excellent pieces.



Editor in Chief

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Home

In last night's dream gladioli grew wild around the house
 Queens-of-the-night crashed through walls
 And the remains of the windowsills were overtaken
 By tall white lilies and blue irises.
 The roses we grew for preserves strangled the front door.

I was sitting next to the poplar grown through the roof
 When I saw a man hanging smoked fish under the eaves.
 My grandparents were having a meal of bread, onion, and water;
 They were talking about bringing the corn to the mill
 And threshing the beanstalks in the yard.

From the beans, the smell of summer.
 I saw the sticks we made out of oak branches,
 I remembered how we sat in the circle,
 The dust from the stalks as we beat them—
 Something like the sound of galloping horses.

They carried on with the meal. Then they sifted wheat.
 I saw them walk right past me. They loaded the cart.
 And I thought I heard my name in the throat of a gladiola.

Carmen Bugan, is at Balliol writing a D.Phil on the influence of Eastern European poetry on Seamus Heaney. Her work was published in 2001 Oxford Poets: An Anthology and will appear in P.N. Review and The Tabla Book of New Verse.

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duce the frequency of crime,'(2) 'the state is responsible for the care of offenders as well as their punishment and control.' It embodied a belief in the perfectibility of man and a faith in the ability and good intentions of professionals and public officials. Offenders were viewed as unfortunate rather than evil.

Why did the penal-welfare system of the pre-1970s period abdicate to the new culture of control? According to Garland, problems arose because of the prevalence of high crime rates and disorder and the recognition that criminal justice limited ability to control crime and ensure security. In response to this evolving environment, actors developed new strategies that appealed to political, popular and professional sectors. The rise of the culture of control corresponded to a new economic style of decision-making, new criminology of control, and a new conception of penal-welfarism.

This new system reinforced the emergence of anti-welfare politics and the conception of the poor as undeserving. The new culture was also created by images in the media, by political rhetoric, but most importantly by the collective experience of crime in everyday life. Private citizens adapted to this prevalent crime with their own adaptations of prevention and control.

Crime policy, Garland argues, currently operates in two distinct manners. The first includes community organizations and preventive measures such as auto theft deterrent devices. Garland calls these the 'criminologies of everyday life.' He also describes the 'criminology of the other,' which echoes the notion of moral panic. This includes high profile crimes that summon drastic, symbolic and pervasive action by policy makers.

This response, he asserts, represents a fundamental contradiction: 'The

odd fact that punitive "law and order" politics have co-existed, in both countries, with an entirely differently strategy — of preventative partnerships, community policing and generalized

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crime prevention — is explained by reference to the public's ambivalence about crime and crime control: an ambivalence that gives rise to quite divergent forms of action'

Garland struggles to clearly delineate cause and effect. In one instance, he argues that 'social organization created political and cultural change that resulted in a change in the way that citizens, corporations and governments act.' In the next, he asserts that his account adumbrates the influence of social and economic forces on public policy, criminological thought, and the cultural meaning of crime and criminals. He also states that his argument reveals the way in which 'today's crime

Far from perspicuous, Garland's strategy of determining explanatory value consists of periodically creating sentences by jumbling *social, political, culture, and crime* and then inserting the word *causes* somewhere in the middle.

control arrangements reproduce a new type of social order.' He further states, "The most important changes [in crime control] have been in the cultural assumptions that animate them." Far from perspicuous, Garland's strategy of determining explanatory value consists of periodically creating sentences by jumbling *social, political, culture and crime* and then inserting the word *causes* somewhere in the middle.

Garland's argument suffers from methodological weaknesses. In his

preface, Garland writes, 'While these endnotes will be essential (and, I hope, enlightening) reading for the professional scholar, those readers who simply want to follow the book's story and grasp its explanation need not be disturbed by their intrusion.' As we will soon see, and as the book demonstrates repeatedly, the disturbing dearth of evidence in the main body of text should alarm the most casual readers, and the misleading and unconvincing citations in the endnotes vitiates support for some his most crucial claims.

Garland provides insufficient evidence to establish the existence and significance of the key indicators of control. He cites an increase incarceration rates, but does not compare incarceration rates as a percentage of population between periods. He refers to greater levels of community policing and activism, yet does not provide any quantifiable evidence of an increase in community groups. (I thought Robert Putnam, whom Garland cites, said that contemporary society bowls alone. Maybe society now bowls alone, but looks for bad guys together.) He also cites the increasing use of capital punishment, ignoring that even these increased number of executions represent a statistically infinitesimal aspect of modern crime policy.

Garland demonstrates additional weaknesses

in his research methods. He states, 'Tough crime policies are not without costs. The policies currently being pursued in the US and Britain entail unprecedented levels of correctional expenditures. Public spending on "law and order" either increases the tax burden or else reduces other heads of public expenditure, such as education, health-care or job-creation programs.' This comment embodies much of what is wrong with Garland's approach. First, Garland does not identify the specific

costs and does not give any explanation of which level of government and by what means the policies are paid for. In the US, policing is often paid for by the local community, education is often paid for by a separate local levy and health-care is funded primarily through the federal government. Thus, it is difficult to claim that these goals compete with one another directly for funds.

Second, the empirical evidence (if Garland had bothered to consult any) suggests that investment in policing provides more benefit than costs. Research by Steve Levitt indicates that although the marginal cost of imprisoning a convicted felon is \$30,000 a year, while the average benefit in terms of crime prevention is \$50,000 a year for each additional convicted criminal. And while an additional officer costs about \$80,000 a year, the average officer produces about \$200,000 in annual crime prevention benefits. Looking at the elasticities, Levitt finds that a ten percent increase in the police force results in a ten percent decrease in violent crime and three percent reduction in property crimes. Does Garland

have evidence to refute these claims? In fact, Garland provides two footnotes to the above passage. Yet these citations leave much to be desired, referring to an obscure audit from Her Majesty's Prison Service and a lengthy book on a seemingly unrelated topic (with no specific page number cited).

Garland provides an equally spurious account of the economic and social changes in the 1980s and 1990s: 'The decline of public institutions through underfunding, the reduction of state benefits, the disinvestments in the inner cities, the social and economic marginalization of the poor — these are policies that engender insecurity. The

neo-liberal choice has been a fateful one in emotional as well as economic terms. Every individual is more and more obliged to adopt the economic attitude of the respon-sibilized, competitive entrepreneur. The corresponding psychic posture is that of tensed-up, restless individuals, regarding each other with mutual suspicion and no great deal of trust.'

This statement reveals the fundamental flaw with *The Culture of Control*. Burdened by stale thinking, unsophisticated generalization, and inexcusable

Burdened by stale thinking, unsophisticated generalization, and inexcusable hyperbole, Garland undermines his potentially cogent hypothesis by failing to move beyond the political ideal-types of the 1980s.

hyperbole, Garland undermines his potentially cogent hypothesis by failing to move beyond the political ideal-types of the 1980s. Public expenditure hasn't declined significantly since 1980; it has merely failed to continue to increase as a percentage of GDP. State benefits have been reformulated, not necessarily reduced. Most major cities have experienced significant revivals associated with increasing tax bases in the past decade. Both financial and attitudinal studies do not confirm that contemporary social and economic marginalization differs in magnitude from previous periods in history, and empirical work does not suggest that 'neo-liberal' policies are the key variable in explaining contemporary margin-alization.

Certainly, neo-liberalism has created its share of problems, just as the welfare state did. But one can't sufficiently identify the relative importance of

these problems by following Mr. Garland's apparent research method (rereading Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*.)

Garland does raise several interesting questions. Despite the poor answers and spotty evidence he provides for these questions, he nonetheless encourages more productive ways of thinking about crime control in contemporary society. First, he takes an interest in the perception (no cited proof) that politicians play a more prominent role in crime control than in the period of high modernity. Second, he identifies an interesting dialectic between freedom and control, although he does not carefully define what makes this dialectic unique for a discussion of current crime policy.

Garland provides a provocative thesis that undoubtedly describes a portion of the current environment of crime control. This culture of control has serious implications for the development of a more inclusive, prosperous nation, be it the UK or the US. Unfortunately for the readers, *The Culture of Control* does not live up to the hype. Confounded by ideology and exiguous evidence, his inchoate argument promises to mislead politically charged readers and excitable literary critics.

His questions merit answers. Hopefully, a more objective researcher will explore them and provide more accurate and helpful responses. **○**

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Two children and failed colonization: Rufin's *Rouge Brésil*

Jean-Christophe Rufin. *Rouge Brésil*. Paris: Prix Goncourt 2001. 550 pages.



As he himself confesses, Jean-Christophe Rufin finds a particular interest in the moment of first encounter between two

civilisations, which he defines as 'an instant of discovery containing the seeds of future passions and misunderstandings'. An historical novel, *Rouge Brésil* brings us back to an extraordinary yet often forgotten episode of the French Renaissance: France's attempt to compete with Portugal in the colonisation of Brazil.

In 1555, an expedition sent by Henri II and led by the Chevalier de Villegagnon leaves France in order to create a 'France Antarctique' in Brazil. In this period of humanism already shadowed by religious divisions — from Luther and Calvin's ideas for Church reform spreading in Europe and leading to the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity in 1559 in England — the New World was considered a land cursed by God and therefore to be conquered and ruled by faithful crusaders.

Two children, Just and Colombe, are forced to embark on this expedition to be used as interpreters with the Indians. Through their eyes, readers discover a new world. The wild bay of Rio, peopled with cannibal Indians, is progressively tamed and transformed into a fortress by Villegagnon. But beyond this small world, the forest and its wild precincts appeal to the innermost essence of human nature and offer a space of escape for those who reject Villegagnon's increasing megalomania.

In this exotic, dangerous microcosm, the quest for their missing father leads Just and Colombe to solve the mystery of their origins and to grow up under the guidance of their respective

spiritual parents, Villegagnon for Just, and the maternal forest and the Indians for Colombe. The confrontation of these two worlds leads to the colonists' obvious domination of the Indians in the form of slavery and prostitution. The equation is further complicated by the arrival of Protestants in the island,

called by Villegagnon in the hope of reviving religious feelings among his decadent troops.

The members of the Reformed Church, supposedly opened to reason and tolerance, appear to be as fanatic as their Catholic persecutors in France, and the uncompromising stubbornness of both factions leads to anticipated Religious Wars. The effect rendered is that of a progressive evolution from

a passage from Rouge Brésil, Vacher trans.

Is it possible that a land could have remained hidden in biblical times, unknown to Alexander and Jesus Christ, to Virgil as well as Attila, and that the cause for such a banishment could have been a serious curse?

On the deck of the caravels, minds were haunted by this question. A surprising horror invaded those who most desired to see the land again when the black mass of the relief appeared in the West, tinted with the blue cold of the morning.

The sea, which they had first feared so much, had progressively become a protective shell. The mountain finger that slowly parted the smooth valves of the sky and of the waters announced a huge encounter, from which they did not know what to expect. For some, it was hope: always fond of cataclysms, the Anabaptists were dancing on the upper deck, looking forward to the eruptions to come, in the fires of which the old world they loathed would burn. The simple soldiers, fed by popular convictions inferred from Ptolemy, were moaning at the thought that they were going to pay for audaciously wanting to reach the edge of the world. The figures of giant monks or warriors in chasuble, outlined yet scarcely visible, as they approached the coast, certainly were those of executioners summoned by God to hurl them down into the void.

Others, better armed with religion, thought they were reaching either Hell, or Paradise, according to their natural optimism and their merits. (...)

As for Colombe and Just, they did not know what to think. For their own sake, they were evoking aloud the fabulous discoveries of King Arthur's time, the islands peopled with faceless knights. But they could hardly believe in these stories. The long journey had left their bodies almost intact but had touched the soul's invisible muscle that allows it to spring out of the tangible world. The only knights in which they now believed were no longer faceless: they were Villegagnon's companions, with their thug faces, their swords eaten by salt by their sides, and the Maltese cross on their chests. Thus, they idealized the shore only to spare each other the cruel certainty that it really belonged to the ordinary world.

Villegagnon's idealistic humanism, his belief in reason and virtue tinged by chivalrous reminiscences and his faith in God, to pure hatred and self-destructive divisions and rivalries. Hence, nothing but the return to France or even better, the return to the original state of nature, can purge the colonists.

Thus, in the subtle antithesis embodied by Just – following Villegagnon's enthusiasm towards civilisation — and Colombe — discovering her femininity in the pleasure of wild life with the Indians — Rufin unfolds the vanity of the former's dreams, and the precariousness of the latter's.

Through language that recovers a sixteenth-century accent, Rufin draws a vivid picture of this multi-coloured world. The disfigured island, masculine, monumental, and soiled, symbolizes of the foolishness of man. The forest, feminine, virgin, protective, suggests the possibility of reaching a form of wisdom and casts the shadow of cannibalism and other bestial impulses.

The historicity of the novel is ingeniously intertwined with the dramatization of Just and Colombe's fates as individuals, but we could justly reproach the author for offering caricatures in place of characters: Villegagnon's sudden change from a passionate lover of humanity into the cruel Huguenot-murderer he historically appears to be, is scarcely realistic.


The 'fictional' part concerning Just and Colombe also lacks originality.

In this exotic, dangerous microcosm, the quest for their missing father leads Just and Colombe to solve the mystery of their origins and to grow up under the guidance of their respective spiritual parents...

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Readers may easily recognize the story of human beings searching for their roots. Here, two children haunted by the absence of the father find parental substitutes to complete their education and eventually discover the truth about their origins, all in an exotic locale calculated to titillate more than to provide a point of contact with the average reader.

The final impression one has when closing the book is that of a deeply interesting and intelligent novel that successfully fictionalises an eventful and culturally dense period of the Renaissance. However, Rufin does not offer the reader enough to sustain the suspense. Each episode is programmed and easily predictable. This must be attributed to an inner weakness of the genre of the historical novel. By definition, such pieces recount an event that has already happened.

The greatest satisfaction one can draw from the reading of such a story may be the ability to appreciate the variety and richness of the multiple — literary, religious, historical — references that punctuate the text. 

Editor's Note: Rufin's Rouge Brésil has not yet been translated into English. His The Abyssinian (W.W. Norton, 2000, originally published as L'Abyssin in 1997) and The Siege of Isfahan (W.W. Norton, 2002, originally published as Sauver Ispahan at 1998), have.

Céline Vacher is a visiting student from the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyon, France. She studies English literature and is presently working on Jane Austen and the theory of interpretation.

Doorways

For my aunt Saftica

In the depths of the night I want
to come inside
Your house through the white
husking door,

The one with the window on
which you placed
A hand-woven shawl with pat-
terns of nasturtiums.

But on the other side of the door
where you waved years ago
I fear that you have woven me
into the knowledge of a
winter rug

With all the reds and yellows you
had thread for
While I wandered and wondered
illusions, hidden in my silence.

—Carmen Bugan

Bitten

beneath a baobab
his eyes roll across
a cobra venom sky.

his leg has swollen blue
above two bleeding holes
of fanged naked flesh.

behind his eyes, he drifts...
a red hyena sniggers,
a green spider monkey
peels a bright blue banana.

a silent windmill stands,
a circle slowly spinning,
slowing down and
stopping.

a black silhouette
against the cobra venom sky.

Australian **Phil Clark** was born in Khartoum as the oldest of four brothers. At 6'5", he hates maths and loves seafood.

[*'kurosawa'* continued from page 1]

'shakkaimono', or as critic Donald Richid defines it, 'meaningful films about social issues seen in personal terms'. Furthermore, such accounts tend to oversimplify the changes in Kurosawa's 50-year directing career, by characterizing them as deviations from a central goal or project, which is something of a theoretical daydream.

Two recent books published in the United Kingdom have sought to resolve the tensions provoked by these dominant and contentious themes. Both take as their subject Kurosawa's most internationally famous film, *Seven Samurai*, which serves as a synecdoche for a range of issues central to an understanding of his work as a whole.

Roy Stafford, in his York Film Notes Series *Seven Samurai*, attempts to address the problematic and reductive debate concerning an opposition between Japanese and American nationalism by complicating the notion of influence and moving beyond the confines of an oversimplified East-West divide. He suggests that a more global context should be brought to bear on considerations of Kurosawa's films.

Joan Mellen, in her BFI Film Classics Series *Seven Samurai*, likewise seeks to provide a more charitable ground for analysis by attacking head-on the received opinion concerning Kurosawa's political failures and by demonstrating the weaknesses of a critical-political hegemony which condemns Kurosawa for not being what he never claimed to have been. His consistent focus on the importance of the individual in action is in this context his greatest success, the result of an exhaustive effort under sustained fire.

Kurosawa was born in 1910 in Tokyo, the son of a military father who came from samurai lineage. His father encouraged him to develop an interest

in the newly emerging medium of film, an interest further supported by his brother Heigo's employment as a *benshi*, or narrator of silent films. The young Kurosawa's interest was, however, in painting, and he entered school to train as professional painter. But this skill, which would later aid him in preparing painted representations for highly visual films such as *Ran*, could not secure him an adequate living. Thus in 1936 Kurosawa, looking for work, answered an advertisement for the position of an assistant director from PCL Studios. He was accepted to work under the direction of the man who was to become his greatest teacher, Kajiro Yamamoto. It was in the following years that Kurosawa developed the technical skills and work ethic for which he would later be renowned.

Kurosawa's first films were directed during and immediately following World War Two, and were produced under the constraints of wartime and occupation censorship. Though his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, a striking depiction of a struggling young martial artist, was relatively unaffected by political influences, the wartime Japanese government was of course anti-Western, and preferred representations of devoted and unindividuated workers who were subordinate at least to a 'social' goal, if not also to a received and semi-feudalistic notion of an 'authentic' Japan which was under attack from Western cultural influences. The American occupation forces, in their turn, sought to subdue representations of feudal loyalty, and banned Kurosawa's 1945 film *They*

Who Tread on the Tiger's Trail. Perhaps tainted by an early and disappointing membership in Japan's Proletarian Artists' League in 1929, and certainly affected by the aura of institutional control over the lives of individuals, Kurosawa developed a strong tendency to promote the self-directed, individual struggle over the random and unpredictable tendencies of mass-movements, which so often perpetuated forms of tyranny under the guise of promoting the greater good.

Kurosawa's first break into international recognition was *Rashomon* (1950), which won the first prize at the Venice Festival. It was followed by a very weak and overly literal adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in 1951, a failure which taught Kurosawa valuable lessons in later adaptations of Shakespeare. (*Throne of Blood* was based on *Macbeth* and *Ran* on *King Lear*.) In his next film, *Ikiru* (1952), he wisely chose an original story, that of a lonely civil servant whose heroic struggle in the face of bureaucratic indifference is one of Kurosawa's most

striking depictions of an isolated effort to make personal life meaningful through the fulfillment of a social object.

In the late sixties a disastrous encounter with Twentieth Century Fox in the production of *Tora!*

Tora! Tora! left Kurosawa bitter and unemployed. He didn't make another film until 1970, and, perhaps as a result of its poor reception and the unwillingness of Japanese production houses to fund any of his extravagant projects, he attempted to kill himself in 1971. In 1975 he received an offer from a Russian organisation, Mosfilm, under whose aegis he produced, in *Dersu Uzala*, a melancholy representation of the alien-



Many studies of Kurosawa's work, for example, involve the analysis of his films in the context of a critique of his national character, and as a result, he is often accused of being overly Western in his technique, his ideology, and his influences.

ation of man from nature as a result of progressive urbanisation and industrialisation. In 1980, Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas found funding for a period film, *Kagemusha*, and in 1985 Kurosawa found backing for the long-contemplated *Ran*. These later films, most critics testify, are bleak in both style and content, and express more of a desire to be resolved to the certainty of death and failure than to celebrate the virtues of existence or promote hope.

Kurosawa made three further films before he died in 1998. He wrote the scripts for each of them entirely on his own, deviating from his prior policy of writing

scripts collaboratively. *Dreams* (1990) attempts to visualise various dreams which Kurosawa claimed to have had throughout his life; *Rhapsody in August* (1991) confronts the consequences of the bombing of Nagasaki; and, finally, *Madadayo* (1993) tells the story of a retired professor who eventually reconciles himself to the death which he knew was inevitable but for which he did not yet feel prepared.

Respected for his adaptations of foreign works and for his cinematic innovations, Kurosawa's most directly discernible influence in popular international cinema is a result of the magnificent storytelling and characterization in his samurai films. *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), for example, has been cited by George Lucas as an important source for *Star Wars*, even providing (in the form of two hapless farmers) the inspiration for the electronic antics of C3PO and R2-D2. *Yojimbo* (1961) and its weaker sequel, *Sanjuro* (1962), introduced into popular cinema the figure of a hero without name, commitments, history — or scruples. The formula has inspired, among others,

Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* and, more recently, *Last Man Standing*.

But Kurosawa's most famous film, *Seven Samurai*, stands out from the rest in its outstanding cinematography, characterization, and fast-paced, compelling action. Kurosawa's representation of honourable but unemployed warriors, caught in the final historical moment of their tradition and banding together without promise of real remuneration to save a distressed and ultimately unappreciative populace, makes

it something of a symbol of Kurosawa's awareness of the importance and the evanescence of individual commitment in a social arena. Six rogue samurai and one farmer with samurai pretensions (played with incredible power by Kurosawa's favourite leading man, Toshiro Mifune) are hired to protect a town of hapless, selfish peasants who are plagued annually by a gang of bandits, who are themselves made up of former samurai.

Led by the wise Kanbei (played by another Kurosawa favourite, Takashi Shimura), the samurai help the townspeople to overcome their irresponsible selfishness and to sacrifice themselves for the collective good. But the nature of the transition from ancient to modern warfare weakens the authority of the samurai, and each of the four who are killed die from gunshots. When the battle is over and the bandits are vanquished, the townspeople return to their rural occupations and leave the samurai again masterless. Kanbei, reflecting on the homeless life of the samurai ends the film with the sad but pregnant lines: 'We lose. Those farm-

ers... they're the winners'.

In the early 1970s New Wave Japanese directors reacted against Kurosawa's reputation and his perceived cinematic authority. They rebelled against what they saw as an American style which was overly individualistic and too directly influenced by westerns in the style of John Ford and others. This was perhaps their most damaging attack, leveled as it was against a director who prided himself on his ability to make films first and foremost for a Japanese audience.

In his York Film Series volume, Roy Stafford straightforwardly claims that it is impossible to reduce the complexities of global cross-cultural relationships to the simplified issue of 'influence', or to the question of the extent to which Kurosawa was essentially either Japanese, or Western. Consequently, for Stafford the film is part of a collaborative effort that is not reducible to notions of national cinema or the single auteur. Kurosawa may have been influenced by American westerns, but he transformed the received form and developed it in a particularly Japanese fashion. With the distance of his-

tory behind him, Stafford thinks himself able to overcome local prejudices and a binary nationalism to show the extent to which various aesthetic styles and techniques are taken up and modified by Kurosawa. 'Perhaps only now,' he writes, 'nearly fifty years after its initial release, can *Seven Samurai* be viewed objectively, the "illusion" peeled away to reveal the "reality".'

Stafford develops his point by offering short descriptions of Kurosawa's stylistic innovations in both camera work and sound. His pioneering use of multi-camera filming and telephoto lenses in *Seven Samurai* became an

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[*kurosawa* continued from page 9]

inspiration and a practical lesson for directors the world over. In his attempt to make wide interdisciplinary and international connections, Stafford's description of the influence of Japanese painting techniques in Kurosawa's cinematic art is illuminating, and an extended discussion of sound effects and musical scores is likewise a valuable addition to popularly accessible works on *Seven Samurai*.

The book is also useful insofar as it contains highlighted words which are explained in a special section on terminology, though it is significantly weakened by the almost total absence of photographs: essential scenes are represented in drawings more appropriate to a child's textbook. Ultimately, Stafford's *Seven Samurai* is a useful introduction to Kurosawa's work and to Japanese film in general, but its most interesting addition to Kurosawa criticism is its insistence upon a move away from reductive and misleading discussions of national identity.

Joan Mellen's contribution to the British Film Institute Classics Series, *Seven Samurai*, begins with a rather incoherent though informative of various aspects of the film; like Stafford's book, it is rather short and in the style of a brief introduction to Kurosawa's contribution to cinema. But she reveals her real agenda in a section on Kurosawa and his critics, which is in fact a detailed and vehement repudiation of the politically motivated mischaracterisations of Kurosawa's work which have tended to decry his 'humanist' individualism and his intellectual 'failures'. Kurosawa, she writes, adopting a common metaphor by making of him some sort of warrior, 'was at war with the critics'. She takes apart, in some

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detail, the criticisms of Noël Burch, James Goodwin, Stephen Prince, Tada Sato, and Michitaro Tada. Western critics are attacked for their 'infatuation with "theory"' and the misrepresentation of history, while in Japan, 'a pseudo-Marxist view has approached the film from a similar premise, distorting Kurosawa's perspective'. A failure to ac-

knowledge the reality of the real world leaves postmodern critics foundering in an ahistorical, underdetermined intellectual schema, utterly incapable of any accurate representation of Kurosawa's sociopolitical commitments; the New Wave directors are merely ungrateful and jealous. The only critic who fares reasonably well is Donald Richie, a benevolent Kurosawa expert whose *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (to which Mellen has made contributions), though it perpetuates the myth of the director's descent into seclusion, remains one of the classics of American criticism of Kurosawa's work.

Though it is presented in a scatter-gun fashion and directed not only against critics but, perhaps too openly, against many facets of contemporary criticism, Mellen's central point comes across quite clearly. Film critics should not condemn directors for failing to make the kinds of films the critics would like to see; this is a form of tyranny and requires decided resistance. Given his initial contact with a politically motivated censorship which was the common ground between Marxism and Imperialism, Kurosawa's vision is one of a freedom which bows neither to received opinion nor to the bigotry of those who

toe a fashionable line. Hence Mellen's blunt quotation from Kurosawa himself: 'I felt that without the establishment of the self as a positive value there could be no freedom and no democracy'. In the end, it is not Kurosawa to whom the narrative of failure applies, but to history: '*Seven Samurai* at the last becomes an elegy, a window into Akira Kurosawa's heart. From the vantage of the post-war moment, he mourns how and when Japan lost its best self. The history which followed would for him move in an ever downward moral direction'.

The recent retrospective of Kurosawa's work sponsored by the British Film Institute, coinciding as it does with the release of Mellen's widely-directed rhetoric is not merely an attempt to perpetuate an appreciation for his wide body of work. It is also an attempt to generate the wider critical and theoretical understanding necessary for a charitable — and just — representation of his contribution to cinema, which does not reduce critical discussion of his work to received clichés concerning the nature of his influences, or the quality of his national character.

The reception by established critics, we may safely wager, will be predictably defensive; but the reception by a new generation of audiences and film students, more distant as they are from the political and social events, and theoretical constructs, which have dominated critical discussion of Kurosawa's oeuvre, is rather more difficult to anticipate. □

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The attraction of utopia is not restricted to the realms of politics and economics; natural environment matters as well, and in this regard the tropical island is ideal. On one hand it is beautiful, isolated, and rich in natural resources. On the other hand it is easy to defend.

Guided by the likely apocryphal legend of Captain Misson's Libertalia, Rushby begins his search for pirate utopia off the coast of Mozambique. However, as it turns out, his search undermines the notion of utopia rather than finding a real-life example of it. In the course of his journey, Rushby constantly encounters other people's island utopias, and finds them wanting. Examples include the island owned by German settlers whose kids have since moved away, the tiny island being sold by a Swedish yachtsman, the fishing atoll overcrowded by Mozambicans trying to scratch a hard living out of the sea, and the failed political utopia of Ali Solih in the Comoro Islands.

The message is always the same — sunshine and rich natural resources are not enough to rescue the ideal of utopia. There is always work to be done, and nature is constantly throwing up new challenges. However, beyond material factors, the greatest dangers are psychological. Man is a social animal. Man is also, it seems, a prowling animal, that needs adventure and a change of scenery for sustenance. The message seems to be that pirates did not become free when they initiated self-rule and overcame scarcity of resources; in reality they imprisoned themselves when they freely ended their peripatetic existence. They were only truly free, in the sense that matters, when they had no fixed address and knew no laws — not even their own. Their true utopia was their buccaneer lifestyle, not an island off of Madagascar, and that is why they retain such a powerful hold on our imagination.

From Plato to Sir Thomas More and beyond, the notion of utopia has played a powerful role in facilitating a critique of existing government. Apparently pirates have likewise entered the realm of political theory. In reference to Defoe's subterfuge, Rushby writes that 'Whole chunks of pirate history, it is alleged, were created by Defoe to further his own subtle ends in dissenting politics. The speeches of Captain Bellamy, and Misson too, were thinly disguised assaults on the English Establishment by one of its own.' Pirates served as a heuristic device for criticizing slavery and the inequitable distribution of wealth. Their fictitious characteristics did not compromise their role in political critique any more than fictitious characteristics hamstrung the efficacy of Swift's Lilliputians.

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Hunting Pirate Heaven takes detours through several other mythical concepts that, like utopia, have surfaced in political theory as heuristic devices and have influenced the way we think about societal order: notions of a universal language (i.e. the Tower of Babel myth), the noble savage, and 'Year Zero'. When encountering examples of these concepts along his journey, Rushby's tactic is once again to undermine them. They end up lacking not only a grounding in reality, which is pretty much self-evident, but also appeal as abstract ideals.

The picaresque characters who pass through Rushby's pages also end up being not what they initially seemed. Infamous French mercenary Bob Denard, who took control over the Comoro Islands, looks like less of a modern-day utopia-seeking pirate than a puppet of French neocolonialism. On the other hand, assassinated Comoro dictator Ali Solih starts out as a wicked Pol-Pot wannabe who attempted to return the Comoros to 'Year Zero' by burning government records, banning traditional weddings, legalizing marijuana, and placing teenagers in high government offices. During Denard's invasion in 1978 — one of many — Solih was allegedly found watching pornographic films with three naked women. His reputation is salvaged later in the book, when locals depict him as a quixotic man of the people, who rode across the country in the same jerry-rigged taxis as the peasantry, and was not afraid to take his shirt off and pour concrete with the builders working on a public school. He turns out to be much simpler, and much less sinister, than colonial propaganda would have it.

By the end of the journey, the vestiges of pirate life that Rushby has discovered are an unequivocal disappointment. One of the only major physical relics he comes across is a huge cauldron that was supposedly used for salmagundi, the pirate soup of legend which all crewmembers shared as equals. An empty pot is a far cry from the in-tact pirate ship found by the children in the classic teen movie *Goonies*. Despite the impossibility of ever finding such a treasure, I would be lying if I didn't admit that this is what I secretly hoped for Rushby as I commenced his book. However, Rushby's failure to find pirate utopia does not mean that his narrative is a failure. Indeed, one could argue that his inability to find solid empirical grounding for the pirate myth serves to prove a more important point: that fanciful heuristic devices can nonetheless play a critical role in revealing shortcomings in our own society. O

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Eye-patched idealists? A traveller's take on pirates' political theory



Kevin Rushby. *Hunting Pirate Heaven: In Search of the Lost Pirate Utopias of the Indian Ocean*. London: Constable 2001. 300 pages.

The success of the search does not determine the success of the writing about the search. That is one lesson to be learned from reading about Kevin Rushby's experiences in looking for the 'lost pirate utopias' off the coast of Mozambique and Madagascar. Contrary to usual rules of travel writing, in this case, getting there is not all the fun — or even all of the adversity — that makes the endeavour worth reading about. Rather, it is Rushby's reflections on a number of archetypes — not merely the pirate, but also utopia, the noble savage, Robinson Crusoe, the foreign legionnaire, and the mercenary — that prove the most rewarding.

The appeal of the book's subject matter is obvious to any reader who has ever been a 7-year-old, but a moment's contemplation reminds us that our knowledge about pirates goes little past Robert Louis Stevenson and the stereotypical hoop-earring brigands of Disney's *Swiss Family Robinson*. As is standard for the historical travel literature genre, Rushby walks us through a review of pirate scholarship. However, it quickly becomes clear that most existing sources bear little more credibility than the familiar cartoon pirates with parrots on their shoulders. This investigation will be driven more by happenstance and fortuitous encounters than inviting clues teased out of decaying manuscripts.

Indeed, the device that initiates Rushby's search is neither a childhood fascination with pirates nor a longstanding academic interest, but rather an encounter with a mysterious stranger in Deptford, South London. The author is allegedly searching for the launching point of the famous East India Company ships on what would have been the four hundredth anniversary of their initial departure. He is contemplating pirates since he has just gone to see the skull-and-crossbone gates of St. Nicholas's Church in Deptford, which allegedly served as the inspiration for the infamous Jolly Roger. In the course of his hunt for the old docks, he happens across a mysterious Asian stranger, who claims to have been the victim of piracy. The stranger places in Rushby's mind the idea that the buccaneers were not only the bloodthirsty robbers of myth; they also founded a democratic political utopia somewhere in islands lying off the Mozambican coast. As the trigger for Rushby's adventurous investigation, this mysterious stranger is too true to

cliché. If he is fictitious, Rushby should have devised a better conceit. If inspired by truth, the author should have modified his characteristics to make him easier to swallow.

At first glance there may seem to be no reason to doubt authenticity of this character. However, Rushby's review of pirate literature reveals the centrality, in this field, of false histories conveyed by fictitious characters. In the foreword of the book, he mentions one of the most famous of all pirate books, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most Notorious Pyrates* by Captain Charles Johnson. This work provides many of the details of the pirate utopia that Rushby sets off to find; it recounts that French

buccaneer Captain Misson, an opponent of slavery, founded the utopian colony of Libertalia in northern Madagascar. This state allegedly featured a new universal language as well as a rudimentary parliament. The problem with this account, Rushby tells us, is that the 'Captain Johnson' who wrote this book was most likely Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*. Even on this point Rushby refuses to take a stand either way; he says 'there are no hard facts'

on this point. However, he does admit that 'There is something ephemeral and untrustworthy about pirate history.'

This rhetorical technique recurs again and again in the book; Rushby sets forth some sort of historical evidence about his subject matter and then undermines its credibility. This may seem like an odd technique, given the fact that the historical literature ostensibly serves as the guide for his journey. However, the notion of 'undermining' lies at the heart of Rushby's narrative. The search most critical to the story is not the physical search for pirate settlements and descendants, but rather the search for, and ultimately undermining of, the ideas that motivated the pirate settlements in the first place.

The notion of a pirate settlement is brazenly oxymoronic. Pirates are by definition nomadic raiders, forever on the prowl for victims and on the run from justice. However, what drove them to settle down was the idea of utopia, as the subtitle of the book indicates. Utopia was not merely meant to signify freedom from avenging authorities, but more importantly, freedom from outside authority generally — a political ideal of self-rule. Of further importance was freedom from material scarcity. Pirates supposedly started their sailing careers as press-ganged conscripts or slaves — in other words, the poorest of the poor. They therefore desired a more egalitarian distribution of resources along with their self-government.

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