

Document Citation

Title	Akira Kurosawa
Author(s)	Gerald Peary
Source	<i>American Film</i>
Date	1989 Apr
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	80-82
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Kurosawa, Akira (1910-1998), Omori, Tokyo, Japan
Film Subjects	Ran, Kurosawa, Akira, 1985 Nora inu (Stray dog), Kurosawa, Akira, 1949 Kumonosu-jo (Throne of blood), Kurosawa, Akira, 1957 Kakushi toride no san-akunin (The hidden fortress), Kurosawa, Akira, 1958 Rashomon, Kurosawa, Akira, 1950 Shichinin no samurai (Seven samurai), Kurosawa, Akira, 1954 Tengoku to jigoku (High and low), Kurosawa, Akira, 1963 Ikiru (To live), Kurosawa, Akira, 1952 Tora no o o fumu otokotachi (The men who tread on the tiger's tail), Kurosawa, Akira, 1945 Yojimbo, Kurosawa, Akira, 1961

Dersu uzala, Kurosawa, Akira, 1975

AKIRA KUROSAWA

Japan's existential cowboy looks West and thinks East

IN HIS 40-YEAR CAREER, AKIRA KUROSAWA HAS CREATED SOME OF THE MOST VIVID, PHYSICAL-ACTION SEQUENCES IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA.



COURTESY OF AMPAS

tHERE ARE MOMENTS IN *RAN* (1985), THE MOST RECENT FILM BY AKIRA KUROSAWA, when the screen throbs with so much life, so many soldiers on horseback, such extraordinary battles, that one thinks, this is what Tolstoy saw in his mind when he wrote about Napoleon's invasion of Russia in *War and Peace*.

Western audiences discovering Kurosawa's work, particularly through *Seven Samurai* (1954), admire first of all the exotic spectacle, the swashbuckling swordplay and the sheer excitement of the age of samurai, re-created in the environs of Mount Fuji, Kurosawa's Monument Valley. But there are more sides to this director than his nostalgia for Japan's heroic days. There is the urbane spinner of noiresque detective stories (*Stray Dog*, *High and Low*); the mandarin intellectual who sees Shakespeare's tragic vision as germane to the Japanese experience (*Throne of Blood*, *Ran*); the existential social reformer who demands that the modern world wake up and live (*Ikiru*, *Drunken Angel*, *The Bad Sleep Well*).

For the 79-year-old Kurosawa, international acclaim has come twice already in

his lifetime. The first time was unexpected, when *Rashomon* (1950) took first prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival and was selected Best Foreign Film by the Academy that same year. A golden era followed, with *Ikiru* (1952), *Seven Samurai* (1956), *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Yojimbo* (1962).

Now in his renaissance, after a suicide attempt in 1971, Kurosawa remains guarded and bitter, unsure of his reception at home and disdainful of the money-men of Japanese cinema who have balked at funding his large-budget period films. Kurosawa will never forget that he had to journey to the Soviet Union to get backing for *Dersu Uzala* (1975).

"Why is it that Japanese people have no confidence in the worth of Japan?" Kurosawa concludes in his memoir, *Something Like an Autobiography*. "I can only despair at the character of my people."

What precipitated Kurosawa's estrangement in xenophobic Japan was his open embracing of Western culture. To be labeled "the most Western of Japanese directors" is not necessarily a compliment. He delights in American Westerns, especially those by John Ford, and certainly *Seven Samurai* can be interpreted as Kurosawa's homage to Ford's '40s cavalry movies.

And, like Howard Hawks and Ford, Kurosawa is a "man's director": tall and imposing behind the invariable sunglasses. He wrote of the William B. Hart Westerns he adored as a boy: "What remains of these films in my heart is the smell of male sweat." Kurosawa stands undeniably tall among the late modernists, spinning macho, heterosexual tales with unflagging confidence that they are what cinema should be about. The samurai spirit abounds in the vigorous, chest-thumping performances of his principal actor, Toshiro Mifune.

Still, it would be a mistake to view Kurosawa as a brainwashed defector to the West. "I would never make a film especially for foreign audiences," he once pointedly said. "If a work cannot have meaning for a Japanese audience, I—as a Japanese artist—am simply not interested."

If he champions Western culture, Kur-

osawa knows Japanese culture. As an elementary student in Tokyo, Kurosawa excelled in painting, calligraphy and swordsmanship—tools for his later filmmaking. The majestic costumes, sets and architecture (all conceived by the director, often in watercolors) combine to create environments for some of the most vivid, physical-action sequences in the history of cinema.

The full range of Kurosawa's career, about 20 films, can be seen on video. Naturally, there is worry when the works of a master visual stylist are shrunk for the TV screen. For the most part, though, even Kurosawa's wide-screen films (*The Hidden Fortress*, *Sanjuro*) survive the transfer. Only *Yojimbo*, in black-and-white Cinemascope, appears chaotic, because the edges have been sliced and diced. As compensation, the color films, *Dersu Uzala* and *Ran*, are lustrous and truly splendid to contemplate. Overall, Kurosawa works admirably on the small screen.

IN *IKIRU*, A PLODDING CIVIL SERVANT (TAKASHI SHIMURA) FINDS NEW MEANING TO HIS LIFE AFTER LEARNING HE'S DYING OF STOMACH CANCER.



THE MEN WHO TREAD ON THE TIGER'S TALE 1944

IT'S HARD FOR AMERICANS TO UNDERSTAND the stir, but Kurosawa got into deep trouble for featuring a famous Japanese low comedian, Enoken, in this sacrosanct traditional Kabuki drama, *Kanjinchō*. Kurosawa's hybrid plot so offended the powers that be that *Tiger's Tale* was shelved until 1953, during the American occupation. Well, Enoken is cute and funny as a clownish porter stuck among solemn samurais. *Tiger's Tale* is a short Kurosawa film (there aren't many of them!), a perfect snack to precede the more substantial works that follow. (International Historic Films, \$35.00.)

STRAY DOG 1949

KUROSAWA'S MOST UNDERRATED film is a Simenon-like detective story set deep in the bowels of postwar Tokyo. A skinny, callow, pre-Nutilus Toshiro Mifune plays a young cop whose gun is stolen from his pocket on a city bus. Humiliated, he goes on a chase, running down every urban lowlife in order to find his Colt. Fortunately, he is teamed with a slow-moving, ingratiating veteran detective (Takashi Shimura), who teaches Mifune that even a cop in hot pursuit needs to take time to enjoy a baseball game, have a sociable drink and notice the stars in the sky. At last, equipped with the knowledge of Zen and the art of sleuthing, Mifune is ready to take on his enemy: a war-vet prefiguration of *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickel.

This tense, exciting chase film jumps with atmosphere and a terrific cast of big-city losers. Of special note is Kurosawa's brilliant audio montage, which mixes together street sounds and popular songs in the long silent section during which Mifune, disguised in an army outfit, goes underground in Tokyo. (Sony, \$79.95.)

RASHOMON 1950

UNDER THE RASHOMON GATE IN MEDIEVAL Kyoto, a tale is told of the trial of a notorious bandit, Tajomaru, who is accused of raping a noblewoman and slaying her husband. *Rashomon* uses flashbacks to show four versions of what happened. None of the stories agrees. Kurosawa took this commonplace device of divergent testimony and turned it into a cinematic statement about the relativity and subjectivity of truth.



TOSHIRO MIFUNE GIVES ONE OF HIS MOST MEMORABLE PERFORMANCES AS THE JAPANESE MACBETH IN *THRONE OF BLOOD*.

"*Rashomon* wasn't all that good," its director has stated, perhaps a little harshly. Actually, it's mid-level Kurosawa, made interesting, certainly, by Toshiro Mifune's virile Tajomaru, the first of the actor's many beastly, sweaty, barefoot performances. (Nelson/Orion Home Video, \$29.95.)

IKIRU 1952

A REPRESSED, PLODDING CIVIL SERVANT (Takashi Shimura) learns that he has stomach cancer and a short time to live. Suddenly this semibreathing zombie wakes up and looks around him. Can he find reason for his existence before he moulders in his grave? Just in time, Mr. Watanabe discovers the need to create a tiny park with a playground in the impoverished middle of his city.

Maintaining a fine line between Goethe and Capra (*It's a Wonderful Life* certainly comes to mind), *Ikiru* demonstrates the validity of a life following humanist ideals. Who has viewed *Ikiru* and remained dry-eyed watching Watanabe in his playground, swinging gently in the falling snow?

"Occasionally, I think of my death," Kurosawa has said. "I keep feeling I have lived so little yet. Then I become thoughtful, but not sad. It was from such a feeling that *Ikiru* rose." (Media Home Entertainment, \$59.95.)

SEVEN SAMURAI 1954

NOT TO WORRY; THE VIDEO IS THE long, long version—more than three hours of how the samurai warriors meet, get recruited and bond together to fight the nasty brigands. Kurosawa's blend of

state-of-the-art swordplay and masterly characterizations is irresistible: *Seven Samurai* is, simply, one of the greats. As he has often done in his career, Kurosawa juxtaposes the rational, sweet-tempered, soft-spoken Takashi Shimura (leader of the samurai pack) against the grungy, mad-cap, out-of-control Toshiro Mifune (samurai-in-training). Together, they form the head and body of a mighty fighting machine. Everything leads toward the final battle in a rainstorm, which Kurosawa shot—mostly using a long lens—with three cameras. It may be the most fabulous combat ever filmed, at least rivaling the skirmish on ice in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*. (Nelson/Orion Home Video, \$39.95.)

THRONE OF BLOOD

1957

THE JAPANESE *MACBETH* IS KUROSAWA at his most tight, taut and minimal—a one-hour-and-45-minute rise and tumble of Captain Washizu (Toshiro Mifune), who, says the voiceover, is “murdered by ambition.” On his own, Washizu is a bit of a sputtering worm, spineless and gutless. He needs his wife, Lady Asaji, to spur him to assassinate first his feudal lord, then his best friend and, finally, a couple of fall-guy guards. But, in the infamous baroque ending, Washizu gets his comeuppance through a torrent of arrows (see the human porcupine!), the most definitive overkill in a movie until the FBI tommy guns get *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). (Media Home Entertainment, \$59.95.)

THE HIDDEN FORTRESS 1958

KUROSAWA'S WIDE-SCREEN PRODUCTION was given a retrospective in the United States when George Lucas claimed it inspired *Star Wars*. Princess Leia's feisty character can be traced to tough-as-nails, 16-year-old Princess Yukihiime in *The Hidden Fortress*, and Lucas's comedic duo, C-3PO and R2-D2, originate from Kurosawa's two never-silent, diminutive farmers who bumble their way across the Japanese countryside.

Still, after the trivia is unraveled, *The Hidden Fortress* is Kurosawa in a decidedly minor, adolescent key. The aforementioned characters (plus Toshiro Mifune) plod across the screen for 139 minutes—far too long—so that the princess can reclaim her throne. There is one fine, elon-

gated battle with lances, and the two farmers provide nonstop Laurel-and-Hardy-brand low comedy. (Media Home Entertainment, \$59.95.)

YOJIMBO 1961

TOSHIRO MIFUNE PLAYS A RUGGED veteran samurai, Sanjuro, gone positively blood simple, who wanders into a filthy, corrupt, 19th-century Japanese town. Sanjuro looks around him and wishes for judgment day. He says, tersely, “I get paid for killing. Better if all these men are dead. Think about it.” When the town is



KUROSAWA ADAPTS KING LEAR TO THE SENSIBILITIES OF A JAPANESE AUDIENCE IN *RAN*. DAISUKE RYU PLAYS THE YOUNGEST AND MOST LOYAL SON.

cleansed—its worthless population decimated—Sanjuro rides off into the sunset.

Yojimbo sounds grim, but actually there's great gallows humor in seeing all these slimy souls cleverly eliminated. Kurosawa obviously got the idea from Dashiell Hammett's classic, *Red Harvest*. In turn, the filmmaker's picture spawned Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), which is an expert transformation of *Yojimbo* to a spaghetti Western. (Nelson/Orion Home Video, \$29.95.)

HIGH AND LOW 1963

FOR ITS FIRST HOUR, *HIGH AND LOW* religiously follows Kurosawa's source, *King's Ransom*, an 87th Precinct novel by Ed McBain. A self-made shoe manufacturer (Toshiro Mifune) plots to take over his company's stock, but suddenly his money supply is threatened when a kidnapper steals his chauffeur's son.

In McBain's novel, the protagonist is a megaforce, and the kidnappers are stupid and weak. But in the film, it's the Machiavellian kidnapper who is too formidable

for one man's revenge. This pariah eludes the whole Tokyo police force—even through a tour-de-force, Hitchcockian chase sequence on a Japanese bullet train.

High and Low goes on and on, for 142 minutes. But in this case, viewers can't help but be amazed by Kurosawa's accretion of Holmesian details as the police get closer and closer to their mark. There's also *High and Low's* socko Dostoyevskian ending, a horrific peek into the black hole. (Sony, \$79.95.)

DERSU UZALA 1975

KUROSAWA'S UNCHARACTERISTIC foray into social realism is a poignant, unabashedly sentimental story about the early 20th-century friendship of a Russian army captain and Dersu Uzala, a hunter from the Ussuri region that separates the Soviet Union and China. Dersu is one more version of Mifune's outsider, but here, he's a softened and truly noble savage. Also, he's a kind of primitive ecologist, in touch with the forest and able to have conversations with the wildest animals. Even tigers. Maxim Munzuk, who plays Dersu, is a genuinely magical presence: a cherubic changeling, part Saint Nicholas, part Pappy Yokum. And Yuri Solomine, as the army captain with a Chekhovian heart of gold, does well to suggest the kinder, gentler side of Kurosawa. (Nelson/Orion Home Video, \$22.95.)

RAN 1985

THE BENIGN ARTIST OF *DERSU UZALA* is nowhere to be found in this astonishingly misanthropic work, released the year Kurosawa turned 75. The world is hopelessly, irredeemably violent in the director's rethinking of *King Lear*.

Ran is undoubtedly a masterpiece, but a flawed one. Tatsuya Nakadai's Hidetori is more a stylized abstraction than a three-dimensional person. And there is talk, talk, talk—not all of it interesting or of Shakespearean caliber.

Mieko Harada is superb, though, as the villainous Lady Kaede, who seduces and marries her husband's murderer. (This Kurosawa concoction, based on Lady Macbeth, is the last in the director's long line of duplicitous women.)

If *Ran* proves to be Kurosawa's swan song, it may stand among the most pessimistic final testaments since Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Yet, it is glorious to behold. (CBS-Fox Video, \$79.95.) □