KUROSAWA, Akira (March 23, 1910 – September 6, 1998)

The Japanese director Kurosawa Akira has been internationally celebrated as one of the most important filmmakers in the history of cinema. One of his highly acclaimed works is *Rashomon* (1950), the *jidaigeki* (period drama) film best known for the complex portrayal of several characters recounting contradictory interpretations of the same event. The film won an unanticipated Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. For the West, its encounter with Japanese cinema started with this ‘discovery’ of *Rashomon*, and for Japan, the sensational triumph of the film abroad opened the door to the West for its cinema. At the same time, *Rashomon*’s worldwide success simultaneously gave Japan an “opportunity to rearticulate consciously what constitute the national and cultural specificity of Japanese cinema,” as Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro argues (Yoshimoto, 1). Kurosawa’s international fame and popularity have always gone side by side with Japan’s self-image toward the West and the West’s use of Japan as a geo-political/geo-cultural imaginary site.

Born in Tokyo, Kurosawa spent his youth devouring foreign literature (especially Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy) and also attempting to train himself as a painter, although he never made it his vocation. His career as a filmmaker started when he joined the Photo Chemical Laboratories (P.C.L., which later became the Toho studio) in 1936 and worked under Yamamoto Kajiro among other senior directors. Kurosawa’s theatrical debut, *Sugata Sanshiro* (*Sanshiro Sugata*, 1943), offered action packed spectacles featuring a stubborn yet honest youth disciplining himself through Judo. While the narrative is quite conventional, following the popular swordfight genre formula, the film already exhibits Kurosawa’s signature filmic forms and techniques, including stylized frame composition and the use of the wipe. The on-going war greatly affected his production as well, and his following feature, *Ichiban Utsukushiku* (*The Most Beautiful*, 1944), was a national propaganda film stressing the war effort by the Japanese. In contrast, his first postwar film, *Waga seishun ni kuinashi* (*No Regrets for Our Youth*, 1946), was developed out of an actual wartime incident as an explicitly political anti-militarist work promoting democratic ethos.

Kurosawa has been often labelled as a director of *jidaigeki* in large part due to the legacy of *Rashomon* and his other trademark ‘samurai’ films, notably *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, 1954) – arguably the most popular Japanese film of all time – as well as the smash hits *Yojinbo* (*Yojimbo*, 1961) and *Tsubaki Sanjuro* (*Sanjuro*, 1962). However, he also directed a number of *gendaigeki* (contemporary drama) films that are concerned with the predicaments of immediate postwar Japan, especially in *Subarashiki nichiyobi* (*One Wonderful Sunday*, 1947), *Yoidore tenshi* (*Drunken Angel*, 1948), *Shizukanaru ketto* (*Quiet Duel*, 1949) and *Ikiru* (*Ikiru*, 1952), which brought him another prize at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1954. Aesthetically, the filmic form and technique in these films is highly ‘modern’ and stylized with, for instance, the use of conflict montage and contrapuntal insertion of music. Thematically, underscored in those films is a universally appealing humanist sensibility that is sympathetic toward struggling individuals, one which echoes Italian Neorealism, a contemporaneous movement that cinematically evoked the plight and frailty of the human condition in postwar Italy.

In his later years, Kurosawa remained extremely influential and uncompromising with such ambitious international projects as *Kagemusha* (*Kagemusha*, 1980), a historical epic film that claimed the Palm d’Or at Cannes, and *Ran* (*Ran*, 1985), another grand epic revolving around the warlord character roughly developed out of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (continuing his interest in adapting Western canonical texts by Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and others). In 1990, he received a lifetime achievement Oscar at the Academy Awards.

Reference and further reading

- Prince, S. (1999) *The Warrior’s Camera: the Cinema of Akira Kurosawa,* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Richie, D. (1996) *The Films of Akira Kurosawa,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Yoshimoto, M. (2000) *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema,* Durham: Duke University Press.

List of works:

*Sugata Sanshiro* (*Sanshiro Sugata*, 1943)

*Ichiban Utsukushiku* (*The Most Beautiful*, 1944)

*Waga seishun ni kuinashi* (*No Regrets for Our Youth*, 1946)

*Subarashiki nichiyobi* (*One Wonderful Sunday*, 1947)

*Yoidore tenshi* (*Drunken Angel*, 1948)

*Shizukanaru ketto* (*Quiet Duel*, 1949)

*Rashomon* (1950)

*Ikiru* (*Ikiru*, 1952)

*Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, 1954)

*Yojinbo* (*Yojimbo*, 1961)

*Tsubaki Sanjuro* (*Sanjuro*, 1962)

*Kagemusha* (*Kagemusha*, 1980)

*Ran* (*Ran*, 1985)

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*Zoku Sanshiro Sugata* (*Sanshiro Sugata Part II*, 1945)

*Tora no o wo fumu otokotachi* (*The Man Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail*, 1945)

*Nora inu* (*Stray Dog,* 1949)

*Skyandaru* (*Scandal,* 1950)

*Hakuchi* (*The Idiot,*1951)

*Ikimono no kiroku* (*Record of a Living Being,* 1995)

*Kumonosu-jo* (*Throne of Blood,* 1957)

*Donzoko* (*The Lower Depths,* 1957)

*Kakushi toride no san akunin* (*The Hidden Fortress,* 1958)

*Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru* (*The Bad Sleep Well,* 1960)

*Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low,* 1963)

*Akahige* (*Red Beard,* 1965)

*Dodesukaden* (*Dodesukaden,* 1970)

*Derusu Uzara* (*Dersu Uzala,* 1975)

*Yume* (*Dreams,* 1990)

*Hachigatsu no rapusodi* (*Rhapsody in August,* 1991)

*Mādadayo* (*Madadayo,* 1993)

Paratextual material

<http://www.criterion.com/films/307-rashomon>

(Trailer: *Rashomon*)

<http://www.criterion.com/films/165-seven-samurai>

(Trailer: *Seven Samurai*)

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