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Intro to Film History

November 6, 2006

Akira Kurosawa: 1950-1960

Kurosawa is often cited as Japan's most famous director, especially in the international market. He originally set out to be a painter, but transitioned to the medium of film, using his paintings to plan shots and keeping his aesthetic skill in practice. He didn't seem to miss the painting in preference of film. He has said, "Take 'myself' and subtract 'movies' and the result is 'zero'" (Kurosawa, xi). Kurosawa's work became famous internationally, especially in America, after *Rashomon* (1950) won first prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival (Richie 80). This paper details his work in the 50's starting with this film until *The Hidden Fortress* in 1958. In this period, he did some of his most famous work, including *The Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Throne of Blood* (1957). *The Seven Samurai* is so popular that this paper cannot add any meaningful analysis to the wealth of information already written, and it will be skipped.

The cinematic style of Kurosawa is very recognizable. He frequently uses weather or natural lighting to set the mood of a scene, usually rain. He uses wipe cuts between scenes frequently as a way to "expose elements that otherwise sustain the illusion of reality" (Goodwin, 144). This kept the audience aware of the fiction the film presented, allowing for more interaction with the characters as symbols of a greater meaning. In the fashion of Japanese storytelling, characters frequently sing to narrate their own lives, and the soundtrack is usually produced from the characters themselves. He frequently directed films set in medieval Japan, featuring samurai warriors on horseback. The coordination needed for the actors to act in the frame with horses required extra talent and support.

Kurosawa was a fan of Westerns, especially those made by John Ford (Kurosawa, xii). He borrowed a lot of techniques from the genre, but also copied Ford's method of repeatedly using a few actors, such as John Wayne. In the 1950's, Kurosawa featured primarily Toshiro Mifune and Takashi Shimura in leading roles. The persistent relationship with Kurosawa assisted these actors to bring brilliant performances to the screen. Kurosawa would showcase their emotions in the most subtle of expressions and reactions in a variety of environments. Mifune could change between the callous bandit in *Rashomon*, to the noble warrior in *The Hidden Fortress*, with a hesitant traitor

in *Throne of Blood*. Shimura could also be a frightened woodcutter in *Rashomon*, a timid clerk in *Ikiru*, and a wise leader of the warriors in *The Seven Samurai*.

Kurosawa's first major success in the West came with *Rashomon* (1950). It featured the chilling story of a rape and murder as retold by those who witnessed them. The actual event is told in flashback four times, and all accounts disagree. In fact, there is no clear truth even after all stories are told. Even the woodcutter's story cannot be completely trusted, even though he seems to be an impartial witness. The concept of eye-witness accounts disagreeing, no matter how disconnected the witness may seem to be, has actually been coined the "rashomon effect" by modern psychology.

The flashback element actually occurs twice, as the story of the event is told by witnesses in court, which is itself a flashback of the people who witnessed the court scene as they hid from a storm in the *Rashomon Temple*. This adds to the complexity of finding the truth, as the two who witnessed the court also disagree on the innocence of the witnesses and the reality of their testimony. The third commoner in the temple exists to enjoy a good story, no matter how improbable it is.

The court scenes are a particularly convenient method of narration, providing context to the testimony as it starts at different points of the story. The camera angle is particularly well-placed, for three elements are given importance. The woodcutter and priest in the background are witnessing the testimonies. The witnesses give long speeches, to set the tone of their narration and emotional state after the event, which might not even be legitimate. Most importantly, the witnesses are talking directly to the camera. This element serves two purposes. First, it allows the audience to be treated as the judge of the court, which gives them a responsibility in actively pursuing the truth. Second, it never shows the presence of a magistrate over the court. This has been noted as a reference to the state of occupied Japan after defeat in World War II (Yoshimoto, 189).

Kurosawa's common elements of cinema are present in full force in this film. The *Rashomon Temple* is drenched in a torrential downpour, adding to the vertical composition of the scene, to contrast the horizontal composition of the court and the chaotic, natural composition of the forest (Yoshimoto, 185). The forest is full of natural light and shadows of leaves, especially in the sequence where the woodcutter walks through the forest. Each scene is very minimal in construction, each with three characters and a single location. The suspense and action is driven by the patient performances of the actors, including Toshiro Mifune as the bandit and Takashi Shimura as the

woodcutter. The simple form strains the complexity of the characters, especially as viewed from different perspectives. The number three also plays a repetitive role, including the three scenes with three characters each.

Soon to follow, Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), meaning "to live" in Japanese, contained similar flashbacks and questions about the human spirit. This film shows the struggle of an office worker coping with his last days alive. Takashi Shimura's performance as Kanji Watanabe shows a spectrum of emotions as he tries to find meaning in partying, in women, and finally making a difference. Shimura breaks from his usual role of a noble hero to that of a hesitant, stammering clerk who is breaking down from the inside as he copes with his upcoming death. Yoshimoto argues that this shows feminine traits and "the close-up of his face becomes as important as what he says," while Watanabe becomes "a maternal figure caring for the welfare of children" (201). This performance would not be as strong without Kurosawa's previous relationship working with Shimura.

The first half of the film shows Watanabe's search for meaning, and the second half is presented as his coworkers try to understand Kanji's last months through flashbacks. This second half is entirely after Kanji's death, to show how much his strive for meaning and remembrance both succeeded and failed. Donald Richie's says the split in narrative form is to show first what is real about Watanabe's life, and then to show "the illusion – the reactions of others, their excuses, their accidental stumblings on the truth, their final rejection of both the truth and Watanabe" (89). Even though change is not reached with the clerks, the park that Watanabe succeeded in building is shown in full use in the final scene. Even as the park empties, the swings keep moving, which is an homage to his final moments.

Watanabe's last moments alive are shown in a scene straight out of Kurosawa's playbook. While the opening image of his stomach cancer in the X-ray showed his imminent death, the final approach is made to seem serene and peaceful. In fact, the disastrous news allowed Watanabe to seek out and complete his quest for meaning while it was still possible. In the last flashback, Watanabe is shown singing slowly on a swing in the snow, the same song he sang months before while depressed in a bar. The activity of the snow falling contrasts Watanabe's stillness as he remains calm and satisfied with life.

The film's message of the meaning of existence is that one's actions determine the meaning of one's life. Watanabe brings meaning by building a park, which his drunken coworkers discover. In their stupor, they devote themselves to the same mission, which falls apart immediately as they return to their shuffling about and avoiding action at work. While depressing at first, Goodwin argues "the film's encompassing argument nonetheless sustains a

potential and promise for human change” (164).

Kurosawa frequently adapts Shakespeare’s plays into a Japanese environment to bring a different style to the storytelling, including later works such as *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), which is his unofficial *Hamlet*. His take on *MacBeth* is *Throne of Blood* (1957), set in feudal Japan with warlords and samurai instead of kings and nobles. Toshiro Mifune is featured as Washizu, the *MacBeth* character, destined to tragedy after being told a fortune by a monster in the woods. One major difference in this adaptation is the roles of *MacBeth* and his wife. In *Throne of Blood*, the *MacBeth* character is more hesitant to betray his master, while his wife is even more manipulating and evil than her theatrical counterpart. In fact, as she is convincing him to kill his sleeping master, a couple elements heighten this sense of evil. The first is when she walks down a hall and disappears into absolute blackness, only to reappear suddenly with a jar of drugged wine. Also, the sound of her gown against the floor as she shuffles off screen adds a disturbing suspense. This change of character is not out of place, as Galbraith believes the film “is more suggestive than adapted” (230). Even the monster in the woods is adapted from the three witches in the play, but brings a more traditional ghost story to the film to fit better in Japanese culture.

Kurosawa’s reputation allowed the film to be produced with a massive budget. The spider city is a huge, working castle that is filled with hundreds of soldier extras. When Washizu gives a speech to his army, a deep focus is used to show his face during delivery while simultaneously showing the entire group of soldiers below. The city itself is daunting. Its architecture is built for war, so you cannot see into the defensible positions. As Washizu approaches it for the first time, the camera looks at the archer positions, finding no evidence of greeting or impending doom.

The choice of weather for this film is a thick, crawling fog. Frequently, characters or scenery is hidden or revealed by thick fog. The spider castle is first revealed when a curtain of fog is blown away after a single shot is held long enough to try the audience’s patience. The final scene where Washizu is killed by his own men in an array of arrows, he falls into a bed of fog that consumes him. This scene was particularly exciting, as it displayed a sudden fall from glory. It was executed by using actual arrows, causing the lead considerable stress. “I’m not really acting at all,” Mifune has said, “And until I stopped him, Kurosawa wanted to use a bunch of amateur archers...just extras...to shoot the arrows!” (Galbraith 235).

Another atmospheric effect is demonstrated as Washizu and his friend chase through the forest. They stir up clouds of dust that further add to the confusion and suspense. The camera views them through the thick branches and

trees, as if a being such as the monster is watching them in secret. This adds to the mystery of the forest, and to the feeling of panic felt by the characters. In both the dust and the fog, there is always a slight breeze. This allows the dust to get kicked around even more and gives the fog the ability to hide and reveal elements as it flows, making a more dynamic scene.

After the success of his epic period pieces, such as *The Seven Samurai* and *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa created *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) to break expectations and mock imitators. Kurosawa is quoted as saying he wanted “to make a 100% entertainment film, full of thrills and fun” (Galbraith, 253). The story is simple, and the style mimics the sword-fight costume-pictures that plagued the theaters of Japan. Richie compares *The Seven Samurai* and *Throne of Blood* as critiques of standard period films being produced at the time, but “*The Hidden Fortress* takes the bigger step of beating it at its own game” (134). It had all of the elements of a popcorn flick: a pair of peasants caught in a struggle greater than themselves, a mysterious hermit, and a damsel in distress. Even the over-glorified happy ending plays on the genre.

Even while parodying the typical action film with elaborate sword fights and heroic characters, the film manages to show some interesting roles within the cast. The two farmers provide some comedy relief during the film, during their quarreling and constant greed. As they attempt to get away with gold or their lives, they are seen as evil characters due to their self concern. However, Mifune’s role as the princess’s guardian is also seen as evil for his inhuman sense of honor, allowing his sister to be killed to protect the princess. The Japanese title, “*Three Bad Men in a Hidden Fortress*,” even refers to this behavior.

The film is structured as an endless line of obstacles that the characters must overcome. This gave the film a simplistic presentation, which “juxtaposed with some breathtaking audiovisual composition and spectacles” (Yoshimoto 272). The process of creating such a combination was admitted by Kurosawa, saying, “Every morning I created a situation which allowed no escape for the general and the princess. Then the other three writers made desperate efforts finding a way out” (Galbraith 254). This provided entertainment, but lacked the substance of his other works.

These films were selected to show the strength of Akira Kurosawa in several types of film, with different settings and stories. This is only the start of his long career, ending finally with *Madadayo* (1993) before his death in 1998.

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