

Kurosawa Analysis

Personal Perspectives on Kurosawa-style Films

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My view of Akira Kurosawa, from both the movies I have seen and all I have learned about his life, is that he was an immensely dedicated man who led an interesting life, and without either of these qualities, Kurosawa films would be entirely different. While the imagery of his films can be applauded by many, the design of the script and the passion behind the camera are perhaps even more important, and by looking at Kurosawa's eventful life, many connections can be made between his success as a film master and various experiences throughout his life. Kurosawa's life, whether intentional or not, noticeably played a big role in his cinematic career and reveals itself in each of his movies.

A distinct thematic element in all of Kurosawa's films is a sense of reality. Kurosawa was clearly unafraid and willing to address different aspects of real life in all of his films, from class differences to family problems to nuclear fallout. In *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*, Kurosawa depicted the reality of corrupt people of power as a central part of the plot and how others were affected by the corruption. *The Hidden Fortress* showed the realities of war in the extreme number of dead bodies scattered around the premises, the strain of friendship in the greed of gold, and other cruelties of the era like slavery. The reality of practicing medicine was depicted in *Red Beard* in addition to the extreme humanity of the characters; from the village man revealing his past immediately before his death, to the old man who died in sadness, and the mentally unstable woman who was abused as a girl, they all exemplified real scenarios and people. Lastly, in *Dreams* Kurosawa depicts various elements of the real world as it is today and in the future, from the growing distance between people and nature seen in the final dream to the looming possibility of destruction caused by nuclear energy and natural disasters that is not commonly thought of but still exists in the back of our minds and in our subconscious. Kurosawa's ability to illustrate realism in his films is a powerful skill that was perhaps shaped by

events throughout his life, such as experiencing the Great Kanto Earthquake and witnessing the mistrust and gruesome reality caused by tragedy (p 50-53). Similarly, the Kurosawa also experienced the harsh realities of society while living with his brother in the low-cost housing where a woman would threaten suicide nightly and another brutally abused her step-child, who in turn didn't want to be rescued in fear of incurring further wrath (p 82-84). This familiarity with real life appears in Kurosawa's films through the natural essence of the story and characters felt in the audience as well as the fearless depiction of reality with no blinders.

However, Kurosawa films are not all "doom and gloom"—they are rounded out by an appreciation for the humor in life as well. It appears as if Akira Kurosawa had a healthy sense of humor, as seen in various childhood pranks including the purposeful sabotage of presentation before a military inspector in middle school (p 60). A sense of comedy in real life is also seen in the relationship and marriage of his wife, Yaguchi Yoko, which was primarily argumentative between herself as a representative of female actors and Kurosawa as the director, before marriage was suggested by a colleague and eventually agreed upon (p 138). Kurosawa explicitly speaks of his mischievousness in his application essay to Toho, where he gladly—and somewhat mockingly—described the inadequacies of Japanese cinema (p 89). This all-around humorous aspect of Kurosawa is also seen in his films' depictions of humor in life. *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro* both have comedic elements in how the main character presents his name as "Sanjuro; well, maybe it's closer to Yonjuro now," and the prank-like trick with the camellias in *Sanjuro*. The two commoners are full of humor in *The Hidden Fortress* and an entire essay could be written on their comedic relief throughout the film. While *Red Beard* had few funny scenes, the humor that the people were still able to find in their lives by teasing the nurse with a crush on one of the physicians. The inclusion of humor as a part of life increases the natural realism in the films.

Kurosawa's interesting life contributes to his skill at presenting a natural reflection of life and reality in his films, but more than that, there are specific events in his life that also contribute to specific essences and scenes in the films we viewed in class. Growing up in a "samurai-household" plus an interest and participation in kendo when young perhaps gave Kurosawa the talent for his most heavily acclaimed films—samurai films (p 20). An event in his childhood, where he stood up to some bullies using his kendo terminology is perhaps also a reflection of the heroic characters of his future films that use martial arts to stand up against oppressors, such as the lead in *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro* standing up to the corruption (p 29). Kurosawa's interest in art, ever since he was young, and his expressed interest in Vincent Van Gogh, is clearly seen in both the artistic nature of his filming and the Van Gogh sequence in *Dreams* (p 13, 71). The long and treasured mentor-pupil relationship between Kajiro Yamamoto and Kurosawa greatly influenced his career as far as technical skill and experience, but also in the inspiration of mentor-relationships within films such as *Red Beard*, where the pairing of Akahige and Yasumoto displays a fine example of the connection between mentor and apprentice (p. 100-101). Other connections to be made between Kurosawa's life and films include the experience of wilderness exploration and leadership in Akita Prefecture as a child where Kurosawa partook in various adventures with village boys collecting food and climbing up waterfalls, which can somewhat be seen in the character of Rokurouta in *The Hidden Fortress* where he is the leader of an epic adventure (p 64-67). Similarly, the story of the flowers on the rock in his father's hometown is directly mentioned in the last episode of *Dreams*, where the picturesque town honors a fallen man by placing flowers on the rock that marks his burial; the meaning had since been lost and required Kurosawa (and the actor in the film) to ask an elder of the village to explain it to him (p 63). Real-life events such as this lend an even more honest and open essence to Kurosawa films.

Through an analyzation of Akira Kurosawa's life, connections between his experiences and their reflections throughout his film career become evident. His dedication as a director made him into a film master and his interesting life granted his films an extra level of reality, life, and natural experience. It would be difficult to imagine Kurosawa films if he were a different man; for instance, would his samurai film have been as genuine if Kurosawa had not grown up in a "samurai-household" with an interest in kendo and childhood adventures in the woods? Would the dream sequences in *Dreams* have been as interesting or artistic if he did not have an eventful life or interest in the arts? Questions such as these are nearly unthinkable, but are also further evidence that Akira Kurosawa's life and dedication were a key contributing factor to his many film masterpieces. All of the Kurosawa films viewed in class can be considered masterpieces in both the Kurosawa-style and all of cinematic history.