

November 1, 2022 (XLV:10)

Akira Kurosawa: **RAN** (1985, 162 min)

URL for Introduction Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/765302346/>

URL for 7:00 Tuesday discussion zoom: <https://vimeo.com/748377120>



**Director:** Akira Kurosawa

**Writing:** Akira Kurosawa, Hideo Ohuni, and Masato Ide

**Producers:** Masato Hara, Serge Silberman, Katsumi Furukawa (executive producer), and Hisao Kurosawa (associate producer)

**Cinematography:** Asakazu Nakai, Takao Saitô, and Shôji Ueda

**Music:** Tôru Takemitsu

**Costume Design:** Emi Wada

**Production Design:** Yoshirô Muraki and Shinobu Muraki

Emi Wada's work for *Ran* won Best Costume Design at the 1986 Academy Awards, where the film was nominated for three other categories: Best Director (Akira Kurosawa), Best Cinematography (Takao Saitô, Shôji Ueda, and Asakazu Nakai), and Best Art Direction - Set Decoration (Yoshirô Muraki and Shinobu Muraki). The film was also nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Golden Globes. At the 1986 Awards of the Japanese Academy, it won Best Art Direction (Yoshirô Muraki and Shinobu Muraki) and Best Music Score (Tôru Takemitsu, whose work for two other 1985 films—*Himatsuri* and *Shokutaku no nai ie*—was also acknowledged), while producer Masata Hara was given a special award.

#### CAST

Tatsuya Nakadai...Lord Hidetora Ichimonji

Akira Terao...Taro Takatora Ichimonji



Jinpachi Nezu...Jiro Masatora Ichimonji

Daisuke Ryû...Saburo Naotora Ichimonji

Mieko Harada...Lady Kaede

Yoshiko Miyazaki...Lady Sue

Hisashi Igawa...Shuri Kurogane

Pîtâ...Kyoami (as Peter)

Masayuki Yui...Tango Hirayama

Kazuo Katô...Kageyu Ikoma

Norio Matsui...Shumenosuke Ogura

Toshiya Ito...Mondo Naganuma

Kenji Kodama...Samon Shirane

Takashi Watanabe...Fujimaki Clan general

Mansai Nomura...Tsurumaru (as Takeshi Nomura)

Takeshi Katô...Koyata Hatakeyama

Jun Tazaki...Seiji Ayabe

Hitoshi Ueki...Nobuhiro Fujimaki

**AKIRA KUROSAWA** (b. March 23, 1910 in Tokyo, Japan—d. September 6, 1998, age 88, in Setagaya, Tokyo, Japan) initially trained as a painter (he storyboards his films as full-scale paintings). Kurosawa then entered the film industry in 1936 as an assistant director, eventually making his directorial debut with *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943). After working in a wide range of genres, Kurosawa made his international breakthrough film *Rashomon* (1950), which won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival and expressed the richness of Japanese cinema to the West. The next few years saw the low-key, touching *Ikiru* (1952), the epic *Seven Samurai* (1954), the barbaric, riveting Shakespeare adaptation *Throne of Blood* (1957), and a fun pair of samurai comedies *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962). After a lean period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kurosawa attempted suicide. He survived and made a small, personal, low-budget picture with *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), a larger-scale Russian co-production *Dersu Uzala* (1975) and, with the help of admirers Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, the samurai tale *Kagemusha* (1980), which Kurosawa described as a dry run for *Ran* (1985), an epic adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. His films are frequently copied and remade by American and European filmmakers. Several of his films have been remade in America as westerns. For instance, *Seven Samurai* (1954) was remade as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), and *Yojimbo* (1961) ("The Bodyguard") was remade as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). In addition, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) was a major inspiration for the *Star Wars* saga, which takes many inspirations from westerns and is often referred to as a space western. He was voted the 6th greatest director of all time by *Entertainment Weekly*, making him one among only two Asians, along with Satyajit Ray (who is ranked in 25th position), on a list of 50 directors, and the highest ranking non-American. He was nominated for an Oscar for Best Director in 1986 for *Ran* (1985), and in 1990 the Academy gave him an Honorary Award for cinematic accomplishments that have inspired,



delighted, enriched and entertained worldwide audiences as well as influenced filmmakers throughout the world. His directorial work includes *Madadayo* (1993), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), *Dreams* (1990), *Ran* (1985), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Dersu Uzala* (1975), *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), *Song of the Horse* (1970, TV Movie documentary), *Red Beard* (1965), *High and Low* (1963), *Sanjuro* (1962), *Yojimbo* (1961), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Donzoko* (1957), *Throne of Blood* (1957), *I Live in Fear* (1955), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Ikiru* (1952), *Hakuchi* (1951), *Rashomon* (1950), *Shûbun* (1950), *Stray Dog* (1949), *The Quiet Duel* (1949), *Drunken Angel* (1948), *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947), *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), *Asu o tsukuru hitobito* (1946), *Tora no o wo fumu otokotachi* (1945), *Zoku Sugata Sanshirô* (1945), *Ichiban utsukushiku* (1944), *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), and *Uma* (1941, some scenes, uncredited). He has also

written for 73 films, some of which are *Last Man Standing* (1996, story), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), *Dreams* (1990, written by), *Runaway Train* (1985, based on a screenplay by), *Ran* (1985, screenplay), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Dersu Uzala* (1975, screenplay), *Dodes'ka-den* (1970, screenplay), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970, Japanese sequences - uncredited), *Red Beard* (1965, screenplay), *The Outrage* (1964, screenplay "Rashomon"), *High and Low* (1963, screenplay), *Sanjuro* (1962, screenplay), *Yojimbo* (1961, screenplay & story), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960, screenplay "Shichinin no samurai" - uncredited), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960, written by), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958, written by), *Throne of Blood* (1957, screenplay), *Seven Samurai* (1954, screenplay), *Rashomon* (1950, screenplay), *Stray Dog* (1949, writer) and *Drunken Angel* (1948, written by).

**TÔRU TAKEMITSU** (b. October 8, 1930 in Tokyo, Japan—d. February 20, 1996, age 65, in Tokyo, Japan) was one of the most important Japanese composers of the 20th century. He composed several hundred independent works of music, scored more than one hundred films, and published several books. He was an



early adopter of *musique concrète*; in 1948—the same year Pierre Schaeffer coined the term, three years before the founding of the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète in the French Radio Institution—Takemitsu had an epiphany on a crowded subway, suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to transport “noise into the realm of organized music,” echoing earlier pronouncements and innovations by French-American composer Edgar Varèse. He was a founding member of the Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop) in Japan, a group of avant-garde artists who distanced themselves from academia and whose collaborative work is often regarded among the most influential of their time. His 1957 *Requiem* for string orchestra attracted international attention, led to several commissions from across the world, and established his reputation as one of the leading 20th-century Japanese composers. The Zen-driven work of American experimental composer John Cage made a “deep impression” on Takemitsu from the 1960s onward, leading not only to his use of indeterminacy and graphic scores, but also to a renewed appreciation for traditional Japanese music, which he would increasingly integrate into his compositions in subsequent decades. He writes of this impact: “I must express my deep and sincere gratitude to John Cage. The reason for this is that in my own life, in my own development, for a long period I struggled to avoid being ‘Japanese,’ to avoid ‘Japanese’ qualities. It was largely through my contact with John Cage that I came to recognize the value of my own tradition.” He was a film fanatic, claiming to watch roughly 300 films per year—naturally, he was a prolific film composer. For the first battle scene of Kurosawa's *Ran*, he provided an extended passage of intense elegiac quality that halts at the sound of a single gunshot, contributing a silence that leaves the audience with the pure “sounds of battle: cries, screams and neighing horses”; just as with Cage, silence was perhaps his music and thought's greatest theme. Some of his film scores include *Sharaku* (1995), *Rising Sun* (1993), *The Inland Sea* (1991), *Black Rain* (1989), *Wuthering Heights* (1988), *Ran* (1985), *Tokyo Trial* (1983, Documentary), *Empire of Passion* (1978), *The*



*Petrified Forest* (1973), *Silence* (1971), *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), *Double Suicide* (1969), *Samurai Rebellion* (1967), *Samurai Spy* (1965), *Kwaidan* (1964), *Pale Flower* (1964), *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), *Wonderful Bad Woman* (1963) and *Harakiri* (1962). He was the recipient of numerous awards and honors, and the Tōru Takemitsu Composition Award is named after him.

**ASAKAZU NAKAI** (b. August 29, 1901 in Kobe, Japan—d. February 28, 1988, age 86) was a [Japanese cinematographer](#) who worked several times with filmmaker [Akira Kurosawa](#). He was nominated for the [Academy Award for Best Cinematography](#) for his work in the film [Ran](#) (1985) along with

Takao Saitō and Shōji Ueda. In 1950 he won the award for Best Cinematography at the [Mainichi Film Concours](#) for [Stray Dog](#) (1949). He worked on 95 films, spanning over fifty years, some of which are *Love and Separation in Sri Lanka* (1976), *Dersu Uzala* (1975), *Bravo, Young Guy* (1970), *The Night of the Seagull* (1968), *Red Beard* (1965), *High and Low* (1963), *The Blue Beast* (1960), *Throne of Blood* (1957), *I Live in Fear* (1955), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Ikiru* (1952), *Stray Dog* (1949), *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947), *Four Love Stories* (1947), *Battle Troop* (1944), *The Song Lantern* (1943), *The Imaginary Ghetto* (1939), *Kiri no yo no hodō* (1933) and *Qingdao kara kita onna* (1933).

**TAKAO SAITÔ** (b. March 5, 1929 in Kyoto, Japan—d. December 6, 2014, age 85, in Zama, Kanagawa, Japan) worked on 29 films, a selection of which includes *Rainbow Bridge* (1993), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), *Dreams* (1990), *Oracion* (1988), *Ran* (1985), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Mitsuyaku: Gaimushō kimitsu rôei jiken* (1978), *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), *Red Lion* (1969), *Bullet Wound* (1969), *The Killing Bottle* (1967), *Red Beard* (1965), *The Lost World of Sinbad* (1963), *500,000* (1963), *High and Low* (1963), *Attack Squadron!* (1963), and *Sanjuro* (1962).

**SHÔJI UEDA** (b. January 1, 1938 in Funabashi, Chiba, Japan) is a cinematographer known for his work on *Ran* (1985), *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Dreams* (1990),

not to be confused with the photographer of the same name. He was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Cinematography for his work in tonight's film. He has worked on 27 films, a handful of which include *A Samurai Chronicle* (2014), *Best Wishes for Tomorrow* (2007), *For Those We Love* (2007), *The Professor and His Beloved Equation* (2006), *After the Rain* (1999), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), *The Bushido Blade* (1981), *The Last Dinosaur* (1977), *Horror of the Wolf* (1973) and *Damasarete moraimasu* (1971).

**TATSUYA NAKADAI** (b. December 13, 1932 in Tokyo, Japan [some sources say 1930]) is one of a handful of Japanese actors known outside Japan. He played characters of a very different age from his own through his career. In *Harakiri* (1962), he played a samurai in his 50s while he was 33. In *Kwaidan* (1964), he played an 18-year-old woodcutter when he himself was 36. In *Ran* (1985) he played a nearly 80-year-old warlord when he was 56. Fun trivia fact: His beard caught fire during the apocalyptic castle-burning scene in *Ran* (1985). Additionally, while filming his first appearance on film as an extra on *Seven*

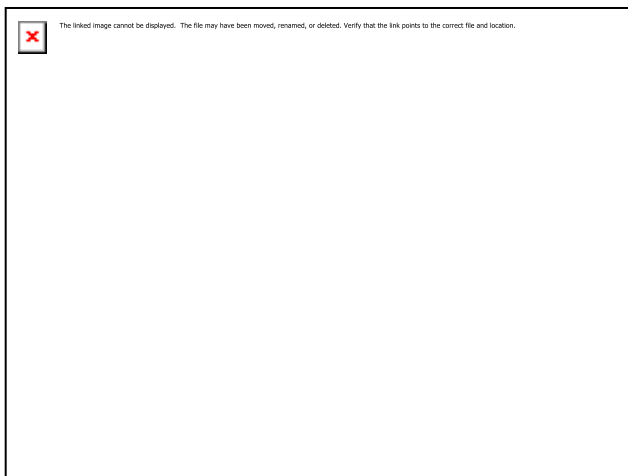
*Samurai* (1954), Kurosawa spent more than 5 minutes lecturing him on how to walk correctly as a wandering samurai for an appearance that totals about 4 seconds in duration. Perhaps this cemented the young actor's resolve, as he often is noted for performing his own samurai stunts. During the filming of *Harakiri* (1962), real, sharp samurai swords were used in the battle scenes (according to Nakadai, this is not his only samurai film where real swords were used but is the only one where absolutely no dull, stage swords were utilized), much to Nakadai's very reasonable concern, since a mistimed slash could have been fatal for him or the other actors. Amazingly, no one was seriously injured during filming. Nakadai has acted in 172 films and television shows, some of which include *The Pass: Last Days of the Samurai* (2020), *The Return* (TV Movie, 2019), *A Town and a Tall Chimney* (2019), *Lear on the Shore* (2017), [Cold Case: Shinjitsu No Tobira](#) (TV Miniseries, 2016), *Burst* (2015, TV

Miniseries), *Giovanni's Island* (2014), *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013), *The Human Trust* (2013), *Japan's Tragedy* (2012), *Zatoichi: The Last Samurai* (2010), *Haru's Journey* (2010), *Listen to My Heart* (2009), *Vengeance for Sale* (2001), *Spellbound* (1999), *After the Rain* (1999), *East Meets West* (1995), *Kozure Ôkami: Sono chisaki te ni* (1993), *Summer of the Moonlight Sonata* (1993), *Wicked City* (1992), *Four Days of Snow and Blood* (1989), *Return from the River Kwai* (1989), *Ran* (1985), *Willful Murder* (1981), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Hunter in the Dark* (1979), *Blue Christmas* (1978), *Queen Bee* (1978), *I Am a Cat* (1975), *The Family* (1974), *Rise, Fair Sun* (1973), *The Human Revolution* (1973), *Belladonna of Sadness* (1973), *The Wolves* (1971), *Will to Conquer* (1970), *Zatoichi Goes to the Fire Festival* (1970), *The Human*

*Bullet* (1968), *Today We Kill, Tomorrow We Die!* (1968), *Samurai Rebellion* (1967), *The Face of Another* (1966), *The Sword of Doom* (1966), *Kwaidan* (1964), *A Woman's Life* (1963), *500,000* (1963), *High and Low* (1963), *Harakiri* (1962), *The Inheritance* (1962), *Sanjuro* (1962), *Immortal Love* (1961), *Yojimbo* (1961), *The Human Condition III: A Soldier's Prayer* (1961), *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1960), *The Human*

*Condition II: Road to Eternity* (1959), *The Human Condition I: No Greater Love* (1959), *Naked Sun* (1958), *Conflagration* (1958), *A Boy and Three Mothers* (1958), *Black River* (1957), *Untamed Woman* (1957), *Hi no tori* (1956) and *Seven Samurai* (1954).

**AKIRA TERAOKA** (b. May 18, 1947 in Kanagawa, Japan) is the son of famous actor Jukichi Uno. After graduating from Bunka Gakuin University, he formed a rock band, The Savage, which experienced brief success thanks to their hit "Itsumademo, Itsumademo." In 1967, Kei Kuma hired him to play alongside his father in his film *Tunnel of Kurobe*. While a chance meeting with Kurosawa opened up new acting roles, including two in the director's oeuvre, *Ran* (1985) and *Dreams* (1990), Teraoka continues to write and sing songs, and his song "Ruby no Yubiwa" was awarded the Record Taisho Prize for 1986. He also regularly works in television, notably for Ishihara TV



Productions. He has acted in 62 projects, including *Fragments of the Last Will* (2022), *The Greatest Gift of Life* (2021), *Special Investigation Nine* (TV Series, 2018-2019), *The Big White Tower* (TV Miniseries, 2019), *Rikuô* (TV Miniseries, 2017), *Aogeba Tôtoshi* (TV Miniseries, 2016), *The Noisy Street, the Silent Sea* (TV Movie, 2016), *Nobunaga moyu* (TV Movie, 2016), *Yôkoso, Wagaya e* (2015, TV Miniseries.), *Nobunaga moyu* (TV Movie, 2016), *The Hovering Blade* (2009), *Change* (TV Series, 2008), *The Professor and His Beloved Equation* (2006), *Aegis* (2005), *Into the Sun* (2005), *Casshern* (2004), *Half a Confession* (2004), *Kokoro* (2003, TV Series), *Letter from the Mountain* (2002), *Tokyo Marigold* (2001), *Darkness in the Light* (2001), *After the Rain* (1999), *Cat's Eye* (1997), *Lost Paradise* (1997), *Hiroshima* (1995, TV Movie), *Dangerous Women* (1985), *Tora-san's Sunrise and Sunset* (1976), *The Village* (1976) and *The Sands of Kurobe* (1968).

**JINPACHI NEZU** (b. December 1, 1947 in Yamanashi, Japan—d. December 29th, 2016, age 69, in Tokyo, Japan) appeared in 67 films and television shows, including *Gonin Saga* (2015), *Runin: Banished* (2004), *Dragon Head* (2003), *The Man in White* (2003), *The Man in White Part 2: Requiem for the Lion* (2003), *Owls' Castle* (1999), *Spellbound* (1999), *Nobody* (1999), *Black Angel Vol. 1* (1998), *Love Letter* (1998), *The Five* (1995), *Alone in the Night* (1994), *Angel Guts 6: Red Flash* (1994), *A Night in Nude* (1993), *Tasmania Story* (1990), *Raffles Hotel* (1989), *Four Days of Snow and Blood* (1989), *Carmen 1945* (1988), *This Story of Love* (1987), *Angel's Egg* (1985), *Ran* (1985), *The Kidnap Blues* (1982), *Farewell to the Land* (1982), *Station* (1981), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Zatôichi monogatari* (1978-1979, TV Series) and *Nureta sai no me* (1974). In 2005, he retired from acting full-time after a car accident and muscle-related disease.

**DAISUKE RYÛ** (b. February 14, 1957 in Tokyo, Japan—d. April 11th, 2021, age 64) was a Japanese actor of Korean descent. In 1981, he won the Japanese Blue Ribbon Award for Best New Actor for his performance as the great warlord Oda Nobunaga in Akira Kurosawa's movie *Kagemusha* (The Shadow Warrior). Other notable performances include Saburo Ichimonji in tonight's epic, *Ran*, and the legendary yamabushi Benkei in Sogo Ishii's critically acclaimed

*Gojoe: Spirit War Chronicle* (2000). In addition to these films, Ryû has appeared in 65 films and television shows including *Keishichô sôsa ikka kyû gakari* (TV Series, 2014), *The Last Message* (2012), *Boss* (TV Series, 2011), *A Lone Scalpel* (2010), *Ultraman* (2004), *Graveyard of Honor* (2002), *Another Battle/Conspiracy* (2002), *Agitator* (2001), *Metropolis* (2001), *Zero Woman Returns* (1999), *After the Rain* (1999), *Bayside Shakedown* (1998), *Woman in Witness Protection* (1997), *Legend of the Devil* (1996), *Four Days of Snow and Blood* (1989), *Lake of Illusions* (1982), *Willful Murder* (1981), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Twelve Months* (1980), *Hunter in the Dark* (1979) and *Kumokiri Nizaemon* (1978).

**YOSHIKO MIYAZAKI** (b. December 11, 1958 in Kumamoto, Japan) shot to fame in Japan when, as a college student, she appeared in a 1980 commercial for the Minolta X-7 SLR camera, in which she took off her jeans to reveal a bikini. Best known for roles in *Ran* (1985), *After the Rain* (1999) and *Shutter* (2008), Miyazaki has appeared in over 112 films and TV shows, with a strong emphasis on television in recent years. Some films and programs she has appeared in include *Pink and Gray* (2015), *Platinum Age* (TV Miniseries, 2015), *Keiji Yoshinaga Seiichi namida no jikenbo* (2014, TV Mini-Series), *Osoroshi ~ Mishimaya Henchô Hyakumonogatari Kotohajime* (TV Miniseries, 2014), *Kuu neru futari sumu futari* (TV Miniseries, 2014), *The Day Before* (TV Miniseries, 2014), *Crying 100 Times: Every Raindrop Falls* (2013), *Cheap Flight!!* (TV Movie, 2013), *Dr. Kenji Morohashi* (TV Movie, 2012), *Welcome Home, Hayabusa* (2012), *Our Homeland* (2012), *Life Back Then* (2011), *Beat* (TV Movie, 2011), *The Lightning Tree* (2010), *Railways* (2010), *Un-Nan: The Legend of the Eight-Headed Serpent* (2008), *Innocent Love* (2008, TV Series), *Time Lost, Time Found* (2008), *Child by Children* (2008), *Detroit Metal City* (2008), *Your Friend* (2008), *Custom Made 10.30* (2005), *Snowy Love Fall in Spring* (2005), *Nana* (2005), *My Grandpa* (2003), *Bloom in the Moonlight* (1993), *Tasmania Story* (1990), and *Hamuretto wa yukue fumei* (TV Movie, 1981).





**from World Film Directors Vol. I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987. Entry by David Williams.**

Akira Kurosawa (March 23, 1910-September 5, 1998), Japanese director and screenwriter, was born in the Omori district of Tokyo. His father, Yutaka Kurosawa, a native of Akita Prefecture and of samurai descent, was an army officer who became a teacher and administrator of physical education. A graduate of the Toyama Imperial Military Academy, he earned a moderate income at the Ebara Middle School, famous for its spartan program. The director's mother, whom he has described as a self-sacrificing realist—'a typical woman of the Meiji era'—came from an Osaka merchant family. Akira was the last of the couple's children, following four sisters and three brothers. The oldest sister had already left home and married by the time Kurosawa was born, and the oldest brother left while he was still a child. The second brother had died before Kurosawa was born, so that Akira grew up with three sisters and the one elder brother who was later to be a great influence in his life. The youngest of the sisters, to whom Kurosawa was closest, died at the age of sixteen while he was in the fourth grade.

Kurosawa characterizes himself in childhood as at first backward at school and physically weak, to the disappointment of his father. In spite of that weakness, he soon came to share his father's enthusiasm for

physical challenge, developing a lifelong interest in sports, especially baseball, and an attitude of "single-minded devotion to a discipline." As a child of ten he practiced *kendo*, traditional Japanese swordsmanship, and "assumed all the affectations of a boy fencer." His father's influence extended in another significant direction. In a time when films were considered frivolous entertainment, Yutaka Kurosawa insisted on their educational value, and took his whole family regularly to the movies as well as to traditional storytellers in the music-halls around Kagurazaka. ...

The great Kanto earthquake of 1923 occurred during Kurosawa's second year at the Keika Middle School. His brother took him on "an expedition to conquer fear," forcing him to look at scenes of horrifying destruction. ...He expressed the wish to become a painter. Despite the family's declining fortunes, his father did not object, but insisted that he go to art school...

Kurosawa found it hard to give his mind to his artistic career during the Depression. His family could not afford to buy the materials he needed, and the distractions of those disturbed times were many. He explored literature, especially the works of Dostoevsky and Gorki; he went to the theatre; he listened to classical music; he became fascinated by movies. In this last he was guided by his brother, who wrote program notes for movie theatres and took part in shows himself as a *benshi*, a professional

commentator, specializing in foreign films. Kurosawa was later to list nearly a hundred films that particularly impressed him in the years up to 1929. The list is mainly composed of films from Russia and the West, and includes most of the great names from *Caligari* to Chaplin. In 1929 Kurosawa joined the Proletarian Artists' League,

not so much from a commitment to Marxism as out of a fashionable interest in all new movements...He left home at this time, ostensibly to live with his brother, but actually moving between various rented rooms and the homes of Communist friends.

Increasingly disillusioned with the political movement and with his painting, Kurosawa left the



League in the spring of 1932 and went to share the bohemian life of his brother, who lived, to the disapproval of the family, with a woman in the tenement district of Kagurazaka. The movie-going continued, of course, but now came the first of the talkies that would mean the end of Heigo's career. The *benshi* was no longer required for sound films, and the strike organized to persuade the studios to resist the change was doomed to fail. Heigo found himself a leader of the strike, and it was this painful role above all that led, in Kurosawa's view, to his brother's suicide attempt. Kurosawa tried to reconcile Heigo to the family by arranging his marriage to the woman he lived with, but in 1933, at the age of twenty-seven, Heigo's second suicide attempt succeeded. The effect on Kurosawa was profound, and he came to describe the brother, whom he saw as a more pessimistic version of himself, "as a negative strip of film that led to my own development as a positive image."

Kurosawa had by this time lost faith in his talent as a painter. He felt himself too easily influenced by the vision of whatever artist he was studying. "In other words, I did not—and still don't—have a completely, personal, distinctive way of looking at things....Kurosawa answered a newspaper advertisement put out by the newly established PCL (Photo Chemical Laboratory, later to become Toho Motion Picture Company)....Out of more than five hundred applicants, over one hundred and thirty were selected on the basis of the essay, but only seven passed the next test, which involved writing a scenario from a newspaper story. Kurosawa was one of the five who came through the final interview, having already established a rapport with Kajiro Yamamoto, whom he impressed with his knowledge of the visual arts. Kurosawa joined PCL in 1936, when the company was only two years old, a vigorous, open-minded organization that encouraged experiment and trained its assistant directors by giving them every job in the production process. After an uneasy

start, Kurosawa joined the group led by director Yamamoto, in whom he discovered "the best teacher of my entire life."

...Kurosawa now began to win prizes from the Ministry of Education for his filmscripts...Kurosawa resigned himself for a time to turning out formulaic scripts and drinking up the proceeds, usually in the company of his old friend Uekusa, who had come to Tokyo as an extra and stayed on to write scripts himself. The drinking led to a preulcerative stomach condition, which Kurosawa attempted to treat by making strenuous trips into the mountains. One day he saw an advertisement for a new novel, *Sugata Sanshiro*, by Tsuneo Tomita. Reading through the summary of the story, he knew instinctively that here was the subject for a film that would not only be acceptable to the censors but ideal for himself to direct...

*Sanshiro Sugata* (the Western order for the name) is a Meiji period story about the origins of judo, tracing the rise of one of its first practitioners. The film was made in accordance with national policy dictated by the Information Bureau. Since the film's content was thus restricted, Kurosawa took the opportunity to concern himself with its form. At a time when the received idea was that a Japanese film should be as simple as possible, "I disagreed and got away with disagreeing—that much I could say." Several critics remark how many of the characteristic features of Kurosawa's style are already apparent here. Richie points to the kind of story (a young man's education), to the tendency to "cyclic form," to the interest in how

things are done (in this case the method of judo itself), and to "the extraordinary economy of the way in which he shows his story." Already Kurosawa is making use of his favorite punctuation device, the wipe, between scenes....

Kurosawa's next film, *Ichiban utsukishiku* (*The Most Beautiful*, 1943),

belongs to a cycle of "national policy" projects





designed to encourage increased industrial production. Unusually for him its subject is women...The style of *The Most Beautiful*, according to Ritchie, was influenced by German and Russian documentary, but he notes also the beginnings of a number of techniques not especially associated with documentary, that Kurosawa was to develop later as his own, such as the “short-cut” for narrative transitions, and a “peculiarly personal use of the flashback.”...

On February 15, 1945, the month *Sanshiro Sugata Part II* was released, Kurosawa married the star of *The Most Beautiful*, Yoko Taguchi (whose real name was Kato Kiyo), at the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, with Yamamoto and his wife as matchmakers. They were at first very poor, his salary being less than a third of what his wife’s had been as an actress. Their son Jisao was born in December of the same year; a daughter, Kuzuko, was born in 1954. As Japan’s defeat in the war approached, Kurosawa wrote a script for a film called *Dokkoi kono yari* (*The Lifted Spear*), but it was abandoned in the pre-production stage because of a shortage of horses. This led to the hastily assembled production of *Tora no o fumu otokotachi* (*They Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail*), during which Japan surrendered. Kurosawa clashed angrily over this film with the Japanese censors, who had remained at their post even after the government collapsed. They pronounced it an insult to Japanese traditions. The American censors who succeeded them also banned the film, some say for its feudalism, but according to Kurosawa because the Japanese had failed to submit it for approval....American soldiers were in the habit of visiting the set during production, among them on one occasion John Ford, who left a message which Kurosawa never received. He only learned of the visit when the two met at last in London years later....

Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, 1950, was a landmark, not only in his own career but also in the history of Japanese cinema and its relation to the cinema of the West....

Kurosawa has acquired the reputation among his collaborators of being, as his production chief Hiroshi Nezu said, “the best editor in the world.” He sees editing as the most important phase of production, giving life to the film, while

pointing out that nothing can rescue a bad script. His method is unusual. Instead of shooting scenes in random order of convenience, he prefers to shoot chronologically, following the script, as far as possible, scene by scene. He then edits the rushes when each day’s shooting is over, so that he can maintain the involvement of his crew in the film’s progress, and so that “I have only the fine cut to complete when the shooting is finished.”...

Once Mizoguchi’s new films began to appear, from 1952 on, he and Kurosawa became the opposite poles in critical debates among French New Wave critics, generally to the detriment of Kurosawa. But *Rashomon*’s influence was wide: Robbe-Grillet declared it had inspired *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and Bergman called his own *Virgin Spring* (1959) “a pale imitation.” The Japanese were equally confused by *Rashomon*’s foreign success, suspecting uneasily that the film appealed in the West because it was “exotic,” or alternatively because it was “Western.” At any rate, according to Kurosawa, Toho were still reluctant to send his next film *Ikiru*, abroad, for fear of its not being understood; this although it was an immediate popular and critical success at home, was placed first on the *Kinema Jumbo* list for 1952, given the Mainichi Film Concours award for best picture and best screenplay, and awarded a Ministry of Education prize. When the film was finally shown abroad, it was very well received, and at a 1961 Kurosawa retrospective in Berlin, it was awarded the David O. Selznick Golden Laurel.

*Ikiru* (*Living*) tells the story of Watanabe, a minor official in the city administration, widowed and alienated from his married son. He learns that he is suffering from cancer and has only six months to live. ...The film is full of changes of tone and mood, as well as of narrative and visual method. It begins with an x-ray picture of Watanabe’s stomach and the narrating voice tells us about his cancer....

Ritchie calls the theme existentialist, comparing

Dostoevsky and quoting with approval Richard Brown: “It consists of a restrained affirmation within the context of a giant negation.” It is clearly possible in interpretation to emphasize one strand more than





another in the structure of this very various film. Burch, in considering it “Kurosawa’s first full-blown masterwork and the most perfect statement of his dramatic geometry,” also finds it “somewhat marred by its complicity with the reformist ideology dominant in that period.” ...Kurosawa saw himself reaching “a certain maturity” in this film, which he felt was the culmination of the “researches” he had carried out since the war; nevertheless the film left him dissatisfied, and it contains blunders that still embarrassed him when interviewed in 1966 by *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Asked if he considered himself a realist or a romantic, he replied, “I am a sentimentalist.”

Kurosawa collaborated on the script for *Ikiru* with two other writers, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni. Since the earliest films he had preferred not to write alone, because of the danger of one-sidedness in interpreting a character, for a character is usually the starting point. The process of writing Kurosawa describes as “a real competition.” The team retires to a hotel or a house isolated from distractions. Then, sitting around one table, each one writes, then takes and rewrites the others; work. “Then we talk about it and decide what to use.” Although he finds scriptwriting the hardest part of his work, he lays great emphasis on its importance. It is the first stage in an essentially collaborative process, of which the next is the careful rehearsal with the cast before any filming takes place. The scripts are often written with particular actors in mind. “We don’t just rehearse the actors, but every part of every scene—the camera movements, the lighting, everything.”...

On January 29, 1959, Kurosawa gave his first press interview and announced the formation of his own company, Kurosawa Productions. Toho was to put up one million yen in an agreement requiring three films over two years, with profits and losses to be shared equally with Kurosawa. It was the first independent company headed by a working director in the history of Japanese cinema....

The story of *Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low*, 1963) is based on an Ed McBain detective story called *King’s Ransom*. The son of Gondo, production head of a shoe

company (Toshiro Mifune), has apparently been kidnapped and a ransom is demanded. when it turns out that the son of Gondo’s chauffeur has been taken by mistake, Gondo must decide whether he will still pay the ransom—to do so would ruin him and allow his rivals to take over the company. Agreeing to pay, he is instructed to throw a briefcase containing the money from a high-speed train. we then learn the identity of the kidnapper; Takeuchi, a poor medical student, provoked by the sight of Gondo’s ostentatious house on a hill overlooking the Yokohama slums where he himself struggles to live. As the police close in, Takeuchi (also a pusher of heroin) kills his accomplices. He is finally captured, and Gondo visits him in prison. The first part of the film (65 minutes of 143) takes place entirely in Gondo’s hilltop house, the action restricted to phone calls and conversations, filmed in long takes shot with several cameras. Three identical sets were built to represent the scene at different times of day, according to Richie; cameras followed the actors movements closely but were positioned outside the set itself. “The effect is one of complete freedom within a very constricted area,” and the camerawork makes the hour-long sequence seem much shorter. It also provides a context for the explosive action that follows, the four-minute sequence on the speeding train. The rest of the narrative is full of incidents, sights and sounds, punctuated by the famous moment when red smoke, in color on the black-and-white screen, appears from a chimney to reveal the location of the discarded briefcase, after which the action accelerates for the final chase. This bold two-part structure is seen by Burch as another outstanding example of Kurosawa’s distinctive “dramatic geometry.” Richie sees it as marking two areas of thematic interest, the first emotionally involving, the second intellectual. Joan Mellen considers it fortunate that the “rather obvious moral dilemma” of the first part is replaced by the “much more interesting treatment of the personality of the kidnapper.” The

second part, after the train sequence, begins by deliberately destroying the pattern of suspense, revealing the kidnapper in his miserable daily existence. For Mellen, this part, with its descent



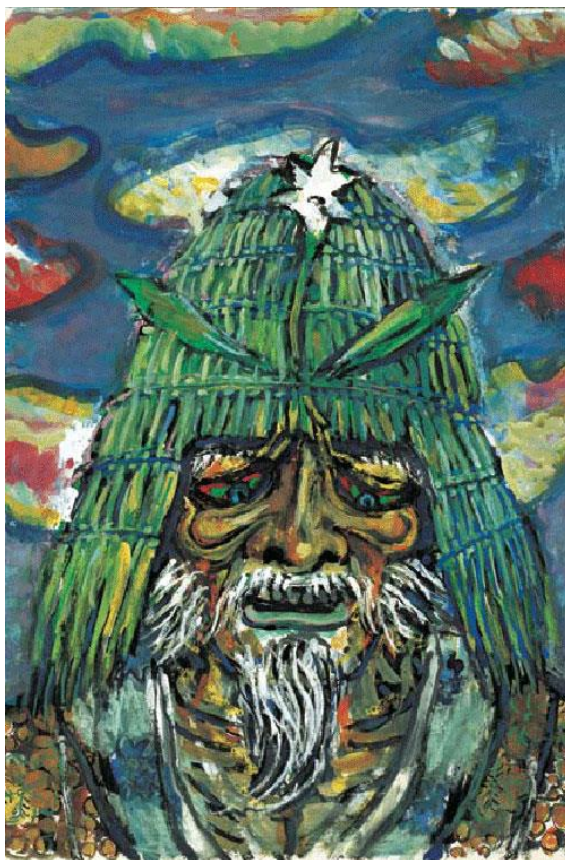
into the slums and its satirical presentation of police and press, “comes close to developing into one of the finest critiques of the inequitable class structure of Japan ever offered in a Japanese film.” She answers Tadao Sat’s objection that a man destined to become a doctor would never have risked his future as Takeuchi does, by reading it as a deliberate irony confirming “the depth of Kurosawa’s social vision.” In the final confrontation, which Richie reads as Dostoevskian, the faces of Gondo and the kidnapper begin to merge with each other’s reflections in the glass screen dividing them, indicating their underlying identity. *High and Low* placed second on the *Kinema Jumbo* list and received the Mainichi Concours award for best picture and screenplay. Some French critics, however, saw it as Kurosawa’s worst picture. Informed of this, Kurosawa wondered if they had not liked it because of the Americanness of Gondo’s style of life—something he had to show, since it is a part of real Japanese society.

...In the five years before his next production, [after *Akahige/Red Beard*], Kurosawa was involved in a number of unhappy projects. Japanese companies refused him support, so he sought financing in the United States. When bad weather postponed shooting in Rochester, New York, of a script called *The Runaway Train*, Fox invited Kurosawa to direct the Japanese sequences of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* After a few weeks shooting, bitter disagreements with the studio ended with Fox claiming that Kurosawa had resigned because of bad health (meaning mental health), and Kurosawa insisting that he had been misled (for instance, about the other director supposed to work with him—he had been promised David Lean) and then dismissed against his will.

Disillusioned, Kurosawa returned to Japan, where an independent company was formed, called *Yonki no Kai* (The Four Musketeers), consisting of Kurosawa, Kinshita, Kon Ichikawa, and Masaki Kobayashi. It was an

attempt to reassert the power and independence of the director in what Kurosawa has referred to as the Dark Ages of Japanese cinema. Kurosawa’s first venture for the company was *Dodes’kaden* (1970), his first picture in color....Kurosawa next made a television documentary, *Uma no uta* (*The Song of the Horse*). Then, on December 22, 1971, a housemaid found him lying in his half-filled bath, wounded with twenty-two slashes on his neck, arms, and hands. He had attempted suicide. Joan Mellen has discussed this attempt in the context of Japanese attitudes toward death and suicide; Kurosawa himself spoke of neurosis, low spirits, and the realization (after an operation for a severe case of gallstones) that he had been in pain for years. His eyesight too had begun to fail. “Letters and telegrams came from all over the world; there were offers from children to help finance my films. I realized I had committed a terrible error.” His spirits were fully restored by an offer in 1972 from the Soviet Union to direct a subject of his choice. Kurosawa chose to write a script based on the writing of Vladimir Arseniev, which he had read in the 1940s. Arseniev was a Russian soldier who, while mapping the Russian-Manchurian border in the early 1900s, formed a friendship with Dersu Uzala, an old hunter who served as a guide for him and his party...

*Dersu Uzala* took almost four years to complete, two of which were spent filming in the Siberian winter. It was shot in 70-mm with six-track stereophonic sound....*Dersu Uzala* was given the American Academy Award for best foreign picture, a Federation of International Film Critics Award, a Gold Medal at the Ninth Moscow Festival, and in Italy in 1977 the Donatello Prize. In 1976 Kurosawa was given by the Japanese government the highest-ranking cultural award of Order of the Sacred Treasure, designating him a Person of Cultural Merits, the first such in his profession; and in 1978 he received an award for “Humanistic Contribution to Society in Film Production” from the European Film Academy.





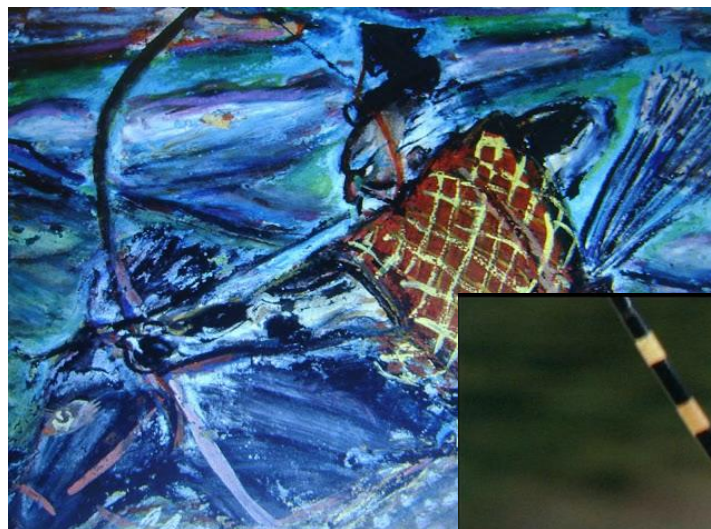
Another five years went by before Kurosawa made his next film. He worked on the script for *Ran*, his Japanese *King Lear*, and on a project based on Edgar Allen Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." With Masato Ide he wrote the script that was to become *Kagemusha*. But although this was a film that had to be shot in Japan, no Japanese company was willing to risk money unless it was assured of large returns. Meanwhile Kurosawa produced hundreds of colorful drawings planning every detail of a film that might never be seen. To supplement his own finances he even appeared in whiskey commercials. Since his recovery in 1972, he had become a much more public person, more open to television and the press. He traveled in 1978 to Europe (visiting his daughter and grandchild in Italy) and to the United States. There he met Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, two of his admirers who consider themselves his students. Realizing Kurosawa's difficulties, the two American directors approached Alan Ladd Jr. of 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, who in turn made a deal for *Kagemusha* with Toho, to whom Fox was to give one and a half million dollars for all the foreign rights. The total cost of six million dollars made it the most expensive film ever made in Japan, but with gross earnings of ten million on its first run, it was one of the most successful Japanese films of 1980. That year it shared the Grand Prize at Cannes.....

If some critics were tempted to see *Kagemusha* as an old man's culminating statement, his latest picture, *Ran* (1985), had proved even more tempting. The story resembles that of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but concerns the sixteenth-century Japanese Lord Hidetora, who retires from active leadership of his clan while retaining an over-all title, and transfers power to the eldest of his three son, Taro Takatora, and to a lesser degree to the other two, Jiro Masatora and Saburo Naotara. Saburo scorns Hidetora's sentimental belief that family ties will prevent conflict and is consequently banished, along with a retainer, Tango, who supports him. Saburo takes sanctuary with a neighboring lord, while

Tango, like Kent, tries to serve Hidetora unrecognized. Goaded by his wife, Kaede, Taro seizes full power from his father, and Jiro backs him. Only Saburo's castle is prepared to shelter Hidetora, but when Taro and Jiro attack (and Taro is killed by one of Jiro's snipers), the old man wanders crazily, accompanied by his fool, Kyoami, and Tango. In the same wilderness are other wanderers: Sue, wife of Jiro, who now seeks to kill her, having been seduced by his brother's widow, Lady Kaede, and Sue's brother Tsurumaru, blinded in childhood by Hidetora. The conflict among the forces of Jiro, Saburo, and their opportunistic neighbors leaves Kaede dead, Sue beheaded, Saburo shot, and Hidetora dead of grief. In the final scene, the blind Tsurumaru stands on the edge of a precipice and releases a scroll-painting of the Buddha into the void. Critics were quick to notice similarities between Hidetora and Kurosawa himself, both the same age. It is said that the relationship between Hidetora and the fool is paralleled by Kurosawa's relationship with Peter, the transvestite actor who plays Kyoami. The twelve-million-dollar budget for *Ran* was put together by French producer Serge Silverman in negotiation with Japanese companies, Nippon Herald, Toho, and Fuji TV, and once the film was completed Kurosawa set off around the world on a promotional tour. A tall, amiable figure, wearing dark glasses to shield his sensitive eyes and surrounded by a busy, protective retinue, he was described by one of his interviewers as "the quiet eye of the storm that blows all around him." Four months of rehearsal were followed by nine months of shooting, extended because of mourning for the death of Kurosawa's wife early in 1985. The spectacular production took Kurosawa's unit once

again to the black volcanic slopes of Mount Fuji, where a castle had to be built and then burned down for the scene of Hidetora's descent into madness.

The Japanese word *ran* means "war," "riot," or





“conflict,” but it has too an older, broader significance—“chaos.” Tony Rayns describes the vision of the film as “one step further down the road to hell from the ending of *Kagemusha*.” After a startling opening scene depicting a boar hunt, the narrative begins with Hidetora handing over power and giving a little lesson on the value of family unity, declaring that while on arrow alone can be broken, three together cannot. Saburo breaks all three arrows across his knee, saying, “This is a world where men’s cruel and evil instincts are only too evident, where one can survive only by suppressing one’s humanity and all one’s inner feelings.” Rayns sees the film as “essentially a dramatization of this scene, “a tautological gloss on Saburo’s pragmatic pessimism.” He finds the parallel of Shakespeare’s original a problem. Hidetora is denied tragic stature because Kurosawa is more concerned with his hero’s past than with his moral regeneration. To Rayns, Hidetora is credible neither as a “brilliant military leader on the verge of senility nor as a madman in second childhood stricken with remorse.” Tom Milne takes a more positive view, describing a film in which “a certain classicism seems to replace the ferment of invention as virtuosity no longer feels the need to be seen to exist. One is moved, as often as not, less by what is expressed than by what is implied.” Reviewers were impressed by the spectacle of the battle, with its forces sharply differentiated by their colors in the blackness of their world, and by some performances, notably that by Mieko Harada as the startling Lade Kaede. Vincent Canby, reviewing *Ran* in the twenty-fifth week of its New York run, felt that the audience which applauded “had been swept up in the kind of all-embracing movie experience that’s rare in any era.” In March 1986, Kurosawa visited London to be made a Fellow of the British Film Institute.

Throughout his career, from his earliest encounters with Japanese censors, it has been suggested that Kurosawa is too “Western” to be a good Japanese director. In the West a kind of purism began to prefer Ozu and Mizoguchi. But Kurosawa has always insisted on his Japanese outlook. “I am a man who likes Sotatsu, Gyokudo, and Tessai in the same way as Van Gogh, Lautrec and Rouault....I collect old Japanese laquerware as well as antique French and Dutch glassware. In short, the western and the Japanese live side by side in my mind, naturally, without the least sense of conflict.” Akira Iwasaki

agrees, pointing out that, unlike Ozu and Naruse, “Kurosawa belongs to a more recent generation which must look to the west for help defining Japan, which verifies and analyses the one by constant reference to the other.” Audie Bock insists that he “has never catered to a foreign audience and has condemned those that do.” But from his Japanese center, Kurosawa from the first was much in touch with international film culture, as the lists in his autobiography, of the films he admired, show. Interviews from the 1960s onwards show his interest in the latest films. He has always believed cinema should take advantage of technical developments. Among his Japanese “teachers,” either literally or as models, Kurosawa names first “Yama-san” (Kajiro Yamamoto), along with his great friend Sadao Yamanaka then Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Naruse. Of Western directors he speaks with most reverence perhaps of John Ford and Jean Renoir. Kurosawa is himself a teacher in his turn. Among more recent examples in the West alone, Altman, Penn, Coppola, and Lucas have all testified to his influence. The younger Japanese directors, on the other hand, have felt the need to react against the world that Kurosawa represents.

Interpreters of Kurosawa, especially the influential Richie, have always been concerned with his “humanism,” although Richard N. Tucker takes issue with Richie and finds in other directors a less feudal version of that humanism....Like many artists, Kurosawa himself complains of critical over-determination. “I have felt that my works are more nuanced and complex, and they have analyzed them too simplistically.” In 1961, Kurosawa said his aim as a filmmaker was “to give people strength to live and face life; to help them live more powerfully and happily.” At the time of *Kagemusha* he said, “I think it’s impossible in this day and age to be optimistic,” but that, seeing the possibilities still in the medium of film, “I would like to be able to create hope somewhere.”... “When I die I prefer to just drop dead on the set....”



**from *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Donald Richie, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. UCal Press, Berkeley & LA, 1998**

Again, there was a period of five years between films. After completing *Kagemusha*, Kurosawa returned to the script for *Ran*, on which he had been working for a decade. And, again, having completed it, he could find no money to make it. And so, once more, Kurosawa went looking for funds. It was going to be an expensive film to make (eventually it cost the equivalent of \$12 million and took nearly a year to shoot), so money was difficult to find. Eventually, however, Masatoshi Hara (of Herald Ace Productions) agreed to provide part of the money and Serge Silverman (of Greenwich Film Productions) agreed to provide the rest.

The seventy-three-year-old Kurosawa, who had by this time almost lost hope of being able to make the film at all, announced himself particularly pleased because its production “would round out my life’s work in film. I will put all of my remaining energy into it.” When asked what his best film was, instead of answering “the next,” as he usually did, Kurosawa simply said, “*Ran*.”

Most of the pre-production work on the picture had been long done. As with *Kagemusha*, Kurosawa had had years to illustrate every action, coordinate every color detail. Again there were sheafs of drawings and piles of paintings for the art department to copy.

Production conditions were also much like those of *Kagemusha*. When this was remarked on, Kurosawa readily affirmed the similarity, even stating that while shooting

*Kagemusha*, he had *Ran* in mind all along. However, though the earlier film may have been thought “a dry run,” there were, he said, a number of differences. One that Kurosawa particularly mentioned was that if *Kagemusha* could be described as a series of events viewed by a single individual, then *Ran* would be a series of equally human events viewed from heaven. The plot of this bird’s-eye view was that of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, more or less Japanized by the addition of bits of Japanese history.

The main inspiration for *Ran* was *King Lear*, and there are many similarities. Lear had three daughters, only the youngest of whom showed parental fidelity. Shakespeare has Gloucester; Kurosawa has Tsurumaru. Lear has his fool, and Hidetora has Kyoami; Cordelia dies, and so does Saburo. There are also a heath and noisy complaints about both the cold and the excessively noisy servants.

Though there are Japanese elements in the film (the incident of the three arrows, for example, is taken from a historical account), it is the Lear story that provides the narrative for the film. At the same time, however, this story—as with *Macbeth*, the basis for *The Throne of Blood*—is simplified, reduced to its single element, made into the vehicle for a single statement.

As the late critic Alan Booth has written: “The tragic force of Shakespeare’s play is concentrated in the intense inward turmoil of Lear himself. It is symbolized dramatically by a storm and by an unhinged mind, and the effect of this turmoil, both on the man who experiences it on the stage and on the audience who experience it by proxy, is cathartic.

“Kurosawa’s film, by contrast, is a parable of social behaviour: didactic, not cathartic. It leaves its audience, intentionally or not, with the feeling they have had a moral truth neatly illustrated for them, but have themselves experienced none of the agony which racks the empathetic witness to *Lear*.”...

Indeed, Kurosawa’s concerns are quite different from those of Shakespeare in this film (close though they may have come in *The Throne of Blood*), and the means through which he realizes them are different. Empathy and catharsis are not Kurosawa’s concerns.



What he intends is something different.

“Kurosawa’s greatness,” the Shakespearean scholar Jan Kott has written, “lies in his capacity to reveal historical similarity and variance; to find a Shakespearean sense of doom in other, remote, and apparently alien historical places....The further the ‘other’ setting is, the less likely it is the image will match the text. It stops being an illustration and becomes its essence and its sign....And here lies Kurosawa’s genius and the singularity of his Shakespeare. The theater he makes use of is, of course, classic Japanese theater.”

Kurosawa’s “other” is the Noh drama, and *Lear* is seen through its accoutrements....The costumes, for example, are, like those of the Noh, particularly and ostentatiously gorgeous. They are used as gesture—the many long-sleeved arm movements, the massive bulk, the bringing of custom into story, as when Lady Kaede rips her kimono.

There is also much use of Noh-like hats, the strings of which tie tightly under the chin and make the face resemble a mask.

Likewise the sound-track carries much that is Noh-like....The first thing we hear in the film is the Noah *fué*, that piercing, plaintive flute that we will later associate with Tsurumaru—a sound that will conclude the film as well and contribute to much of its poignancy....The acting is Noh-like in that it tends to be stately, formal, hieratic. There is, of course, much more passion (and much more overacting) than is common in the Noh, but there is, at the same time, a very Noh-like sense of presentation.

The script itself contains (rarely for a Kurosawa screenplay) many metaphors. The destruction-of-the-castle sequence is thick with them. A retainer staggers out “like someone running in a dream,” the spear carriers rush “like an avalanche” Hidetora runs “like a madman,” blood “runs like a river,” and so on. There are also a large number of metaphorical actions. To mention but two, Hidetora loses his sword just when he loses his self (that is, becomes mad), and Jiro kicks the dead Taro’s helmet aside as he is about to make love to the wife of the deceased.

Like *Ivan the Terrible*, a film it much resembles, *Ran* can be seen as one long lesson.

It is a picture with a message, and the message is supported by didactic dialogue. Here is a sample from the end of the film. The bereaved Kyoami and Tango, a lord friendly to Saburo, are talking:

Kyoami: Oh. Is there no Buddha in the world? Buddha, hear me. Are you so bored up in heaven that you enjoy watching men die down here? Is it amusing to hear them cry?

Tango: Enough! Do not slander the Buddha. It is he who is crying. Men—they are so stupid that they believe that surviving depends upon killing. No, not even the Buddha can save us. Don’t cry anymore. This is as it is. Men seek sorrow, not happiness. They prefer suffering to peace.

Since this is the last real dialogue in the film, it may stand as Kurosawa’s “message.” And we recognize it. It is the “people-are-no-good text that occurs in *Rashomon* and *The Bad Sleep Well* and other films....Its [*Ran*’s] didactic message is that there is no hope and that life is the tragedy that we have suspected it of being. We do not need to be freed of this truth (as, to an extent, we are in *Lear* because we are purged of emotions, having been made to experience them), because it is external and we must live with it forever. Consequently, we do not need to experience Hidetora’s agony. All we need do is watch it.

We do not even need to believe in it. Indeed, we cannot. The film is too schematic for that, its elements too controlled.

*Ran* may thus be seen as a morality play—something one sees and learns from. It is also, as Kurosawa intimated, a final statement.



**from *Kurosawa Film Studies and Japanese Cinema.***  
**Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Duke University Press, 2000.**

As is often the case in Kurosawa films, some of the remarks by the principal characters of *Ran* sound naive, didactic, or overstated (e.g. Tango’s reproof of Kyoami at the film’s close: “Do not blaspheme! It is the gods who weep. They see us killing each



other over and over since time began. They can't save us from ourselves"). The rationality and professionalism of Kurogane reminds us of many other Kurosawa heroes and villains.

In *Ran*, Kurosawa creates a series of magnificent visual tableaux by transforming reality into symbols and abstract patterns. The names of the three sons, Taro, Jiro, and Saburo, mean "first son," "second son," and "third son." These names, therefore, transform the individuality of each son into his hierarchical position in the family system. In a similar vein, the film uses colors schematically. Taro, Jiro, and Saburo are respectively clothed in Yellow, red, and blue, and their soldiers also carry yellow, red, and blue banners and pennants. The number of horizontal lines on the soldiers' pennants—one, two, and three—corresponds to their leaders' names and familial positions. The troops of Fujimaki, Saburo's father-in-law, are in white, and those of Ayabe, who attacks First Castle at the film's end, are in black. The scarcity of close-ups and the extensive use of long shots render even principal characters abstract figures and, by preventing the spectators' identification with them, create the sense of detachment that positions the spectators as distant observers of a drama of massive destruction. Sue, Jiro's wife, is supposedly beautiful, yet without a close-up of her face, the spectators are not allowed to judge whether there is any validity in the statement asserting her beauty.

What really stands out in *Ran* is the allure of visual imagery, and it is often not humans but sets and decor (e.g. castles and monumental gates that either coldly reject or trap Hidetora and his retinue in a hell on earth) that play major roles in the development of the narrative. However, even the impressive sets and decor are in the end images without depth....Among Kurosawa's work, *Ran* is probably the best example supporting Masumura Yasuzo's characterization of Kurosawa as a "magnificent yet tragic genius" who makes a gargantuan effort to present dynamic and

perfect images on the screen."

**from *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*.  
James Goodwin. Johns Hopkins U Press.  
Baltimore/London 1994**

Kurosawa began writing the script for *Ran* in 1976 and completed a first version around 1979. With the collaboration of Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide, the script continued to evolve over the next seven years. *Ran*, which has been translated as "chaos," conveys additional connotations of revolt, upheaval, discord, turmoil, and anarchy. Inspiration for the story came first through Kurosawa's notion to invert the legend of Motonari Mori (1497-1571), whose three sons are admired in Japan as the ideal of family loyalty.

In considering *King Lear*, Kurosawa was puzzled that Shakespeare had given his characters no past:

We are plunged directly into the agonies of their present dilemmas without knowing how they came to this point. How did Lear acquire the power that, as an old man, he abuses with such disastrous effects? Without knowing his past, I have never really understood the ferocity of his daughters' response to Lear's feeble attempts to shed his royal power.

In the script to *Ran*, the answer to such questions is to create a past political career for the ruler and to set events in a specific era. The story is set in medieval Japan, the fictional Great Lord Hidetora Ichimonji's line of descent had to be male. To divide a realm among daughters would have contradicted history completely.

The Soviet film director Grigori Kozintsev, in a 1971 adaptation of *King Lear*, treats the play as a social tragedy and a visual epic. In an extensive discussion of the play and his film treatment, Kozintsev offers this interpretation:

*Lear* is not only the drama of a particular group of people who are linked by the plot, but also a stream of history. Whole structures of life [and] social situations are carried along and tumbled together. Not only single voices are heard in the din of tragedy (lifelike in the fullest sense of the word) but combined and mighty ensembles, whole choruses. From Kozintsev's perspective on Russian and Soviet history, absolute dictatorship is both a cultural legacy (the tsars) and a living historical memory (Stalin). His film represents the life of a willful ruler through its reflection in the lives of his subjects. The tragic destiny



of Lear expresses at the same time the destiny of a people.

In Kurosawa's perspective on the era of Japanese history in which he sets the events of *Ran*, absolute power is based on a legacy of ruthlessness. After a lifetime of brutality, Hidetora unwisely plans for peace through a scheme of shared power with the eldest son Taro established in the First Castle, the next son Jiro in Second Castle, and the youngest son Saburo in Third Castle. The Japanese meaning of these given names—"first son" (Taro), "second son" (Jiro), and "third son" (Saburo)—reiterates the hierarchical arrangement. Amidst the suffering and chaos that results from his ill-conceived plan, Hidetora encounters the surviving victims of his own savage conquest of the realm many years earlier. This dramatic movement through the ruins left by past ambition and war is quite different in structure from the immediacy of the tragedy that follows from King Lear's demand for professions of love and from his rash temper, both of which theater audiences directly witness.

In its intertextual treatment of material found in the Shakespeare play, the film typically condenses, abbreviates, or intensifies events and character traits. Lady Kaede possesses the same savage ambition as Edmund, but she has a motive of revenge that he does not. She was born and raised at First Castle, when her father ruled from there. Kaede left to marry Taro, an alliance that led her family to trust Hidetora, who soon overtook First Castle and murdered the men of her family.

One draft of the *Ran* script includes a nightmare vision wherein Hidetora is haunted by all those he has killed....A notation in the published *Ran* script states that the idea for the sequence is drawn from the famous Noh play *Funa Benkei*, in which a samurai traveling by ship sees in the waves the ghosts of his victims.

The logic of events in *Ran* approaches the rationale for brutality and treachery asserted by Edmund: "men/ Are as the time is: to be tender-minded/ Does not become a sword" (5.3.31-33).

Kurosawa, like Shakespeare, accepts the possibility that ruthless

intentions can be harbored by men and women equally.

Kurosawa considers his film more hopeful than Shakespeare's tragedy:

I believe my film to be less pessimistic than *King Lear*; in any case, it is with this sense that I made the film. In contrast to King Lear, who has no regrets, who does not contemplate his past, who needlessly falls into this terrifying drama, Hidetora reflects on his past and regrets it. In this sense I think that my work is less tragic.

*Ran* lacks the archetypal pattern of Western tragedy's sacrifice of the hero and promise of redemption for the society that survives him. A principal consequence of the film's



creation of a detailed past of misdeeds by the character is to make Hidetora not only less tragic but also less heroic than Lear.

### **Leigh Singer: "Five lessons in filmmaking from Kurosawa" (BFI)**

There are film schools, and then there's standing at the shoulder of a legend for months as he creates his late masterwork. That was the unlikely and incredible experience of Italian [Vittorio Dalle Ore](#), then only 24-years-old, and not able to speak one word of Japanese, who found himself in 1984 as an assistant director to the great [Akira Kurosawa](#) on [Ran](#).

Not so much a straight adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a highly personal amalgam of Lear and a famous Japanese 16th-century legend, it's a career summation and high point for Kurosawa. Now re-released 30 years after its debut, the stunning 4K restoration does justice to the famously epic, colour-coded battle scenes and intensity of



the intimate struggles that result from a ruthless warrior king relinquishing his throne to three sons, and the ensuing betrayal and madness, bloodshed and tragedy.

“It was one of those very lucky things in life in that a cousin of mine married a very famous Japanese writer called Nanami Shiono, who worked for Japanese television,” Dalle Ore relates. “She knew Kurosawa and had interviewed him several times. And she knew I was interested in film and told me, ‘I know Kurosawa and he’s preparing his new film *Ran*, would you like to work with him?’ Of course! So the next time she met him, she asked him – and you know, for an old gentleman it’s not very easy to say no to a lady, so he mumbled something like, ‘OK, send him over...’”

“Of course I was nervous. He was wonderful but, of course, he did not speak with me, because I didn’t speak Japanese at the time. But I was included in the crew and he allowed me in the editing room and then he called me back for the other films. By then I spoke Japanese and became assistant director officially on *Dreams* (1990).”

So what was the essence that Della Ore took away from his experiences watching a master at work? “The intensity and the energy that he put in everything he did,” he replies instantly. “That’s why he’s famous for his rages, but he demanded from himself first and then the crew. We were responsible for everything and scapegoats for everything!” Della Ore chuckles, his memories evidently very vivid on this subject. “When you saw his eyes changing colour, becoming grey, oh my God...” Here then are five more harmonious recollections, each a telling example of Kurosawa’s filmmaking mastery at work.

### **Uncompromising attention to detail**

This was the first scene that was shot on the film. That scene is two shots but nothing is as simple as that in Kurosawa’s films. One shot is made in studio, the long travelling shot; but before that there is another shot, where Taro looks out of the window. And that was the real landscape. So Kurosawa had this window frame brought to Kyushu, the island where we shot all the battle scenes. And it ended up being one of the most expensive scenes in the film, because the good weather never came, so it was taken up and down and rebuilt three times, for something that you could just as easily have made in the studio with a painted landscape! But no, he wanted the real thing.



Before shooting, all the crew – even the cameraman, the sound man – would go and polish the sets so that they would sparkle, and that was on every set! Kurosawa felt it was so important that everyone enter the spirit of the scene; that it gave intensity to the image that came out.

### **The organisation of chaos**

The set was very organised. There was a crew of actors that were trained as soldiers – the Sanjuki – and they would train the extras every day. The extras would come, get their armour and flags and then they would be trained by the Sanjuki. And Kurosawa would design the shot and the movement and then the camera would film it. There’s a sequence where Hidetora’s soldiers are all dead and you have a montage of the scene; and he had drawn all the pictures of how he wanted them, with the colours and everything, and we had to prepare everything just as they were. And he would go with the cameras to one after the other, so those were shot in very little time.

I was really lucky because he allowed me into the editing room, so I followed all the post-production – and all the fights between [composer Toru] Takemitsu and Kurosawa, [compared to] which, the battle scene is nothing! It was always Kurosawa’s idea to use only the music score for some of the battle and he also had a very strong idea of what the music should sound like. Only Kurosawa was not a musician and had never studied music, so he was not able to communicate what he wanted to Takemitsu, so it took a long time. But the result is fantastic.

### **Working with the elements**

That was a real typhoon! No one was in a shelter except the camera and the lights. They had the only way to shoot in the rain that was available at the time –



a disc of glass that would spin around and rotate in front of the lens so that it would protect the lens from water. It had been used in [David Lean's] [Ryan's Daughter](#) (1970) and they had it flown over. We could not hear each other! It took a whole day [to shoot] because the visual part was very important. But, of course, wind you don't see and so we took the grass from somewhere else where you had long grass and put them all around, so that they would sway in the wind. Unfortunately what happened was the costumes got wet and heavy and would not sway in the wind, so some of the effect got lost...

Poor [Tatsuya Nakadai](#) (Hidetora) had to go through four hours of makeup every day and the makeup would change for different scenes and he would have different Noh masks as the character developed. And Kurosawa was very demanding of him, and Nakadai was very good in developing this character slowly losing his mind and going into his own world.

### **An actors' director**

I had the immense fortune to be there for all the preparation for *Ran* as well, and Kurosawa would bring all his crew to the rehearsal room to watch the scene develop. His way of shooting was to use three cameras at a time when it was not common at all, and he used long lenses. Not only for an aesthetic choice but also so that actors would not feel the cameras, they would not see them because they would be far away and not be disturbed by their presence. He used tracking shots, not so much as tracking shots but to move the camera from one position to another, in order to have the different angles of the scene. So he would rehearse the scene the day before with all the camera movements and costumes, and then shoot it the next day.

Another thing that amazed me, Kurosawa often did not shoot a reserve take. He would shoot and most of the time he would say, Cut!', get up to leave and

then turn and say [to the cameraman], "Oh sorry, was it OK for you?" because for him himself it was OK. And if the cameraman would say yes, then it was done. And on such a large production, it was amazing, but that was his faith in the work. His limit was the length of the magazine of film, 12 minutes. It happened one time, on *Dreams*, that the magazine ran out, so he said "Everybody freeze!" and they changed the rolls and continued. That way you had the scene come out much more natural.

### **Control that allows for improvisation**

You see Kurosawa's [storyboard] pictures and they are exactly as they appear in the movie. No changes at all. But in one of the last scenes where you have Kurogane chopping off Kaede's head, the day before he was saying to the costume designer, what a shame that we have to soil such a beautiful and expensive costume with blood. And then while blocking the scene on the set, the whole thing changed. And it came out with such power. That is his faith in the cameramen, [\[Taeko\] Saito](#) and [\[Masaharu\] Ueda](#). It is such a narrow frame! [Hisashi Igawa](#) [who played Kurogane] had to deliver a long line with such strength that he took quite a few times before he was able to go all the way to the end and strike, and then the blood shoots up. Even all of us when we saw the rushes, we were amazed at the power of that scene.

***The Cinephilia & Beyond* entry on *Ran*, "["Ran' is by all standards one of master Kurosawa's best films in his resume."](#)** includes a 12-minute commentary on *Ran*; *A Message from Akira Kurosawa: For Beautiful Movies*, a 90-minute documentary composed of ten separate interviews with Kurosawa focusing on various aspects of filmmaking: "The Seed of a Film," "Screenplays," "Storyboards," "Filming," "Lighting," "Production Design," "Costumes," "Editing," "Music," "Directing".

### **THE FALL 2022 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XLV:**

August 30 William Wellman *Wings* 1927

Sept 6 Jean Renoir *Rules of the Game* 1939

Sept 13 Michael Curtiz *Casablanca* 1942

Sept 20 Nicholas Ray, *In a Lonely Place* 1950

Sept 27 Luis Buñuel *Viridiana* 1961

Oct 4 Orson Welles *Chimes at Midnight* 1966  
Oct 11 Mel Brooks *Young Frankenstein* 1974  
Oct 18 Arthur Penn *Night Moves* 1975  
Oct 25 Sydney Pollack *Tootsie* 1982  
Nov 1 Akira Kurosawa *Ran* 1985  
Nov 8 Martin Scorsese *Goodfellas* 1990  
Nov 15 Hiyo Miyazaki *The Wind Rises* 2013  
Nov 22 Ava Duvernay *Selma* 2014  
Nov 29 Pedro Almodóvar *Parallel Mothers* 2021  
Dec 6 Ang Lee *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* 2000

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