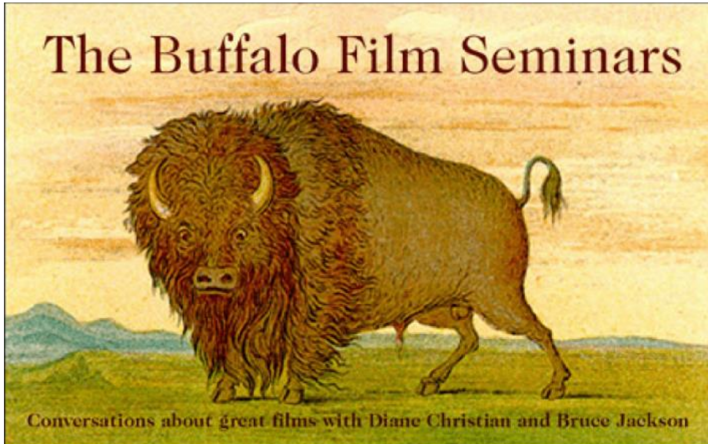
Akira Kurosawa:: **THRONE OF BLOOD/KUMONOSU JÔ** (1957, 105m)

Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries



[Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian video introduction to this week's film]

[Zoom link for Tuesday, September 15, post-screening discussion]

DIRECTOR Akira Kurosawa
WRITING Shinobu Hashimoto, Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa, Hideo Oguni, based on *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
PRODUCERS Akira Kurosawa and Sojiro Motoki
CINEMATOGRAPHY Asakazu Nakai
EDITING Akira Kurosawa
MUSIC Masaru Satô
PRODUCTION DESIGN Yoshirô Muraki
COSTUME DESIGN Yoshirô Muraki

CAST
Toshirô Mifune...Taketori Washizu
Isuzu Yamada...Lady Asaji Washizu
Takashi Shimura...Noriyasu Odagura
Akira Kubo...Yoshiteru Miki
Hiroshi Tachikawa...Kunimaru Tsuzuki (as Yoichi Tachikawa)
Minoru Chiaki...Yoshiaki Miki
Takamaru Sasaki...Kuniharu Tsuzuki
Kokuten Kodo...Military Commander
Kichijiro Ueda...Washizu's workman
Eiko Miyoshi...Old Woman at castle
Chieko Naniwa...Old Ghost Woman

AKIRA KUROSAWA (b. March 23, 1910 in Tokyo, Japan—d. September 6, 1998 (age 88) in Setagaya, Tokyo, Japan) was one of the twentieth century's most celebrated film auteurs. He wrote or cowrote nearly all 31 of the films he directed, and he edited several of them as well. For much of his career Kurosawa was appreciated far more in the West than in Japan. Zhang Yimou (director of *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*) wrote that Kurosawa was accused "of making films for foreigners' consumption. In the 1950s, *Rashomon* was criticized as exposing Japan's ignorance and backwardness to the outside world," a charge Yimou sees as "absurd." Yimou further claims that when he faces similar "scoldings" in China, he uses "Kurosawa as a shield." Kurosawa directed his first film in 1943 but says *Drunken Angel* in 1948 was really his first film because that was the first one he made without official interference. *Rashomon* (1950), the first Japanese film to find wide distribution in the West, made Kurosawa internationally famous. He was equally comfortable making films about medieval and modern Japan or films based on Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorki, and Evan Hunter. He loved American westerns and was conscious of them when he made his early samurai pictures. When someone told him that Sergio Leone had lifted the plot of *Yojinbo* for *A Fistful of Dollars*, the spaghetti western with Clint Eastwood, Kurosawa told his friend to calm down: he'd lifted the plot himself from Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. Kurosawa was nominated, in 1956, for the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or for *Ikimono no kiroku* (*I Live in Fear*, 1955) and for an Academy Award for Best Director in 1986 for *Ran* (1985). He won the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or in 1980 for *Kagemusha* (1980) in a tie with Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979). He also won an Honorary Award at the 1990 Academy Awards "For cinematic accomplishments that have inspired, delighted, enriched and entertained worldwide audiences and influenced filmmakers throughout the world." He

directed 33 films, some of which are: *Uma* (1941, some scenes, uncredited), *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), and *The Most Beautiful* (1944); *Sanshiro Sugata, Part Two* and *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* in 1945; *Those Who Make Tomorrow* and *No Regrets for Our Youth* in 1946; *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947) and *Drunken Angel* (1948); *The Quiet Duel* and *Stray Dog* in 1949; *Scandal* and *Rashomon* in 1950; *The Idiot* (1951), *Ikiru* (1952), and *Seven Samurai* (1954); *Throne of Blood* and *The Lower Depths* in 1957; *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Sanjuro* (1962), *High and Low* (1963), and *Red Beard* (1965); *Song of the Horse* (TV Movie documentary) and *Dodes'ka-den* in 1970; *Dersu Uzala* (1975), *Dreams* (1990), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), and *mm 7uMaadadayo* (1993). He produced 11 films: *Haru no tawamure* and *Stray Dog* in 1949; *Throne of Blood* and *The Lower Depths* in 1957; *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Yojimbo* (1961), *High and Low* (1963), *Sanshiro Sugata* (1965), *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), *Kagemusha* (1980). He also edited 17 films: *Uma* (1941), *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), *Sanshiro Sugata, Part Two* (1945), *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), *Snow Trail* (1947), *Rashomon* (1950), *The Idiot* (1951), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Asunaro monogatari* (1955), *The Lower Depths* (1957), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Yojimbo* (1961), *500,000* (1963), *Ran* (1985), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), *Maadadayo* (1993). He also wrote 77 films.

ASAKAZU NAKAI (August 29, 1901 – February 28, 1988) was a Japanese cinematographer (98 credits), born in Kobe. He worked on a dozen films with filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. He was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Cinematography for his work in the film *Ran* (1985), becoming the oldest nominee ever in that category. In 1950 he won the award for Best Cinematography at the Mainichi Film Concours for *Stray Dog*.

TOSHIRO MIFUNE (b. April 1, 1920 in Tsingtao, China [Qingdao, Shandong, China]—d. December 24, 1997 (age 77) in Mitaka city, Tokyo, Japan) said of his work with Kurosawa: "I am proud of nothing I have done other than with him." Leonard Maltin writes that “Mifune is perhaps the screen's ultimate warrior, if only because he's portrayed that type in infinite variety. He has been brash and reckless in *The Seven Samurai* (1954), stoic and droll in *Yojimbo* (1961) and its sequel *Sanjuro* (1962), paranoid and irrational in *Throne of Blood* (1957), and swashbucklingly heroic in *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). All of the preceding films were directed by Akira Kurosawa, who is responsible for shaping Mifune's rugged, imposing screen persona. He scored an early triumph in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), playing a medieval outlaw, but he's also portrayed a number of contemporary characters including detectives and businessmen. Mifune had originally planned a film career behind the camera as a cinematographer, but wound up before the lens in 1946's *Shin Baka Jidai*. He first worked with Kurosawa in 1948's *Drunken Angel*. He made one attempt at directing in 1963, *Goju Man-nin no Isan*, which was a failure; his production company now makes films for TV. Mifune's forceful personality, projected through baleful expressions and dynamic physical presence, won him international recognition and led to many roles in American productions, including *Grand Prix* (1966), *Hell in the Pacific* (1968, in a two-man tour de force opposite Lee Marvin), Kurosawa fan Steven Spielberg's *1941* (1979), and the TV miniseries "Shogun" (1980).” He acted in 183 films, including: *Snow Trail* and *These Foolish Times* in 1947; *Drunken Angel* (1948) and *Stray Dog* (1949); *Scandal, Wedding Ring, and Rashomon* in 1950; *The Idiot* and *The Life of a Horsetrader* in 1951; *Sword for Hire* (1952), *The Last Embrace* (1953), *The Sound of Waves* (1954), and T*he Underworld* (1956); *Throne of Blood* and *Downtown* in 1957; *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) and *The Big Boss* (1959); *The Last Gunfight*, *The Gambling Samurai,* and *The Bad Sleep Well* in 1960; *Yojimbo* (1961), *Sanjuro* (1962), and *High and Low* (1963); *Samurai Assassin* and *Red Beard* in 1965; *Samurai Rebellion* (1967), *Red Lion* (1969), *Zatoichi Meets Yojimbo* (1970), *Red Sun* (1971), *Paper Tiger* (1975), *Midway* (1976), *1941* (1979), and *Shogun* (1980, TV Mini-Series); *Inchon* and *The Bushido Blade* in 1981; *Conquest* (1982), *Sicilian Connection* (1987), *Picture Bride* (1994), *and Deep River* (1995).

TAKASHI SHIMURA (b. March 12, 1905 in Ikuno, Hyogo, Japan—d. February 11, 1982 (age 76) in Tokyo, Japan) acted in 272 films, some of which are: *Ren'ai gai itchôme* (1934) and *Osaka Elegy* (1936); *The Most Beautiful* and *Shibaidô* in 1944; *Those Who Make Tomorrow* (1946) and *Drunken Angel* (1948); *Stray Dog* and *Onna koroshi abura jigoku* 1949; *Ore wa yojinbo, Ma no ogon, Spring Snow, Pen itsuwarazu, bôryoku no machi, Scandal, The Angry Street, Rashomon, Yoru no hibotan, Tenya wanya*, and *Ginza Sanshiro* in 1950; *The Idiot* (1951), *The Life of Oharu* and *Ikiru* in 1952; *Seven Samurai* (1954), *I Live in Fear* (1955), *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956), and *Throne of Blood* (1957); *The Loyal 47 Ronin* and *Nichiren and the Great Mongol Invasion* in 1958; *Storm Over the Pacific* and *The Bad Sleep Well* in 1960; *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962); *Attack Squadron!* and *The Lost World of Sinbad* in 1963; *Kwaidan* (1964); *Samurai Assassin, Red Beard* and *Frankenstein Conquers the World* in 1965; *Zatoichi and the Fugitives* (1968), *Am I Trying* (1969), *Zatoichi's Conspiracy* (1973), and *Kagemusha* (1980).

David Williams: “Akira Kurosawa,” from *World Film Directors Vol. I.* Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987.

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 film scripts...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 influence 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."...

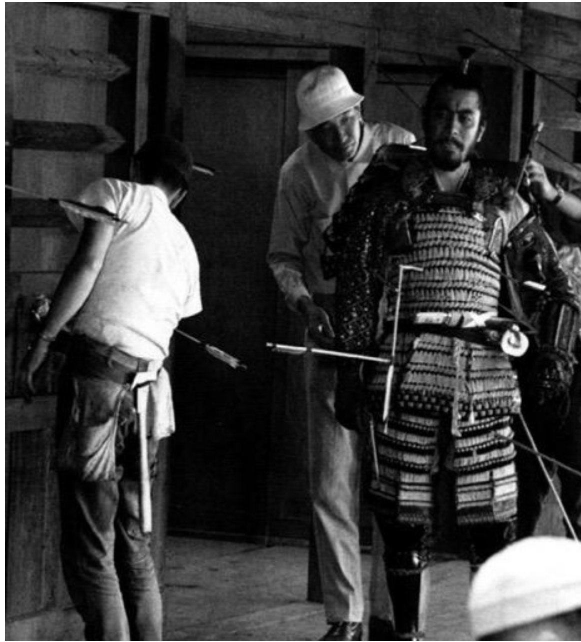
On February 15, 1945, the month *Sanshiro Sugata Part II* was released, Kurosawa married the star of *The Most Beautiful*, Yoko Taguchi (whose real name was Kato Kiyo), at the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, with Yamamoto and his wife as matchmakers. They were at first very poor, his salary being less than a 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. Critics see continuity and gradual change rather than marked turns in Kurosawa's career. Max Tessier notes a displacement of the early interest in humble suffering humanity towards a hero of stronger personality. Audie Bock sees the topicality of *Drunken Angel* and *Stray Dog* giving way to something more universal. Noél Burch compares the films between 1946 and 1950 to the neorealism of Rosselini and De Sica, but finds in their style the disjunctiveness, pathos, and excess," which will also be "constants in the mature work of the 1950s," together with the "characteristic stubbornness of Kurosawa's protagonists" which affects the structure as well as the theme of many of his films. Even so, *Rashomon* still marks a change, not only because of the unusual nature of the project itself. *Rashomon* came together in Kurosawa's mind from a number of stimuli. He felt that films had lost something of "peculiar beauty" from the days of silent film. In particular he felt "there was something to be learned from the spirit of French avant-garde films of the 1920s." *Rashomon* would be a "testing ground" where he could apply his ideas on the aesthetics of those silent films, using an "elaborately fashioned play of light and shadow" to express the "strange impulses of the human heart" explored by the original short story, "In a Grove," by Ryunosuke Akutagawa.

The story had been made into a script by Shinobu Hashimoto, but it was too short for s feature film until Kurosawa added material from a second Akutagawa story called "Rashomon" as a frame for the first, the whole being set in the Heian period (794-1184). In a dense forest , a triangular encounter takes place between a samurai and his bride and a bandit. The bride is raped, the samurai killed, and the scene is witnessed by a woodcutter. The narrative of the film presents four main versions of this story, each told from the point of view of one of the participants. The captured bandit tells of tying up the husband, raping his bride, then, at her entreaty, dueling with the husband and killing him. The woman's version is that after the rape her husband rejected her, and she killed him in her angry grief. The third account is spoken though the lips of a medium by the spirit of the dead samurai. He says that after the rape the woman agreed to follow the bandit, but that the bandit rejected her when she insisted that he kill her husband; then the samurai found the woman's dagger and killed himself. The fourth version is the woodcutter's, altered by himself as he tells it. He says that he found the bandit after the rape, pleading with the woman to run away with him. She insisted that the two men fight for her. The bandit killed the samurai, then he and the woman left separately. We see these versions as told partly before the police, but also retold by three men sheltering from torrential rain in the ruins of the great Rashomon gate of the medieval city of Kyoto. One of these men is the woodcutter himself, another a priest who was also present at the police interrogation, and the third a common man who questions and comments. Finally, as these three consider the baffling tale, they hear a baby cry. The commoner, finding an abandoned child, steals its clothes, but the woodcutter, who has earlier been suspected of stealing the woman's dagger, picks up the baby and takes it home, while the priest comments that his faith in humanity has been restored.

The apparent relativism of this intriguingly complex structure, which may have had much to do with its popularity in the West, create some problems in Japan. Daiei were reluctant to approve production because they did not understand the story. The studio head, Masaichi Nagata was particularly scornful, until the film's success abroad. Although *Rashomon* did well at the box office in Japan, audiences were inclined to miss the point, searching for the one "true" version of events. Some theatres appointed a sort of *benshi* to help. Kurosawa explained the script to three baffled assistants, one of whom refused to cooperate and was sacked, by comparing its difficulty to the difficulty of understanding he psychology of human beings who "are

unable to be honest with themselves about themselves." Donald Ritchie confirms such a reading, distinguishing the rich suggestiveness of Kurosawa's film from the simpler questioning of all truth in Akutagawa's original. Turning attention away from any supposed message Tadao Sato says "*Rashomon* is a masterpiece because of the way it is made," citing in particular the editing of the scene in which the woman yields to the bandit. Noël Burch notes Kurosawa's revival of the device of the 180-degree-reverse-angle cut as "a basic element of his rough-hewn, jagged editing, and his use of "frequent and sharply contrasting juxtapositions of close-up and long shots, of moving and fixed shot, or shots of contrary movement." Ritchie on the other hand emphasizes the unobtrusive connecting of the mostly very brief but unusually numerous shots (420 in all).



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." Although his selection of shots, including the split-second shots of action, includes those that draw attention to the camera, with *Rashomon* he begins to use more frequently that obtrusive punctuation mark, the hard-edged wipe. Kurosawa himself acknowledges that the powerful visual impression of this film is largely due to the work of cameraman Kazuo Miyagawa, with whom he worked here for the first time, and praises in particular the introductory section "which leads the viewer through the light and shadow of the forest into a world where the human heart loses its way." Miyagawa says that till then he had been shooting for Daiei "in a rather soft key," but that Kurosawa required many "special effects." He instances the forest love-scene of Machiko Kyo as the bride and Toshiro Mifune as the bandit. "He wanted Mifune to be like a big sun, like the Hinomaru [the red sun of the Japanese flag] in high contrast with the softness of Machiko Kyo….[As that required contrast between black and white, not the usual grey tone. I even used mirrors against the sun to get that effect, which was something I had never done before." In the same interview Miyagawa recalled a plan Kurosawa had had, which remained only a plan, for combining tracking shots by four different cameras. Despite Daiei's doubts, *Rashomon* was released with a certain flourish and, though accounts differ about its success, it was reasonably well received. Patricia Erens says that it "managed only to earn back its production costs" on first release, but it was placed fifth in the Kinema Jumpo list for 1950, and, according to Ritchie and Anderson it was Daiei's fourth best money earner out of fifty-two films that year. The Tokyo Motion Picture Reviewers' Club awarded their Blue Ribbon for the screenplay. But wider recognition was to come….

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 Jumpo* 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....

Richie 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....

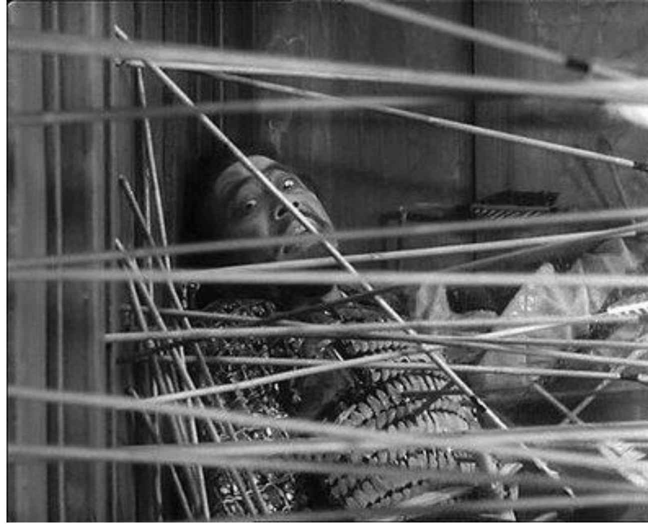
The story of *Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low*, 1963) is based on an Ed McBain detective story called *King's Ransom*. The son of Gondo, production head of a shoe company (Toshiro Mifune), has apparently been kidnapped and a ransom is demanded. when it turns out that the son of Gondo's chauffeur has 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 Sato'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 Jumpo* 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*], Kuosawa 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, Kuroswa returned to Japan, where an independent company was formed, called Yonki no Kai (The Four Musketeers), consisting of Kurosawa, Kinshita, Kon Ichiikawa, 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 Aresniev, 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 Uzsala, 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 n 1972, he had become a much ore 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 20th 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 al 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, wile Tango, like Kent, tries to serve Hidetora unrecognized. Goaded by his wife, Kaede, Taro seizes full power from his father, and Hiro backs, and Jiro backs him. Only Saburo's castle is prepared to shelter Hidetora, but when Taro and Hiro 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, "Kuosawa 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…."

Donald Ritchie: "Remembering Kurosawa" (Criterion Notes)

Not that he himself wanted to be remembered. Rather, he wanted his work to be remembered. He once wrote: "Take 'myself,' subtract 'movies,' and the result is 'zero.'" It was as though he thought he did not exist except through his movies. When I was writing my book about him, he sometimes complained that there was nothing to write about if I persisted in asking him about himself. He became interested in my project only when he learned it was to be called *The Films of Akira Kurosawa.*

I do not remember one subsequent conversation that was not about the movies, almost invariably the one he was then making. Kurosawa had no interest in small talk—it was all heavy talk about the present project.

He had his reasons. Once I asked about what a certain scene in a prior picture had meant, and he said: "Well, if I could have answered that, it wouldn't have been necessary for me to film the scene, would it?" I may have had my theories about my subject, but he was not interested in theory.

He was interested only in practice—how to make films more convincing, more real, more right. He would have agreed with Picasso's remark that when critics get together they talk about theory, but when artists get together they talk about turpentine. He was interested in focal lengths, in multiple camera positions, in color values, just as he was interested in convincing narrative, in consistent characters, and in the moral concern that was his subject.

I do not think he even considered himself an artist. He talked about his methods as though he were a carpenter or a mason. And he was old-fashioned enough to believe in the traditional Japanese lack of distinction between the arts and the crafts.

Though he sometimes said that he photographed merely in order to have something to edit, he was nonetheless very particular about how and what he filmed. He had the castle for *Throne of Blood* dismantled, unphotographed, when he found that the carpenters had used nails, an anachronism the long-distance lens would have readily revealed; he allegedly had assistants pour twenty years' worth of tea into the teacups for the hospital scenes of *Red Beard,* in order to achieve the proper patina.

To exercise such complete control, Kurosawa had also to exhibit such socially unattractive qualities as egotism and a dictatorial disposition. "Though I am certainly not a militarist," he once said, "if you compare a production unit to an army, then the script is the battle flag and the director is the commander of the front line."

I remember a number of consequently bellicose blowups, lots of storming off the set, and an unfortunate habit of needling individuals in order show the others what awaited if they did not behave. It was through the employment of such perhaps necessary strategies that he had earned his sobriquet of Tenno—the Emperor—a title not at all popular in postwar Japan.

It was, indeed, Kurosawa's concern for perfecting the product that led to his later reversals. Though many film companies would have been delighted by such directorial devotion, Japanese studios are commonly more impressed by cooperation than by innovation. They thus refused to fund his films. He occasionally did not finish a production on time and/or went over the amount of money budgeted; they said he was expensive, difficult to work with. And he was famously uncooperative with the media.

As a result, his films became fewer. Convinced that *Kagemusha* would never get made, Kurosawa spent his time painting pictures of every scene—this collection would have to take the place of the unrealized film. He had, like many other directors, long used storyboards. These now blossomed into whole galleries—screening rooms for unmade masterpieces.

Finally, fully abandoned by big-business Japan, Kurosawa had to search for funds elsewhere—Russia, the USA, France. Like Lear himself, he wandered the blighted heath to get the money for *Ran.* All of this was then seen by the local media as yet more proof of horrid Western influence on his films.

Once, exasperated by this repeated canard, he said: "I hear a lot about foreigners being able to understand my movies, but I certainly never thought of them when I was making the films. Perhaps because I am making them for today's young Japanese, I find a Western-looking format most practical, but I really only make my pictures for young Japanese in their twenties."

Certainly with the young, the director was different. During one of his birthday parties—there were some Mosfilm guests, so it must have been 1975, when negotiations were concluding on *Dersu Uzala*—it had been all business talk and grumpiness, and then Kurosawa's little grandson toddled in. The change in the director was so swift, so dramatic, that I was as surprised as the Russians were. The stern figure of authority, the Emperor himself, melted before our eyes, and here was a doting grandpa and a smiling, trusting grandchild—since children liked him as much as he liked them: just look at the kids in *Rhapsody in August,* the little tubercular patient in *Drunken Angel,* even that baby in *Rashomon.*

And older kids as well. It was perhaps another birthday, or a celebration of some sort, when Kurosawa was suddenly approached by the much younger director Nagisa Oshima. Everyone turned to stare. Oshima had never before spoken to Kurosawa, would have refused to, had attacked him, as well as many another grown-up Japanese film director.

And here was the young perpetrator again setting upon his aging target. But now his purpose was different. I was near enough to the two that I could hear Kurosawa being congratulated, on whatever the occasion was, but also being addressed as "sensei," a title of the highest respect, "teacher" plus "master."

What had happened? I have no idea. Perhaps Oshima had reconsidered, and just as Shohei Imamura later decided that his mentor, Yasujiro Ozu, was not the calcified creator he had earlier accused him of being but a teacher from whom he had learned much, so Oshima had come to recognize the worth of Kurosawa.

I wonder what Kurosawa made of this. There is no knowing, but it might have seemed to him a kind of vindication—the most noticeably rebellious of the young rebels was now seeking him out, an indication that his films, always moral and even toward the end moralistic, held lessons that could be imparted across the generations.

And that was what he valued most. Who he himself was interested him very little, because just as he insisted that his heroes neglect the past and live only in the present, so was he unconcerned with anything that had happened to him.

He perhaps initially thought that in my book I was after a summing-up, a taking into account of the past but not the present. If so, then it would follow that I was not properly concerned with life. Life is not that.

And in Kurosawa's films, the major theme is that the heroes are always, from Sugata on, not being but becoming. They live in a present where, though history may indicate, it does not define. You cannot sum up a living person. You can sum up only the dead.

Maybe that is why the films of Kurosawa remain so alive and why this dedicated director, about whom we really don't know all that much, becomes so admirably the sum of all of his parts.

Akira Kurosawa, from *Something Like an Autobiography*. Knopf, 1982

What is cinema? The answer to this question is no easy matter. Long ago the Japanese novelist Shiga Naoya presented an essay written by his grandchild as one of the most remarkable prose pieces of his time. He had it published in a literary magazine. It was entitled "My Dog," and ran as follows: My dog resembles a bear; he also resembles a badger; he also resembles a fox. . . ." It proceeded to enumerate the dog's special characteristics, comparing each one to yet another animal, developing into a full list of the animal kingdom. However, the essay closed with, "But since he's a dog, he most resembles a dog." I remember bursting out laughing when I read this essay, but it makes a serious point. Cinema resembles so many other arts. If cinema has very literary characteristics, it also has theatrical qualities, philosophical side, attributes of painting and sculpture and musical elements. But cinema is, in the final analysis cinema.

With a good script a good director can produce a masterpiece; with the same script a mediocre director can make a passable film. But with a bad script even a good director can't possibly make a good film. For cinematic expression, the camera and the microphone must be able to cross both fire and water. That is what makes a real movie. The script must be something that has the power to do this.

Many people choose to follow the actor's movements with a zoom lens. Although the most natural way t approach the actor with the cameras is to move it at the speed he moves, many people wait until he stops moving and then zoom in on him. I think this is very wrong. The camera should follow the actor as he moves; it should stop when he stops. If this rule is not followed, the audience will become conscious of the camera.

I think...that the current method of lighting for color film is wrong. In order to bring out the colors, the entire frame is flooded with light. I always say the lighting should be treated as it is for black-and-white film, whether the colors are strong or not, so that the shadows come out right.

I changed my thinking about musical accompaniment from the time Hayasaka Fumio began working wit me as the composer of my film scores. Up until that time film music was nothing more than accompaniment – for a sad scene there was always sad music. This is the way most people use music, and it is effective. But from Drunken Angel onward, I have used light music for some key sad scenes, and my way of using music has differed from the norm – I don't put it in

where most people do. Working with Hayasaka, I began to think in terms of the counterpoint of sound and image as opposed to the union of sound and image.

I am often asked why I don't pass on to young people what I have accomplished over the years. Actually I would like very much to do so. Ninety-nine percent of those who worked as my assistant directors have now become directors in their own right. But I don't think any of them took the trouble to learn the most important things..

from Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*.. Duke U Press, 2000. The Search for Japaneseness

Throne of Blood (*Kumonosujo*, 1957) is one of the most frequently discussed Kurosawa films. This is not surprising when we think about the film's remarkable beauty and formal precision. Almost every aspect of the film (e.g., sets, acting, camera work, editing) demonstrates the originality and superb craftsmanship of Kurosawa as a filmmaker. In other words, the film has a number of intrinsic merits that justify the kind of attention it has received critically. Yet they are not the only reasons why *Throne of Blood* has been regarded as a unique film among Kurosawa's work. The popularity of *Throne of Blood* as an object of critical analysis is inseparable from the fact that it is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and it is precisely this relation that has gotten the most attention. Kurosawa criticism has meticulously noted and enumerated the similarities and differences between Kurosawa's film and Shakespeare's play partly because of the following "paradox": *Throne of Blood* is regarded as the best adaptation of Shakespeare's work into film, yet at the same time among many Shakespeare adaptations it departs from Shakespeare's text most radically.

Frank Kermode simply refuses to consider *Throne of Blood* in his review Shakespearean films because he sees it as "an allusion to rather than a version of, *Macbeth*."

Macbeth is not the only original source to which *Throne of Blood* is compared. Another source mentioned frequently by critics is Noh. In fact, the study of the film's connection to Shakespeare's text and the study of the film's borrowing of Noh conventions are often pursued simultaneously. For many critics, the influence of Noh in the film is precisely what makes it unique and successful. They agree that Kurosawa's superb use of Noh makes *Throne of Blood* an aesthetically complete, yet unlike other Kurosawa films from the same period, anti-humanistic film.

In short, the film's possible sources, whether Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Noh, traditional Japanese ink painting, or Japanese history, do not solve interpretive questions arising when we see the film but raise more questions that need to be dealt with in our interpretation of the film.

Adaptation is one of the least-explored topics in contemporary film theory. As a critical topic, it is mostly ignored, and sometimes even stigmatized, as an obsolete issue. What makes adaptation a questionable topic is the implied notion of fidelity; that is whenever adaptation is discussed, the adaptation's fidelity to the original almost inevitably comes up. Yet fidelity is a misleading and unproductive notion because it establishes a hierarchical relation between original and adaptation, and also because it assumes that there is some uniform set of standards for comparing the two artworks in different media. What is ignored in both is not only the specificity of the adaptation but also that of the original....In what I shall call the discourse of adaptation, the original is always valorized over the adaptation, which is never granted autonomy regardless of its aesthetic value. The discourse of adaptation is therefore less the discourse of aesthetics than that of power.

The reception of Shakespeare in modern Japan is inseparable from the questions of Western imperialism and hegemony maintained by the unequal production and distribution of cultural capital.

Despite its use of Noh and other types of traditional Japanese art, *Throne of Blood* has little to do with the affirmation of Japaneseness. Nor is it an attempt to create a new national film style. Instead, Kurosawa simultaneously tries to expand the possibility of film form and reexamine the specific history and genre conventions of Japanese cinema. *Throne of Blood* is a unique film made by a true innovator of cinema.

from James Goodwin: *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. James Goodwin. Johns Hopkins Baltimore 1994

The film dialogue makes no attempt to transpose Shakespeare's poetry into Japanese. Instead, the visuals create the film's metaphoric imagery. The film characters speak only from the necessity of a present situation, They are not developed through the reflective thought Shakespeare provides in asides and monologues.

In the representation of the Forest Castle setting, the film's compositions are designed to foreshorten and compress visual perspective. Extensive use of the telephoto lens was favored by Kurosawa to achieve an effect that "effaces distance, cancels all perspective and gives to the image a weight, a presence almost hallucinatory, making the rhythms of movement emerge." In collaboration with scenic designer Yoshiro Muraki, the director decided that for Forest Castle the location "should be high on Mount Fuji, because of the fog and the black volcanic soil. But...we created something which never came from any single historical period. To emphasize the psychology of the hero, driven by compulsion, we made the interiors wide with low ceilings and squat pillars to create the effect of oppression."

In its modulations of compositional scale, the film depicts events as progressively larger than the individual's power to control them.

The passage of time, which is extraordinarily accelerated in the Shakespeare play, is hastened further in *Throne of Blood*. As messengers report to Tsuzuki and his war council at the outset, the wipe cut is utilized as a visual figure for precipitous change in the course of events.

Kurosawa has stated that his intentions for *Seven Samurai* and for this film were to present jidai-geki [period dramas] that are historically informed at the same time that they are visualized in a

completely modern and dynamic manner. His concern for history, however, is not limited to matters of authenticity in sets and costumes. In all his jidai-geki Kurosawa demonstrated a preference for eras of disruption in samurai culture, of massive social upheaval, or of civil war. For *Throne of Blood* he had in mind the Sengoku period of civil wars (1467-1568) when there were frequent incidents of gekokujo, the overthrow of a superior by his own retainers.

Another indication of Kurosawa's reorientation of tragic meaning in the film is its elimination of nearly al the scenes of pathos and acknowledged guilt in Macbeth. In the context of a conclusive pattern of defeated ambition and vain effort, of absolute futility, heroic fate is impossible. Tragedy in this film is mankind's general heritage rather than an individual destiny. From the distant, almost geological, perspective in time that the prologue and epilogue establish, dramatic action becomes less experiential and more elemental, more emblematic.

Kurosawa values Noh for its symbolic range, dramatic compression, manner of understatement, and its fusion of form and substance. Noh has taught the film director much about the dramatic impact of economy in acting, set design, and sound accompaniment:

"In Noh there is a certain hieratic property: one moves as little as possible. Also, the smallest gesture, the smallest displacement produces an effect truly intense and violent.

Now, Noh actors are all veritable acrobats....But in general the actors conserve their energy, the avoid all unnecessary actions. There, to my mind, lies one of the secrets of Noh."

Through its ceremonial, elemental, and contrastive method of presentation, Noh makes the properties of stillness and vehemence coexist on the stage. *Throne of Blood* achieves similar visual and dramatic rhythms that measure blank expanses against character movement, stillness against recklessness, passivity against vitality, and sparse sound signals or silence against shouts and sounds of battle. Kurosawa's uses of Noh forms and sources remain modern and deliberately intertextual in his film.

Kurosawa prepared each principal actor by assigning a Noh mask for the basis of characterization. For Toshiro Mifune's performance as Washizu the model was the Heida mask, by tradition the face of the warrior in his prime. In the context of Throne of Blood, there is an ironic discrepancy in this image, since the Heida mask indicates a man of greatness who conquers evil spirits. The mask named Mika-zuki (crescent moon) is the face of a wrathful warrior and it may have inspired Kurosawa's choice of the symbolic crescent moon to mark Washizu's reign.

The use of facial closeups in *Throne of Blood* is noticeably sparing, particularly in comparison to psychological interpretations of Shakespeare such as Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971). Polanski relies on the closeup to visualize a play of emotion and consciousness on the faces of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, often while their most revealing thoughts are delivered through voice-over. In his own cinema of the early 1950s—particularly in *The Idiot* and *Ikuru*—there is great dependence on the closeup and the reaction shot in dialogue scenes for the disclosure of character psychology. The human face in *Throne of Blood*, most often seen at a distance that objectifies its appearance, is a social mask. The character motives behind such a mask are to control the social meaning of one's presence and to control the interpersonal situation.

Kurosawa recognized that in Throne of Blood he violated the norms of intimate drama:

"I tried to show everything using the full-shot. Japanese almost never make films in this way and remember I confused my staff thoroughly with my instructions. They were so used to moving up for moments of emotion, and I told them to move farther back. In this way I suppose you would call the film experimental."

Such experimentation with the camera's remoteness from the dramatic center of action had been by that time conducted rigorously in the cinema of Kenji Mizoguchi. When a sequence in *Throne of Blood* does cut to closeup, the face is fixed in expression in the character's reaction to events for the duration of the shot.

Kurosawa has described characterization on the basis of the mask as "the opposite of acting." In Western theatrical traditions that follow the method of Constantin Stanislavsky, the actor develops and impersonates the unique individuality of the character through analysis of the psychology of that particular personality. The Noh actor, through study of the omote ("outside") or dramatic mask, expresses and exterior image of the spirit or essence of character. The mask represents a transformation of character into symbol. In assuming the mask, the Noh actor places a symbolic image on the surface of character. As a consequence, the presentation of a Noh character's experience is based upon ideas rather than personality and upon an image of emotion rather than raw emotion itself. Masked drama produces a "distancing effect" between character and audience, and this quality has figured prominently in modern Western cultural innovation by writers as dissimilar as Ezra Pound and Bertholt Brecht.

Kurosawa's adoption of Noh methods for *Throne of Blood* facilitates the creation of an unheroic film tragedy. Its protagonist is not depicted as the sole or even primary agent of dramatic events. Audience understanding of his character is developed through objective, external means rather than through emotional identification. Washizu is not possessed of any greatness, either inward or outward, that would enable him to withstand and govern the forces that propel him. Not once does he voice his inner drives. The spinner-prophet and Lady Asaji dictate to him the urgings of ambition that they attribute to his own desires. The stature of Washizu's feelings, thoughts, and actions is further diminished by the film's impersonal scale of events and the unworldly scope of time.

from "'Throne of Blood': The Value and Meaning of Kurosawa's Fog-Drenched Masterpiece" (*Cinephilia & Beyond*)

After making *Rashomon* in 1950, Akira Kurosawa set his eyes on making a film based on William Shakespeare's 'Macbeth.' Since Orson Welles' version was announced somewhere around that time, he decided to put it on hold, switched his attention to other

projects and returned to the idea in the second half of the decade. In 1957, he finally made *Throne of Blood*, a film mostly ignored by the Western audiences at the time, but a marvelous piece of filmmaking that would soon acquire the reputation of one of the all-time best film adaptations of the world's most celebrated poet's work. Interestingly enough, Kurosawa wrote the screenplay with the intention of hiring another director to actually make the film, while he would take on the producer's role. When Toho Studios realized the potential expenses of making such a film, they asked Kurosawa to shoot it himself. Keeping the same core of the original play, which is sometimes simply called *The Scottish Play* due to the superstition surrounding its cursed status, Kurosawa took a lot of liberties with the material, and this turned out to be one of the film's greatest assets. By transferring Shakespeare's work to 16th century Japan, Kurosawa created a unique and mesmerizing mix of Western and Japanese cultures. To be more precise, *Throne of Blood* could be called the mixture of two distinct aesthetics: the aesthetics of the Western and that of the traditional Japanese Noh Theatre. Noh or Nogaku is a form of classical Japanese musical drama performed since the 14th century and is considered the oldest major theater art still performed these days, and is distinguished by the use of stylized masks functioning as the primary visual means for conveying emotions. The same approach was used by Kurosawa, as the faces of his characters heavily echo this practice. While in 'Macbeth' it's open to interpretation to what degree free will influences the course of an individual's life, as opposed to some kind of divine will, Kurosawa settled for a less ambiguous interpretation. Describing himself as an ordinary man observing both the history of Japan and the contemporary society he was a part of, Kurosawa chose to explore the theme of greed, corruption and ambition, the never-ceasing and ultimately self-destructing hunger for power he felt functioned in a cyclical form, constantly repeating itself along with all of it destructive consequences over and over again. He finds the fault not in the sky: his protagonist isn't just an actor, a pawn performing the lines written in the stars. His ultimate demise is the direct consequence of his inner self, his nature and the classic cautionary tale of the ancient wisdom that says that when we strive to prevent something from happening with all our energy and power, it's our actions that usually make the wretched thing happen. Kurosawa's Macbeth is called Taketoki Washizu (played by the brilliant Toshirô Mifune, the filmmaker's greatest and most reliable acting collaborator), a skilled general who starts believing in a prophecy he would become the ruler and following his ambitious, manipulative wife Asaji's (the great Isuzu Yamada) advice and urging. Both Washizu and Asaji slowly get consumed by the psychological consequences of their gruesome actions, with her descent into madness and his inevitable demise in one of the best death scenes in the history of film.

Throne of Blood seems cold, distant, presenting characters we're not supposed to sympathize with. Kurosawa shot the film as something the audience should look at and absorb a lesson, not become a part of the story by entering the minds of the persons whose life paths they witness. Because of this, it's easy to say *Throne of Blood* is a cautionary tale, but such a classification is used without any ounce of intention of belittling its quality and greatness. It's a visual spectacle, with the castle exteriors built high up on the slopes of Mount Fuji, where heavy fog and black volcanic dirt were practically regular inhabitants. The film was shot by cinematographer Asakazu Nakai, with whom Kurosawa worked on *Seven Samurai* and would later reunite for *Ran*, another one of his great Shakespeare adaptations. *Throne of Blood* was shot in black-and-white, with the contrasts, omnipresent fog, expressionless faces and visual symbolism creating the feeling that what you're actually watching is someone's own personal nightmare. Yoshiro Muraki, the production designer, explained the design of the castle was based on ancient Japanese scrolls, with the color black chosen for the walls and armor added to complement the general visual style of the film. The screenplay was co-written by Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, Hideo Oguni and Ryûzô Kikushima, with Toho Studios regular and Kurosawa's favorite composer Masaru Satô delivering the score, while the director himself edited the picture.

Kurosawa's film was hailed by a number of prominent film and literary critics from all corners of the world. The American literary critic Harold Bloom called it the most successful film version of 'Macbeth,' the poet T. S. Elliot stated it was his favorite film, Time magazine cited it as the most brilliant and original attempt ever made to put Shakespeare in pictures, while the critics universally appreciated its values. *Throne of Blood* is definitely one of the most haunting, beautiful and original adaptations we've seen, and even if Orson Welles, Roman Polanski or Justin Kurzel's variants of this story are closer to what you believe to be a perfect version of 'Macbeth' on film, it's impossible to shake off the value of Kurosawa's grandiose effort. *Throne of Blood* is a moody, intense, poetically shot movie that history will remember as one of the Japanese master's best.

from Donald Richie: *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*

Kurosawa did not intend this film for himself. "Originally, I wanted merely to produce the picture and let someone younger direct it. But when the script was finished and Toho saw how expensive it would be, they asked me to direct it. So I did. My contract expired after these next three films anyway." Perhaps if he had written the script with himself in mind he might have written it differently. He has said that the scripts he does for others are usually much richer in visuals than those he does for himself—and *The Throne of Blood* is visually extremely rich. But what occurred, he says, is that he often visualized scenes differently from the way he had written them. Not that he improvised, or invented on the set. "I never do that. I tried it once. Never again. I had to throw out all of the impromptu stuff." What he did do, once he knew he was to direct the picture, was to begin a study of the traditional Japanese tnushae—those early picture

scrolls of battle scenes. At the same time he asked Kohei Esaki—famous for continuing this genre—to be the art consultant. The designer, Yoshiro Muraki, remembers: "We studied old castle layouts, the really old ones, not those white castles we still have around. And we decided to use black and armored walls since they would go well with the suiboku'ga (ink-painting) effect we planned with lots of mist and fog. That also is the reason we decided that the locations should be high on Mount Fuji, because of the fog and the black volcanic soil. But… we created something which never came from any single historical period. To emphasize the psychology of the hero, driven by compulsion, we made the interiors wide with low ceilings and squat pillars to create the effect of oppression."

Kurosawa remembers that "first, we built an open set at the base of Fuji with a flat castle rather than a real three-dimensional one. When it was ready, it just didn't look right. For one thing, the roof tiles were too thin and this would not do. I insisted and held out, saying I could not possibly work with such limitations, that I wanted to get the feeling of the real thing from wherever I chose to shoot." Consequently, Toho having learned from *Seven Samurai* onward that Kurosawa would somehow get his way, the entire open set was dismantled. "About sets," Kurosawa has admitted: "I'm on the severe side. This is from *Ikiru* onward. Until then we had to make do with false-fronts. We didn't have the material. But you cannot expect to get a feeling of realism if you use, for example, cheap new wood in a set which is supposed to be an old farm-house. I feel very strongly about this. After all, the real life of any film lies just in its being as true as possible to appearances."

After a further argument with Ezaki, who wanted a high and towering castle while Kurosawa wanted a low and squat one, the set eventually used was built—to Kurosawa's specifications (which were extreme: even the lacquer-ware had to be especially made, from models which he found in museums). "It was a very hard film to make. I decided that the main castle set had to be built high up on Fuji and we didn't have enough people and the location was miles from Tokyo. Fortunately there was a U.S. Marine Corps base nearby and they helped a lot. We all worked very hard, clearing the ground, building the set, and doing the whole thing on this steep, fog-bound slope. An entire MP battalion helped most of the time. I remember it absolutely exhausted all of us—we almost got sick." Actually, only the castle exteriors were shot here. The castle courtyard (with volcanic soil brought all the way from Fuji so that the ground would match) was constructed at Toho's Tamagawa studios in the suburbs, and the interiors were shot in a smaller Tokyo studio. In addition, the forest scenes were a combination of actual Fuji forest and studio in Tokyo, and Washizu's mansion was miles away from anywhere, in the Izu peninsula.

I remember this set particularly. Like all the others it was completely three dimensional and was, in effect, a real mansion set in the midst of rice paddies in an almost inaccessible valley. I remember it particularly because I was there when Kurosawa visualized a scene. Though it was in the script, there had been little indication as to how it would be seen and, after some thought the night before, Kurosawa had decided. The scenes included those where a messenger comes announcing the arrival of the lord and his hunting party. Washizu, already thinking of murder, rushes out of his mansion, astonished that fortune should at this time direct that the lord appear for the night. The first camera was on a platform inside the mansion gates, and the second was located in the rice-field outside, the two cameras hidden from each other by an angle in the wall. Kurosawa was on the platform, looking through the finder, and selecting the angle he thought best. There was one rehearsal and then the take. From the far distance, the messenger galloped up on horseback and announced the lord. The castle retainers rushed out of the gate and the scene was stopped because one of them slipped and fell down. "A little too much atmosphere," said Kurosawa, everyone laughed, and the scene was re-shot.

The main camera was taking this scene from inside the gates, while the auxiliary camera was taking it from the side. The next scene, a continuation of the first, shot the messenger giving his message and the main camera was equipped with long-distance lenses. After this was shot, the two cameras, both with long-distance lenses, shot the distant hunting party (complete with deer and boar, an enormous procession) advancing. The next shot in this small sequence was to show Mifune rushing out as the distraught Washizu. Mifune practiced running back and forth to get himself properly winded, and the take was made, with both cameras panning with him, one with long-distance lenses. Then more scenes were taken of the advancing hunting party, its number now swelled by all the neighborhood farmers that the production chief could find costumes for. Particularly fine were those rushes of the advancing hunting party, both the long silhouette shots and, later, the advance, taken with long-distance lenses which flattened the figures out and looked like a medieval tapestry. After they were taken Kurosawa said he was pleased. "I have about ten times more than I need."

In the finished film this morning's work takes ten seconds. Gone are the living tapestries ("they only held up the action") ; the wonderful turning shots of the messenger ("I don't know—they looked confused to me") ; a splendid entrance of Mifune skidding to a stop ("you know, Washizu wasn't that upset"); and a lovely framing shot of the procession seen through the gate ("too pretty"). I still think of Kurosawa that morning, up on his platform, directing everything,

always quiet, suggesting rather than commanding, looking through the view-finders, getting down to run through the mud to the other camera, making jokes, getting just what he wanted. And then—having the courage, the discipline to choose from that morning's richness just these few frames which contained what would best benefit the film. And, all the time, making the definitive statement on man's solitude, his ambition, his self-betrayal.

COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, FALL 2020, SERIES 41:

Sept 22: Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal/Det sjunde inseglet* (1957)
Sept 29: Marcel Camus, *Black Orpheus/Orfeo Negro* (1959)
Oct 6: Luis Buñuel, *The Exterminating Angel/El ángel exterminador* (1962)
Oct 13: Jean-Pierre Melville, *Le Samuraï* (1967)
Oct 20: Sergio Leone, *Once Upon a Time in the West/C'era una volta il West*, (1968)
Oct 27: Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris/ Солярис* (1972)
Nov 3: Werner Herzog, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God/Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972)
Nov 10: Richard Rush, *The Stunt Man* (1980)
Nov 17: Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire/Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987)
Nov 24: Krzystof Kieślowski, *Three Colors; Red/ Trois coleurs: Rouge/ Trzy kolory. Czerwony* (1994)
Dec 1: Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

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