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divine. They are set adrift, often slowly slipping into insanity as they strive to see the face of God yet only see their own horrified reflections framed in the screen, filling most of the view.

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See also: Dogme 95; Mysticism.

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Kurosawa, Akira (1910–1998)

Akira Kurosawa is without question Japan's most famous filmmaker and among the dozen most influential directors in film history. Over a 50-year period—from the release of *Sugata Sanshirô* (1943) to that of *Madadayo* (1993)—Kurosawa produced 30 films, 8 to 10 of which are considered to be masterpieces.

One of the most remarkable works of world cinema, Kurosawa's *Rashômon* (1950) was adapted from two short stories by the early-20th-century writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927). Famously, the film tells a tale—of the rape of a woman and the murder of a *samurai*—from four different perspectives, thereby deconstructing the viewer's sense of truth and fact. The most overtly philosophical of Kurosawa's major works, *Rashômon* sets in motion the director's unique brand of skeptical humanism. Four characters provide conflicting reports of the events—a nameless woodcutter, a bandit, the samurai's wife, and even, via a *miko* (medium), the murdered samurai—while a Buddhist priest and a commoner respectively narrate and provide commentary on the various stories.

Given the whirlwind mix of sex, death, power, honor, punishment, guilt, and shame, it is hardly surprising that each of the characters has something to lose from a purely factual recounting of the events. Who killed whom? Was the death an honorable suicide, the result of a heroic (or comic) duel, or a shameful defeat by the sword of a dirty bandit? Was the woman raped or did she willingly go with the bandit,

Japanese director Akira Kurosawa at the Cannes International Film Festival, 1980. AP Photo/Levy.

casting off her husband? Kurosawa, here as in his later *samurai* films, turns a critical though not wholly dismissive eye toward values such as loyalty and honor, which seem so often to be swallowed up by our very worst tendencies: greed, pride, malice. It is not so much that each of the *Rashômon* characters is engaged in outright falsehood but that they may be deceiving themselves most of all, caught up in their respective webs of self-justifying illusions. This, if anything, is their sin—the inability or unwillingness to see through the illusions that ground their very identities as consistent and unchangeable "selves." Interpreted this way, *Rashômon* takes on a distinctively Buddhist flavor. From a Buddhist perspective, the moral failure of the characters can be attributed in large part to their egos, which bind them to an illusory world—one that is ultimately as harmful to themselves as to those around them.

At the end of the film, the humble priest is clearly shaken by learning of the evil ways of all those involved—including the woodcutter, who eventually confesses to witnessing the crime and afterwards stealing the woman's valuable dagger. The final scene—added by Kurosawa to the original story—restores the priest's faith in humanity, as the woodcutter repents of his sins and offers to raise an abandoned baby discovered by the interlocutors.

Inspired by Leo Tolstoy's 1886 novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Ikiru* (1952; literally "to live") is a powerful meditation on the meaning of one man's actions amid the seeming absurdity of life. Trapped in a dead-end job and surrounded by a selfish and loveless family, Kanji Watanabe discovers that he has six months left to live. This sets up a classic and universal dilemma: how should he spend his last days on earth, knowing that the end is imminent? Watanabe's attempts at live the life of pleasure are soon abandoned—*la dolce vita* strikes him as hollow and frivolous. Inspired by an encounter with a vivacious young coworker who finds meaning in her job as a toy maker, Watanabe makes it the goal of his remaining

time to transform a filthy neighborhood area into a children's playground. Despite encountering frustrating setbacks from the local bureaucracy, his persistence pays off and the old man dies in peace. At his wake, his drunken coworkers vow to change their own lives, but the sober light of dawn finds them immersed in the same routines as the day before.

Although some critics have read *Ikiru* as a Christian allegory of sacrifice (Watanabe as the "suffering servant")—which is plausible given the Tolstoyan roots of the story—upon closer inspection the "spiritual" themes of *Ikiru* do not fit so easily into Christian understanding. For one, there is little to indicate that Watanabe acquires any sort of faith in a higher power. Watanabe's enlightenment can be best interpreted from a Buddhist perspective as a sudden but dramatic recognition of the reality of change and the consequent acceptance of death. Despite some readings of the director's work, of *Ikiru* and others, Kurosawa is not interested in positing a (western) heroic individualism against the confining structures of (Japanese) society and family. Rather, he contrasts the possibility of an open and dynamic "self" based on compassion for others, with the closed and ultimately illusory "self" ostensibly bound to social codes but in fact rooted in human weaknesses such as greed, anger, and delusion.

Finally, it is worth noting that the young lady who provides inspiration for Watanabe is, for all her boundless energy, a rather ordinary person. When asked about her life, she responds that she simply "works and eats"—a line reflective of the earthy realism of some currents of Zen Buddhism, where awakening is to be found in a concentrated awareness amid the vagaries of life. Or, in a more existentialist vein, the meaning of life can be found only in concentrated action—in the meaning that we give to what we do.

The connection between Kurosawa's *samurai* films and American westerns runs deep. Yet Kurosawa's *jidai-geki* (period pieces) are frequently satirical and darkly comic—deconstructing in fundamental ways the very basis of the traditional samurai drama (or western, for that matter). This is most evident in the character of *Sanjûrô* in both *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Tsubaki Sanjûrô* (1962). Essentially amoral though heroic in his determination and fighting skills, he is a figure who goes out of his way to reject the ideals of "proper" samurai behavior. (It is not incidental that Kurosawa's samurai heroes are *rōnin*—masterless warriors—who are poor, hungry, and literally looking for something to do.) In these films, those who attempt to follow *bushidō* (the samurai code) most strictly come across as pompous or at best ridiculous. *Bushidō* values of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and honor are held up to ridicule in *Yojimbo* and (especially) *Sanjûrô* and are questioned throughout *Kakushi-toride no san-akunin* (*The Hidden Fortress*, 1958) and *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, 1954), where the good and bad alike are

ultimately trumped by the ugly. It is often unclear what the warriors are fighting for other than their daily bread and a bit of amusement. Violence appears real and thus is rarely glorified—more often it verges on the comic or the grotesque.

All of this might be read as a rejection by Kurosawa of traditional Japanese values, but it is more plausibly seen as his rejection of the illusions of an idealized and imagined past or present in favor of a focus on the world as it really is, with all its blights and boils. The truly heroic man (in Kurosawa the heroes are inevitably men) is one who is able to face the ugliness of reality (especially of human beings) and still, through his actions, find meaning and purpose in life. Ultimately, the truth lies less in the telling than in the doing—a message that resonates well within Japanese religion, which tends to favor *orthopraxis* over *orthodoxy*. Our very beliefs and assumptions—especially if they do not account for change—may be the biggest stumbling blocks in our human quest.

Kumonosu jô (*Throne of Blood*, 1957), Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth*, is transformed by being set in early modern Japan. It draws heavily on Noh theater for its visual and dramatic techniques—a reliance that injects a good measure of Buddhism into the film, taking it far away from the Shakespearean original. Most notably, the emotions of the characters in *Throne of Blood* are abstracted from the characters themselves; they become objectified. Thus the sins of ambition, pride, lust, and cruelty become corruptions of the general human condition and perhaps the very condition of nature itself. In *Throne of Blood* and to varying degrees in *Donzoko* (*The Lower Depths*, 1957), *Kagemusha* (1980), and *Ran* (1985; literally "chaos"), Kurosawa's sceptical (and quixotic) humanism is overtaken by despair at the fallen state of humanity, the brevity of life, and the inexorable workings of fate (or karma). Ironically, the final scenes of *Ran* include a number of Buddhist images, yet here the emphasis is clearly on the darker, more world-denying aspects of Buddhism: the sufferings of the Avīci hells, the battles of the Asura demons, and the emergence of the age of *mappō*, the "end of the Dharma."

Kurosawa's final films, produced while he was in his eighties, step back from the awful precipice to which *Ran* appears to have led. In these three films, made over a four-year period, the tone is quiet, thoughtful, and decidedly less pessimistic. The heroes are themselves elderly men and children, evoking a theme of innocence not seen in Kurosawa since the 1940s.

Although sometimes criticized in his homeland for being too "western" in both his technique and his choice of stories of his films—many of which, like *Ikiru*, *Throne of Blood*, *Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low*, 1963), and *Ran* were adapted from western literature—Kurosawa was also indebted to both Kabuki (*Tora no o wo fumu otokotachi* [*The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*], 1945) and Noh (*Throne of Blood*) traditions as well as Japanese *jidai-geki* (*Rashômon* and the samurai films). As a result of such eclecticism and given his own self-description

as a *citoyen du monde*, it is hardly surprising to find a wide range of religious elements in Kurosawa's oeuvre.

Taken as a whole, Kurosawa's films display a deep and abiding humanism, yet one that refuses to get lost in lofty ideals or otherworldly realms. It is a humanism that pushes on in spite of the facts, including, most importantly, the blurred lines that exist between right and wrong, good and evil, friend and foe, heaven and hell. Something like the doctrine of karma—which in its simplest form teaches that acts breed (moral) consequences—seems to underlie Kurosawa's ethos. At least in his earlier works, karmic law is tempered by an emphasis on the power of the will to transform oneself, one's behavior, and one's surroundings by a kind of contagion of goodness. This is also the correct Buddhist interpretation of karma, although it has often been taken in a more deterministic manner, akin to what we find in Kurosawa's later films, like *Kagemusha* and *Ran.*

Kurosawa's heroes go through a period of internal—perhaps spiritual—crisis, leading them to change the way they live. For all the implied criticism of Japanese (especially Confucian-derived) social norms, the Kurosawan hero, at least in the earlier films, combines a very Japanese mixture of dogged determination and stoic patience—along with a touch of the quixotic. The film's resolution becomes an acting out—a *realization* in both senses of the term—of the hero's awakening experience. Yet things are rarely perfectly resolved, as the final scenes of *Ikiru* and *Seven Samurai* indicate. Indeed, it appears that the better nature of the hero will often be what causes or nearly causes his downfall (as in *Yojimbo*). One of the ironies of Kurosawan enlightenment is that it entails the knowledge that the lines between good and evil are blurred, and thus compassion—while still a virtue—may not lead to happiness, at least in any worldly sense. All we can do is to keep our eyes wide open and be assiduous.

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See also: Buddhism; Japan; Leone, Sergio.

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