

## Japanese Folklore and Kurosawa's *Dreams*

by Paul Otis



Episode One, "Sunshine Through the Rain."

The fox bride and groom suspect that they are being watched.

Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*, released in Paris 1990, provides three brief visually stunning episodes that turn on Japanese folklore, each episode offering the teacher and student special insight into the context of folklore in Japanese life, even into the late twentieth century. The Warner Brothers home video contains the eight complete episodes, each of approximately eight minutes; however, only the first three are the concern of this review. Episode Five, "Crows," focused on van Gogh, and the concluding "Village of the Water Wheels," although outside the

revealed through a series of recollected "dreams." The eight dreams are framed within an entry wedding procession (Episode One, "Sunshine Through the Rain") and an exultant funeral dance (Episode Eight, "Village of the Water Wheels") as witnessed by a young traveler who grows without comment from a disobedient boy of nine, spying on a wedding, to a questioning young man at a funeral. Although the film has been publicized as springing from Kurosawa's youth, literally no mention of it is made in any of the reviews accompanying its premiere.

Nobuhiko Obayashi, Kurosawa's most thorough biographer in his *Cahiers du cinéma*<sup>1</sup>, has nothing to say of the folklore embedded in the first three episodes, nor does his documentary film, *The Making of "Dreams,"* at any point in an otherwise illuminating revelation on production and cinematic technique, contribute one word other than to suggest that the house in "Sunshine" "was very similar to my old one in Koishikawa."<sup>2,3</sup>

### SETTING THE STAGE

Kurosawa expresses himself in terms of the vernacular culture, exposing a life common to everyone, but now beset by industrial pollution, environmental decay, and nuclear fears. Central episodes of *Dreams* are replete with atomic horrors, human monsters, and war. The folkloric quality in *Dreams* is established immediately in Episode One but falls away after Episode Three as if to suggest that the content of the central portions of the film have tragically abandoned it.

■ The teacher may be well served to suggest on opening that as Dorson notes,<sup>4</sup> Japan is an ideal place for folk legends to develop in abundance: the people remain in a single geographic locality; there is no frontier (as in America); there is no colonial empire save in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the village (*mura*) is fenced in by mountains, there is ritual at *mura's* edge on returning, there are local deities from whom the villagers believe they are descended, hence there is a powerful sense of individuality and tradition. What travelers there are will carry leg-

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limits of the article, is treated briefly in the conclusion as interesting in themselves and capable of providing special discussion in the classroom. Despite the film's often dismal reviews, it has recently enjoyed frequent showing on American television—perhaps the comments herein will help position portions of the film within literature and humanities courses offered by high school and college teachers.

Elementary teachers from grades three onward will find their pupils readily engage episodes one and two. The spirit of the foxes in the first and the age of the narrator in the second are especially appropriate. Episode three should be reserved for grades nine or later. College instructors will work easily with all three episodes in their discussions at the folkloric level. Extensions such as selective remembrance, nostalgia, filmic quality, and Kurosawa's agenda come easily to mind as students open to the material.

The film purports to be a demonstration of Kurosawa's life (b. March 1910, Tokyo) as

ends about the land, and these are enlivened by the spectacular landscape of water, rivers, lakes, hot springs, pools, shorelines, forests, and volcanoes. A common term for folklore or folk stories is *minwa*, whereas legends are properly called *densetsu*, being simpler in structure and flexible in length, depending upon the narrative.

- BEAUTY is found to be fleeting, temporary, and fragmentary here on earth. As in most literatures, even sorrow is seen as beautiful—witness the cherry blossom falling almost as soon as it comes to life.
- THE POINT OF VIEW is often the singular Japanese use of the narrator's peering from behind something such as a tree or screen (Episode One).
- GODS, MAGIC, AND FOLKLORE are removed from the film after the third episode, but the gods, thriving on dance, music, and ritual, return in the last episode. In the same vein, as there is music only in the first and last episodes, there is dance only in the first and last, again to say that the gods are happy solely with the traditional ways.
- IN FORMER TIMES, people sought dreams at shrines and Buddhist temples; thus, through these dreams, Buddhist divinities would signify their wills and further reveal themselves in waking events. Perhaps this film is Kurosawa's way of returning us to a better and often forgotten time.

For each of the episodes, a brief narrative summary will be followed by the folkloric tradition and suggested classroom application. Printed sources for Japanese folklore are given in endnotes and the bibliography.

### "Sunshine Through the Rain" (*Kitsune no Yome-tori*)

EPISODE ONE

#### NARRATIVE—

The opening dialogue between the boy (Kurosawa-narrator) and his mother has the mother admonish the boy that he mustn't go out. "There is sunshine but it's raining. A fox will become a bride when the weather is like this, and she doesn't want to be seen by anyone. If someone sees her, something horrible could happen to that person." Of course, the boy goes out anyway, spies on the foxes proceeding as from a wedding,



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Episode Two, "Peach Orchard."

A single peach tree remains as a reminder of the past glory of the orchard.

and returns home to find himself locked out by his mother, who, of course, knows what has occurred. "You saw it. You saw something that you shouldn't have seen. I can't let someone who does such things back in the house. Just a while ago, the fox came here and was very angry with you. She left this knife and asked you to kill yourself to apologize. I can't let you in until the fox forgives you."

The boy doesn't know where to find the fox.

The mother responds that the fox's house is under the rainbow, and the boy departs, knife in hand, across a flower-brightened field toward the overarching rainbow.

#### TRADITION—

Foxes are associated with Inari, the god of plenty or the God of Rice. They may serve as messengers, perhaps harkening back to fox worship. Foxes, badgers, and serpents can assume the guise of other animals and of human beings. They may even marry human beings without the human knowing the least thing about it. Likewise, they may bring treasure to their friends, but cause death or humiliation to their enemies. Dorson maintains that the Japanese fox "inhabits a different universe from the European fox, for he is no animal but a demon, a transformer, and a degenerate deity."<sup>5</sup> The Japanese fox is different from the European fox which is typically sly and tricky (see Aesop's fables); the American Pueblo Indian fox of the Southwest is a trickster or a totem object.

#### APPLICATION—

Kurosawa interweaves the fox, the wedding, and the rain shower as told by Redesdale in his *Tales from Old Japan*.<sup>6</sup> In Redesdale's version, the old fox gives up his place as the head of the family, and his son, who is a white fox, works very hard to earn enough money to marry. The son hears of a beautiful lady-fox and resolves to marry her. A meeting is soon arranged, wedding presents are sent from the bridegroom to the lady's house, and there are speeches all round. When this is concluded, a special day is set aside for the bride to go to the bridegroom's house. She is carried in a most solemn procession through the forest during a light sunshiny rain. A shower during sunshine, which is called "the devil beating his wife," in the West, is called in Japan "the fox's bride carried to her husband's house." Hence, the whole of Kurosawa's central

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Episode one, "Sunshine Through the Rain."  
"He left this. You are supposed to kill yourself."

procession and delightfully suspicious dance of the foxes' wedding procession. Later, cubs are born and carried off to the temple of Inari Sama, the patron saint of foxes.

Students may question whether or not the mother is serious about shutting her son out of the house, and then giving him the knife with the suggestion of suicide. Younger students especially will respond at this level, whereas high school and college students may well want to question whether or not this is a good way to introduce folklore. (Is there ever any suggestion of suicide in European folklore? Burning of witches and sleeping death, yes, but not this.) How do younger students respond to the foxes as portrayed by humans? Or, indeed, do they even notice it? Suspended disbelief.

"Peach Orchard"  
(*Hina-Matsuri*), a retelling of  
"The Peach Boy" (*Momotarō*),  
EPISODE TWO

NARRATIVE—

The child-narrator brings *dango* (sweet dumplings) into the room and stands watching his sister and her friends sitting before a large *hinadan* (a tiered stand with many dolls). Suddenly he sees a singular girl apart from them near the doorway. Summoning his sister, they find no one, but he runs into the forest in pursuit of the phantom. Arriving at a hillside cleared of its orchard, he is confronted by tiers of traditionally-clad men and women—they are the dolls from the *hinadan* turned into real people. He is admonished as somehow responsible for the cutting of the orchard, but pleads that these trees were his greatest joy. The prince of dolls will not relent, exclaiming that everyone knows that *hinamatsuri* is also called *Momo no sekku* (the Peach Festival). How could it be celebrated without peach trees? The hillside figures dance, and he is given the chance to see once again the peach orchard in all of its springtime radiance. Each human figure is briefly replaced by a wonderful flowering peach tree, but they fade and finally disappear altogether. Only the phantom girl remains. He runs to her only to see her transformed into a diminutive, yet growing peach tree.



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Episode Two, "Peach Orchard."  
"We dolls personify the peach tree."



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Top photo: Episode Two, "Peach Orchard."

The boy says:

"You can buy a peach. But where can you buy a whole orchard in bloom?"

#### TRADITION—

The "Peach Boy" is probably the best known Japanese folktale. Essentially, it tells of the hero boy who comes to an old couple from a peach which has floated down a stream. He grows into a strong, handsome young man, the perfect son. Determined to repay them, he asks for millet dumplings, because millet is a magical strength-giving food, and sets out on an expedition to the ogre's island. In the standard version, the island is explained as being in the lower world, reached by going down a hole found under a rock. Along the way Momotarō meets a dog and is asked for a millet dumpling, and after eating it, the dog becomes his companion. Soon a monkey and a pheasant are added in the same manner. Once at the ogre's island, they force him to surrender, and taking all of the treasure, return home to the happy parents.

Some versions include a captive princess, others add a crab and a chestnut to the troop.<sup>7</sup>

#### APPLICATION—

This episode is the richest in folklore teaching sources, because in addition to Momotarō, the viewer is treated in the opening scene to the ancient custom of *Hina-matsuri* (also called *Joshi no Sekku*) (Girls' Festival), the 3rd of March. Traditionally, girls gather in one another's homes to visit and display the *Hina* dolls. It was one day when girls could feel important and celebrate their happiness. There is prayer for the girls' health and happiness. Most homes erected the *Hina*-dolls on a four-tiered stage

decorated with peach blossoms and *Hishi-mochi* (three-colored, diamond-shaped rice cakes). *Hishi-mochi* cut into small pieces is roasted and called *Hina-arare*. *Hina-mochi* is arranged from bottom to top in its three colors—white (snow), green (vegetation), and pink (flowers). Thus, there is a representation of the changes in the seasons from winter to spring.

The origin of the festival is found in an ancient Chinese practice in which the misfortune in the human body was transferred to the doll, and the doll was then washed in a river or even set adrift, thus cleansing the person. The practice spread to Japan during the Edo period (1600–1868) and was associated with girls playing with dolls.<sup>8</sup> Teachers interested in extended application can quickly adapt the *hina-matsuri* material to classroom use even to the point of costume making.

If one looks closely, it can be made out that one of the dolls is missing from its tier, leading to the speculation that Kurosawa has blended the two folktales to his dramatic purpose. The teacher may also lead students to Akutagawa Ryunosuke's *The Dolls*,<sup>9</sup> completed in 1923. The story is set some time after the Meiji emperor was returned to power and begins his revolutionary turn toward the West. With the collapse of feudalism, many of Japan's finest families were impoverished. Traditional objects such as *Hina* dolls were not consistent with the new outlook, and so in this story the family heirlooms are sold outright. Akutagawa finds expression for his unhappiness with the Western ideas around him, and returns the girl of the story back to the past.<sup>10</sup>

#### "Snow-Woman" (*Yuki Onna*), EPISODE THREE

#### NARRATIVE—

Several climbers are caught in a frightening snowstorm high on a mountainside, remote from their camp. Tired and collapsing, they are urged on by their leader, yet finally he, too, falls into the drifts. In the midst of more wind and snow, a beautiful young woman appears. Covering the leader with her shawl, she speaks encouragingly to him. However, as he sleeps on, she changes gradually into an ugly ghost-like being, all the while trying to guide him to a death world. Inwardly intent on surviving, he revives, and she vanishes in a flurry of driven flakes. Awakening the others with shouts and loud clanking of equipment, they flounder a few steps to find their wind-whipped tents welcoming them to safety.

#### TRADITION—

There are several versions of this tale, the least embellished describing a young man who meets a snow-woman one night during a snowstorm in the mountains. Soon she comes to his village and marries him, unrecognized. In one addition, she is forced to take a bath and melts away. In other versions, either her health deteriorates as the weather gets warm, or she leaves her clothes and simply disappears, or waiting ten years of earthly tenure, walks out into another snowstorm. In any event, it is a pretty sad ending.

The nicest retelling of this tale is Lafcadio Hearn's in his *Writings from Japan*.

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Episode Three, "Snow-Woman."

The snow-bound mountain climbers are comforted by the Snow-Woman who enigmatically tells them, "The ice is hot."

APPLICATION—

This adaptation fails to engage most students, simply because not much transpires beyond the shouting and floundering about in the drifts. There may be some disagreement about the dialogue or the snow-woman's intent, and reference to the written text can yield some rewarding points. If the journal collection *Asian Folklore Studies* is available, students may with some interest find a number of variations on the tale which can further any argument.

The appearance of *Yuki Onna* is dramatic and replicates quite exactly the color illustration accompanying a version of the tale in Davis's *Myths and Legends*.

"Village of the Water Wheels,"  
EPISODE EIGHT

This final episode is not grounded in any particular folktale, but rather represents Kurosawa's closure of the film and a personal statement.

NARRATIVE—

The young narrator enters to find an old man working alone at a wheel-like affair.

"What is this village called?"

"There's no name for it. We just call it 'Village.'"

"Is there a festival going on here today?"

"No. It's a funeral. But don't be sad. From the beginning, funerals were considered good things. A person should be happy about death if he lived well, worked hard, and had people around him saying 'Good-bye' before he goes to another world."

**Editor's Note:** A video version of *Dreams* (VHS, color/120 minutes, English subtitles, Number 11911) may be obtained from:

Warner Brothers Home Video  
A Time Warner Company  
4000 Warner Blvd.  
Burbank, CA 91522

The young man carries him further, asking about the lack of lighting. The old man responds, "It is supposed to be dark at night, isn't it? We don't need to light up the darkness and make it like a sunshiny day. We are trying to do whatever we can to live with nature. But nowadays people tend to forget that they, too, are a part of nature; they think they can make things better. . . . The most important things for mankind are fresh air and clean water."

As the funeral procession nears, the old man tells him that the funeral is for the first woman that he ever loved, but it didn't last long, and he married someone else. The old man joins the dancers while the narrator watches them exit, leaving himself, the trees, the rocks, the flowers, the stream, and music to themselves.

The film is circular, ending just as it began. Music attends the gods and their nature—man is a singular witness at best. Students find this intellectually satisfying and can respond with remarkable insight, not only to the film as art, but to Kurosawa's part in bringing us a paean to nature and an appreciation of what has been.<sup>11</sup>

Curtain

The teacher who brings a "foreign" film into the classroom takes on added problems, especially should the film include subtitles as does Kurosawa's *Dreams*. Large high school or college classes of thirty-five or forty students looking at a distant, miniature TV monitor quickly lose the sense of drama and inclusion necessary to a careful following of any film—the spoken words fade away behind the sound of the car alarm in the adjacent parking lot, the white printed subtitles distance themselves beside the inevitable student monitor with a pass to the counselor (nurse, security, textbook clerk). A video projector mounted on a cart and available throughout a department works wonders in raising student appreciation of film. Its large movie screen projection and attendant front-placed sound are certainly worth the expenditure.

Naturally enough, audiences find portions of *Dreams* visually and emotionally attractive. A reading of this brief piece and a review of the works referenced below will be an initial stride into the unexpected theatre of Japanese folklore. ■

## NOTES

1. *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 431/432 (1993): 36-37. See the chapter entitled "La methode Kurosawa."
  2. Obayashi Nobuhiko's documentary *The Making of 'Dreams'* is available only in Japanese and does not treat all of the episodes. Especially revealing are the production of "Sunshine" and "Crows." Concerning the concluding "Village," Kurosawa says to Obayashi, "I think that one can make good movies even after the age of eighty. The only thing you have to do is to make a lot of them. Then you'll be able to find the proper way of making good movies by your own experiences. I agree with the villager in my movie that people are trying to do things which only make themselves worse off. People don't understand the simplest things."
  3. Critical reviews immediately following its release consistently traced the director as cinematographer and not as mythological storyteller. Terance Rafferty's three-page *New Yorker* essay was particularly critical of Kurosawa's handling of the material and focused discussion primarily to Steven Spielberg and George Lucas's assistance. Stephen Prince's "Memory and Nostalgia in Kurosawa's Dream World," *Post Script*, Vol. 11, No. 1 is digressive and avoids the traditional elements of Japanese folklore.
- For a fairly complete listing of reviews of *Dreams*, see *Film Index International*, British Film Institute, 1994. Software (c) 1994, Chadwyck-Healy, France S.A.
4. Richard M. Dorson, *Folk Legends of Japan*. The text, including an excellent Introduction, extensive collection of stories, Sources, and Bibliography, may well be the best single, lightweight, modern anthology available.
  5. Introduction, xiii.
  6. Algernon B. Redesdale, *Tales from Old Japan*. "The Foxes' Wedding."
  7. See Frederick H. Davis, *Myths and Legends of Japan*, for one of the best versions.
  8. The dolls are displayed in the following fashion. Tiers or steps are erected and covered with a carpet. On the top tier are placed the *Dairi-bina*, the Emperor and Empress. Usually the emperor is placed on the left when seen from the front. A *bombori*, a lamp, is placed to each side. Folding screens are placed behind the two figures. On the second tier, *Sannin-kanjo*, three court ladies, are set. They represent ladies-in-waiting to the emperor and empress. On the third tier we find *Gonin-bayashi*. These five musicians play such instruments as *taiko* (drum), *tsuzumi* (hand drum), or *fue* (flute). Next down are *Udaijin* and *Sadaijin* (two important lords). There may also be set out various chests and food. On the very bottom stagger *Sannin-jogo* (three drunk servants). On the right of them must be a cherry tree, on the left an orange tree. Finally, on both sides should be placed flowers symbolic of spring; peach blossoms are most popular.
  9. *Exotic Japanese Stories*. Trans. Takashi Kojima and John McVittie.
  10. Kurosawa is well acquainted with Akutagawa. It is his *Rashomon* set in the late Heian period at the

end of the twelfth century and a second story of his which Kurosawa adapted for his own *Rashomon*, winner of the 1951 Venice Film Festival.

11. Teachers interested in the Episode titled "Crows" will find only a slight linkage to Japanese folklore. Royall Tyler in his excellent collection *Japanese Tales* relates the story of a crow as magic messenger, but to affix this to Kurosawa's episode may be tenuous. (See in Tyler story number 59, "The Genie.") Kurosawa's "Crows" opens with the young narrator looking at van Gogh's painting titled *Drawbridge at Arles with a group of washerwomen*. See #208 in *A Detailed Catalogue*. The painting is canvas, 21x25 inches, and is seen just so in Kurosawa. It was commonly identified as *Arles* (See letter 469, dated about 17 March, 1888, by Hulsker). Van Gogh also made a watercolor (F 1480) after the first version, on which the name of the bridge is misspelled 'Pont de l'Anglais,' in the same way as in the letters. The true name of the bridge was 'Pont de Langlois,' after the bridge keeper. The painting was exhibited in Tokyo and Kyoto in 1958. Vincent once wrote to Theo, "The Japanese draw quickly, very quickly, like a lightning flash, because their nerves are finer, their feelings simpler" (No. 500). The implication is that Vincent was drawing in a spirit of simple, enlightened Japanese form. The narrator steps into the painting (Obayashi has a lengthy discussion on the technique) and walks through a village (see plate Uitert No. 95, "Street in Auvers," painted May 1890) down to a wheat field (see plate Uitert No. 91, "Wheatfield Seen from the Window of Vincent's Room at the Hospital of Saint-Paul" or *A Detailed Catalogue*, plate No. 257) where he meets van Gogh painting. There is a conversation in English. Crows fly around calling loudly. But van Gogh abruptly sends the narrator away, saying that he is too busy to talk. The narrator leaves and returns to the museum, looking again at the painting where it all began.
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- BOOKS**
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There is an intriguing discussion of the Peach Boy tale and its rendering prior to and during the Pacific War. See pages 250-257. Two films, *Momotarō of the Sky* and *Momotarō—Divine Troops of the Ocean*, are in the Japanese film collection in the Library of Congress.

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**ARTICLES**

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