

Teaching and Interpreting the Works of Kurosawa Akira

By Jan Bardsley and David P. Phillips

Few Japanese artists have won the international attention and critical acclaim enjoyed by filmmaker Kurosawa Akira (b. 1910). His films span a career of over fifty years, and whether framed as period pieces or modern dramas, explore the elusive topography of self and society. The popularity of his films has led to their wide availability on video with English subtitles, and stimulated many books and essays of critical interpretations. This essay will present a brief introduction to Kurosawa's life and work, followed by plans for teaching two of his well-known films in the college classroom: *Ikiru* (To Live), a 1952 film which offers a cynical

this film not only shows Kurosawa's artistic independence (the director constantly fought with war-time censors who wanted the film to show nationalistic spirit and support for the war effort), but also reveals a major theme of Kurosawa's work: the interplay of illusion and reality. The popularity of this film in Japan led to several more, some set in the past world of the warrior, such as *Seven Samurai* (1954), while others, such as *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946) and *Ikiru* (1952), explore illusion and reality in post-war Japan, engaging the personal and political dimensions of social issues. Kurosawa's first international success, as well as his first academy award, came in the early 1950s with *Rashomon*, a film which relates a crime through the accounts of three participants whose quite different perspectives on the event make the viewer wonder whether the notion of truth has any value at all.

Although many know Kurosawa as the most famous Japanese director, his works have both influenced and been influenced by Western arts. *Seven Samurai* (1954), for example, served as the model for *The Magnificent Seven*, while *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) greatly influenced *Star Wars*. Kurosawa found inspiration himself in foreign works, modeling *Throne of Blood* (1951) on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Ran* (1985) on *King Lear*, and *The Idiot* (1958) on Dostoevsky's novel. As Kurosawa freely explores the western canon and Japanese culture, he both alludes to the possibility of universals in art (the grand questions) even as he exploits the particular (Japanese settings, their images and language).

Kurosawa never abandoned his love of painting but has often planned for his films by creating illustrations and paintings. Perhaps no other film evinces this attention to the "painted" as well as *Dreams* (1990), a film whose vivid, pre-production illustrations by Kurosawa inspired special exhibitions. Admired as much as these visual creations, the scripts of major Kurosawa films (*Ikiru*, *Ran*, *Rashomon*, *Seven Samurai*) have been translated into English.

Those interested in Kurosawa himself will enjoy reading his *Something Like an Autobiography*, a narrative rich with lively anecdotes about his childhood and his film career to 1950. Yet, as film scholar James Goodwin has observed, Kurosawa prefers to look forward to new work rather than back-



From *Ikiru* (1952)
Photo courtesy of Kurosawa Productions

look at life and its meanings in the post-war bureaucracy, and *Rhapsody in August*, a 1993 film that explores the nature of memory, especially in ways that people choose to remember and to forget the atomic bombings of Nagasaki.

KUROSAWA: A LIFE IN ART

Though Kurosawa made his career in film, his earliest artistic ambitions focused on painting and illustration. In 1936, forced to find a more lucrative profession, Kurosawa found work as an assistant film director trainee and succeeded so well in this form that he began directing entire films himself in the 1940s. His first film, *Sugata Sanshirō*, released in 1943, depicts in Buddhist terms a young man's spiritual and physical path to becoming a judo expert. According to film historian Donald Richie,

ward to past achievements. When honored by the Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1990 for a lifetime of artistic achievement, Kurosawa commented that the honor had come too early in his career and promised that "I will continue to devote my entire being to understanding this wonderful art."

Clearly, the sheer variety of Kurosawa's works provides a source of endless interpretation. While the lesson plans offered here come from college-level courses in Japanese literature, teachers working in high schools and adult education courses will also find the use of a Kurosawa film highly effective, either in creating a Japanese module in a world civilization or film course, or in a class devoted to Japanese culture.

KUROSAWA'S *IKIRU*: ROLE-PLAYING AS LEARNING

The film introduced in this unit, *Ikiru*, was produced in 1952, during an era when many Japanese people were questioning the nature and direction of social change and the effect of bureaucratization on Japanese values. The film portrays an aging bureaucrat's anguished search for the meaning of life upon learning he has terminal cancer. The protagonist in the film, Watanabe, is chief of the Citizen's Section at city hall. Watanabe's illness helps him to realize the irony of how he has sacrificed his life to serve a system that cares little about the average citizen. Exhibiting behavior that shocks his colleagues and superiors, Watanabe becomes an advocate and spokesperson for a group of women attempting to coax city hall into converting a local drainage ditch into a playground. Through sheer perseverance he succeeds at convincing city hall to build the playground. His triumph in changing the bureaucracy is short-lived, for after his death his coworkers revert to their narrowly defined roles.

Kurosawa's *Ikiru* is a richly layered film that presents several important themes about early postwar life in Japan which can be developed for classroom discussion. First, it presents the dilemma of a society that is burdened by a bureaucracy which is unyielding and unsympathetic to the needs of the public. Students will want to examine *how* such a system came into existence, and *why* it is allowed to continue. Second, in telling the story of a protagonist who is both a member of the bureaucratic system, and ultimately an iconoclast, Kurosawa asks his viewing

audience to admire selfless, heroic actions that are humanitarian and nonconformist. The film provides material for discussions about the role of conformity in Japanese social settings, the place of the individual, and the fate of the iconoclast. The film also introduces broader issues that have universal concern, including the existential struggle of its protagonist to find meaning in life, and the humanitarian goals of individuals who feel a basic need to help their neighbors.

Teachers traditionally use films such as *Ikiru* in the literature classroom by conducting film analyses which parallel literary analyses. Such an approach is easy for students to grasp, but it does not take full advantage of film as a medium. In order to engage students fully, it helps to devise a series of specific projects for students that help them to appreciate nuances of films which would be missed by simple analyses. Techniques that will enhance classroom exercises with films include cross-cultural comparison, group discussion, the writing of individual essays, and group presentations using role-playing in which students use their imagination to improvise as they act out the roles of characters. In this unit, working with both the film and the film script, students were divided into small groups and assigned one of the following topics:

- (1) theme and thematic structure
- (2) character portrayal and voices
- (3) setting and time period
- (4) role of the viewer/reader versus role of the writer/director
- (5) cultural and social messages, and
- (6) use of imagery.

Students were divided into small groups, one group per topic, and were given definitions for each of these topics.

For example, for *theme and thematic structure*, students were asked to isolate the main themes of the work being analyzed. They were also asked to identify the objectives of the filmmaker, and to address other relevant questions, including how juxtaposition of events within the film helps the filmmaker to emphasize specific themes. For *character portrayal and voices*, students were given questions about the type of characters included in the film, the inclusion of stereotypes, and techniques used to develop characters. After each group was given a written definition of its topic, they were also

given suggestions for role-play situations and questions for small-group discussions.

In investigating their topics, students initially examined the dynamics of such subjects as generational change, family, and gender roles. One group, which was assigned to examine *cultural and social messages*, chose to role-play an imagined scene in which the protagonist Watanabe tells his son why he is so disappointed with him. They then asked the class to identify the problem they had depicted in postwar society, and the causes of this problem. The role-play and the following discussion helped the class to understand the mechanisms by which social characteristics and egoism can supplant values such as family cohesion and self-sacrifice. As they performed role-plays, they started to read the film more closely, observing particular sets of interactions and the ways in which characters resolve conflict, as well as techniques used by the filmmaker to shape audience sentiments.

When students acted out the characters in *Ikiru*, such as the hedonistic writer Toyo and the dying Watanabe, they experienced directly the frustrations of an individual struggling against the societal pressure to conform. Consequently, they were better able to identify the conflict within individuals who make the choice to rebel. Students also prepared role-play presentations that were loosely based on the script. For example, one group in my class identified social messages in this film such as the suppression of individual will and the importance of allegiance to the group. As they acted out scenes from the

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film, this group asked the class to guess which scene depicted which of these issues. Such close attention to the film through role-playing enabled students to go far beyond simplistic, one-dimensional readings.

Exercises to construct cross-cultural comparison helped to clarify differences in Japanese and American value systems, and provided a starting point for exploring the idea of ethnocentric bias. Students in one cross-cultural exercise were asked how American and Japanese viewers might interpret differently the individualistic behavior Watanabe exhibits upon deciding he will give meaning to the end of his life by getting a children's playground built. Whereas Americans would likely see his behavior as altruistic, brave, and justifiable, the other characters in *Ikiru* construe it as being egotistical, inappropriate and defiant of authority. This exercise also helped students to understand Kurosawa's message: because of its unwavering emphasis on conformity, Japanese bureaucracy does not have the flexibility to allow individuals to deviate creatively from their assigned roles. Using its cross-cultural framework, the class developed a greater contextual appreciation of the dynamics of Japanese behavior.

Further, through attention to the use of imagery in *Ikiru*, students could also appreciate film as an art form which has many structural devices that parallel the organization of novels, and that shape the audience's emotional and intellectual responses. Just as the author manipulates the interaction of characters in time and place and shapes the setting, the filmmaker uses film as a medium for employing speech, sound, and image towards a similar end. By linking their discoveries about imagery to symbolism and social constructs, students were able to embellish their discussion of the world which Kurosawa has constructed within the film.

Students who are studying a foreign culture for the first time have a tendency to simplify their understanding of social structure, and to assume that all members of a culture act in the same way. Historical perspectives in film and literature can easily reinforce such a mistaken impression. This problem gets compounded when students take only one work of literature, or one film such as *Ikiru*, and make overgeneralizations about an entire historical period or about socio-cultural patterns. For example, one student writing about *Ikiru* correctly identi-

fied the conformist nature of the bureaucracy, but took the analysis too far by assuming that people in Japanese society are not ever allowed to have individual values. The student wrote:

In Japanese society, people were so concerned with what was expected of them. Rather than have an individual set of ideals and values, the Japanese were usually affiliated with a specific group, and this group determined the ideals and values of each member. Watanabe was part of this group until he realized he no longer wanted to belong to it.

There are some pedagogical drawbacks when film is perceived not as live drama, but as an all-encompassing representation of the culture that the students are investigating. Students find it easy to assume an ethnocentric stance, judging characters and implicitly suggesting American cultural superiority. They also generate assumptions based on their own biases.

The linear framework of cultural development that many students have internalized leads to assumptions that all cultures are at various points along the same continuum of social advancement. The image which *Ikiru* presents of a bureaucratic culture that suppressed all individual expression left the students imagining that all office workers in 1950s Japan, with few exceptions, were automatons. It is important to point out to classes that the popularity of the film with Japanese audiences suggests that the Japanese respect individuals who are idealistic and who have the courage to challenge authority figures. Other sources presenting people with diverse viewpoints and values, such as Kenzaburō Ōe's *A Personal Matter*, which portrays an individual's rebellion against societal norms, help students to realize that it would be misleading to reach conclusions based on an interpretation of one source. The film can be a starting point for a longer unit that includes one or more works of literature in which students explore varying aspects of social phenomena.

Given adequate exposure to different contemporaneous aspects of Japanese culture, students discover that multiple interpretations of culture exist. Once students start to investigate the culture-specific advantages to social behaviors, such as the ways in which Japanese society is supportive of the

individual, they move beyond assumed cultural superiority. Equally important is the integration of exercises which allow students to develop cross-cultural comparisons and to involve themselves directly with the material. The end product of these exercises is a cross-cultural framework which students use in evolving their own approach to interpretation and analysis of Japanese and American cultures. By giving students the methodological skills to become classroom ethnographers and to conduct their own analyses, we empower them to both challenge their initial assumptions and to see literary and cultural interpretation as an ongoing process.

RHAPSODY IN AUGUST

The most controversial discussions arising in my class, "Introduction to Japanese Literature," focus on the representation of the tragedies of World War II, specifically the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Through viewing Kurosawa's 1993 film, *Rhapsody in August*, and reading Ōe Kenzaburō's anthology of A-bomb fiction, *The Crazy Iris*, we encounter very different interpretations of this tragedy. As we discuss our reactions to these works and consider them not only in artistic terms, but also in light of other commemorative and political projects, we wrestle with these questions: How do "private" and "public" memory influence each other? How does one give artistic voice or image to horrors on the scale of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? In what terms does the reader/viewer analyze and evaluate such work as art? Because *Rhapsody in August* provides both light, comic moments and movingly sorrowful ones, it displays a range of moods and ideas ripe for discussing these broad yet complex questions. In describing my approach to *Rhapsody*, I will give a brief plot summary, some key information about current tensions regarding the atomic bomb "memorials," and specific ideas for directing class discussion.

The plot of *Rhapsody* centers on one summer vacation in which four young, very urban cousins stay with their elderly grandmother Kané in Nagasaki. Kané (Sachiko Murase) lives in an old farmhouse in a village nestled beneath lush mountains. Impatient with this bucolic life, her grandchildren rudely complain about their grandmother's refusal to bring either a television set or a washing machine into her life, and

whine about her old-fashioned cooking. Over their vacation, however, the young people become curious about their grandmother's life, prodding her fading memory for the local fairy stories, family legends, and for the story of her husband's death on August 9, 1945.

As they learn more about the bomb, the children become disgusted with their parents' joy at learning they have a rich Japanese-American relative Clark (Richard Gere). The four parents plead with the grandmother to join two of them on vacation in Hawaii and meet her long-lost, dying, and now *very rich*, older brother. As this international family story comes together, Clark surprises everyone by coming to Japan to learn more about his great-uncle's death by the bomb and to express his sorrow to the grandmother. As Clark and the grandmother sit together, gazing at the moon, a powerful symbol of enlightenment in Buddhism, it seems tensions in both familial and national histories have been neatly resolved.

But Kurosawa does not leave things quite so comfortably. In the final scene of the film, we see the whole family running after the grandmother, who has fled outside in a terrible thunderstorm. Somehow the storm has provoked the grandmother's memories of the bomb, sending her reeling back to the terrors of August 9, 1945. Having lost her sense of the present, the grandmother runs toward Nagasaki as if to find her husband. Kurosawa lingers a long time on this final scene of the young people running with all their might after their terrified grandmother. The audience soon hears the voices of children innocently singing as we continue to watch the grandchildren running. One feels as if the children are no longer simply passive repositories of their grandmother's memories but have actually inserted themselves in that memory, feeling the fear she feels. Making a strong statement at the end of his film, Kurosawa implies that memories, especially those of the A-bomb, must not remain within the realm of personal, past experience but should also serve as a map to what lies ahead, haunting these children as premonition, "some scary tale of the future."

After students have seen *Rhapsody in August* in a screening session and read the Œ selections, we have a 75 minute discussion period. I begin by emphasizing that, while 1995 marked the fiftieth anniversary



From *Rhapsody in August* (1993)

Photo courtesy of Kurosawa Productions

of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as *Rhapsody in August* so clearly shows, time has by no means healed all wounds. Victims of the bombs continue to suffer emotionally and physically from their exposure to radiation. In both Japan and the U.S., heated debate arises over every commemorative gesture: recall the U.S. decisions in 1995 to abandon plans for an A-bomb stamp and for a Smithsonian exhibit that seriously questioned the morality of this U.S. act. Similarly in Japan, groups have argued about whether or not to institute special welfare programs for the A-bomb victims and how to interpret this tragedy in their textbooks. Many Japanese want a formal apology from the U.S., just as other Asian countries have demanded an apology from Japan for its own wartime aggressions.

I next tell students that against this background of competing memories and contested interpretations stands the most fearful response of all: the possibility of completely forgetting. According to a 1995 Gallup Poll, 22% of Americans know almost nothing about these atomic weapons, and 35% do not know that the first was dropped on Hiroshima (*New York Times* 3/1/95: A15). While this level of ignorance of the bombs does not exist in Japan, *Rhapsody*, too, portrays these events as quite removed from the consciousness of young Japanese. As one teenager in the film says, "It always seemed like some scary fairy tale to us, not quite real."

This introduction leads to our first discussion question, "What does Kurosawa say about the nature of memory itself?" In the ensuing discussion, students point to scenes which show "forgetting" and "remembering." Though also linked to some harsh realities, the film's lighter moments revolve around both the grandmother's inability to remember all her siblings' names, and her recollections of local legend and family love scandal. Considering these scenes encourages students to think about the role memory plays in the development of a sense of self: who would any of us be without our memories? Further, this makes us think about how memory creates a sense of familial history and belonging. Such scenes present memory as something fragile and easily lost, something we have to make a special effort to preserve.

Focusing on this need to preserve a sense of the personal dimension of major historical events, we discuss how private and shared experiences combine to create public memory. We see the most intimate sharing of memory occur in the scene in which the grandmother and one of her elderly friends, also a widow, sit in silent "conversation," remembering the tragedies they suffered on August 9, 1945. Kurosawa depicts another act of remembering, both highly personal and public, in a scene in which older people lay wreaths at the charred playground equipment in a schoolyard where their former classmates had been killed in the atomic blast. It is also here in the playground, a setting strongly associated with childhood innocence, that the grandchildren, and later Clark, experience the full impact of the horror of the bomb's destruction. An internationally-tinged memorial takes place when Clark attends a Buddhist service for the Nagasaki bomb victims, and also when the film shows sculptures dedicated to peace in the Nagasaki Peace Park. In discussion of these scenes, we consider the need people feel for public observance of war tragedies and the role art can play here. Showing photographs of our own memorials such as the (very different) Vietnam and Iwo Jima monuments in Washington, D.C., for example, leads to a comparison of these works with the sculptures shown in *Rhapsody*, and provokes argument about just what values such monuments *ought* to teach.

Talking about the kinds of sculptures dedicated as memorials also leads to the ques-

tion of what kind of artistic representation students see as most effective. Do we find the more abstract work or the more representational art evocative of the tragedy of war? Here, students can recall the surreal way in which Kurosawa represents the atomic bomb in *Rhapsody* as an enormous eye which fills the whole sky and leaves a mushroom cloud in its wake. How does this compare to graphic newsreel footage of the bomb's destruction we see in films such as Alain Resnais' 1959 *Hiroshima Mon Amour* or, its horrific recreation in Imamura Shōhei's 1989 *Black Rain*? Are such graphic or surreal depictions more powerful in stirring our emotions than Kurosawa's own 1955 film *I Live in Fear* which focuses on one man's naked fear of another atomic attack? We might also ask how the symbolic representation of the bomb in *Rhapsody* compares with the abstract paintings described in "The Colorless Paintings" by Sata Ineko, or the more graphic "Fireflies" by Ōta Yōko in the Ōe anthology. As students offer their ideas on what they find effective and why, I point out the emerging, and perhaps differing, criteria they are building for viewing art of a politically-charged nature and the various values this exercise reveals. While this part of our discussion has portrayed memory as fragile and in need of active preservation, we next briefly turn to memory as something extremely powerful, something which cannot be extinguished despite one's effort. Here, we recall the grandmother's descriptions of her brother as so plagued with memories of the atomic eye that he went mad. We also remember the way in which that same atomic eye has fixed in the grandmother's memory and how easily she slips back into its terrors during the thunderstorm. Thinking about these scenes raises the question: "Where do we locate memory—in our past, our present, or in our future?" How much of our own memories, even if not as traumatic as the grandmother's, affect our everyday lives and determine our actions in the future? How much control do we exert over them? I do not intend these questions to elicit immediate answers from the students, but to make them think about another aspect of memory as Kurosawa presents it in *Rhapsody*.

Finally, our discussion of this film must also consider what it does not say, and what the teenagers do not learn from their Nagasaki summer. While certainly the

atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki wrought incredible devastation, the victims there were not the only ones who suffered in the war nor the only ones who wish to preserve memory of their suffering. The "Comfort Women," the Chinese, Korean and other women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese troops, for one example, have had a very difficult time getting the Japanese government to even acknowledge their story, let alone make some restitution. While the grandmother in *Rhapsody* says that "both the Americans and the Japanese" did "bad things" and that this was all "the fault of war," one might well ask if Kurosawa does not encourage all our focus on war's destruction to center too completely on Nagasaki, and all war crimes to be too easily explained by the adage "war is bad." ■

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