

Japanese filmmaker dead at 88

Akira Kurosawa's achievement

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The Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa died at his home in Tokyo September 6 at the age of 88. Kurosawa, who made 28 films between 1943 and 1993, belonged to that generation of European and Asian directors whose works dominated the international art film world in the 1950s and 1960s. One thinks of such figures as Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Satyajit Ray, Luis Buñuel, Luchino Visconti, Robert Bresson and Roberto Rossellini, all now either dead or inactive.

At his best Kurosawa demonstrated an extraordinary visual and intellectual vivacity. Whatever his limitations—and there are moments when his conceptions seem overmatched by his emotions—one feels that Kurosawa never shied away from any problem or dilemma. His is a cinema of towering, almost superhuman confrontations, whether in medieval forests or modern city streets. He created, as one critic puts it, “dense fictional worlds,” in which his fascination with human nature and social problems was given free range.

Kurosawa was born in 1910 in Tokyo, the youngest of eight children, to a family that held Samurai rank. His father was a military school administrator. The future director refused to undergo military training, developed an early interest in painting, and while still a teenager attended a private art school. According to his biographers, Russian literature fascinated him. He was later to adapt works by Dostoyevsky (*The Idiot*) and Gorky (*Lower Depths*) for the screen, and a Tolstoy story (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*) apparently influenced another of his films (*Ikiru*). Of Dostoyevsky he once said: “I know of no one so compassionate.... Ordinary people turn their eyes away from tragedy; he looks straight into it.” Shakespeare’s plays also influenced or formed the basis of a number of his works.

Unable to make a living at painting, Kurosawa in 1936 obtained a position as an assistant director at a leading Japanese film production company. After seven years as an assistant, he directed his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, in 1943, the story of a youthful judo champion and his search for spiritual enlightenment.

Drunken Angel (1948), another work influenced by Dostoyevsky, is generally considered to be the first of Kurosawa’s major films. One might say that this film, and *Stray Dog* (1949), belong to the director’s “neo-realist” phrase. In the latter film, a novice policeman (played by the youthful Toshiro Mifune) is pickpocketed on a crowded bus and his Colt revolver stolen. When the gun is used in several crimes, including murders, he feels responsible and tracks down the guilty man through the back streets of a Japanese city. The criminal is a young man of his own age, “the stray dog” become a “mad dog,” as a result of his experiences in the war, referred to in the title. In a memorable final sequence the two fight it out in a muddy field. When the cop finally manages to get his handcuffs on the young man, the latter howls like an animal in pain. It is a wrenching moment.

Rashomon (1950) was the film that brought Kurosawa international recognition, winning the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1952. It remains, along with *Seven Samurai* (1954), Kurosawa’s most widely known film. *Rashomon* tells the same story—the confrontation in the woods between a bandit and a samurai and his bride, watched by a woodcutter—in four different versions. The notion that the insistence on a “true version” is misguided is surely a theme that turns up in a great many postwar films, for fairly obvious reasons.

Ikiru (*To Live*), made in 1952, is one of Kurosawa’s

more remarkable films. It tells the story of a government bureaucrat who discovers that he is dying of stomach cancer and has only months to live. In fact, as a narrator informs us: “It would be difficult to say that he is really alive.” His job is mind numbing and meaningless, his son insensitive and unfeeling. At first he turns to alcohol and prostitutes in an effort to come alive or at least provide some meaning to his last days. That only makes him feel worse. He then tries to relive his youth by spending time with a young woman. Not much comes of that either. In the end, he decides to spend the remainder of his life in service to others, campaigning to turn a swampy lot into a park for children.

Ikiru was the first of what one commentator calls “the half-dozen masterpieces made between 1952 and 1963.” There is little question but that this was Kurosawa’s richest period. In those years, in addition to *Seven Samurai*, in which a group of warriors defend a village against bandits, he made *Record of a Living Being* (1955), the story of a man driven mad by his fear of nuclear war; his riveting version of *Macbeth*, *The Throne of Blood* (1957), set in medieval Japan and reportedly T.S. Eliot’s favorite film; his version of Gorky’s *Lower Depths* (1957); another vivid piece laid in feudal Japan, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958); his examination of corruption in the corporate world, *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), apparently a version of *Hamlet*; *Yojimbo* (1961), based loosely on Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, about a samurai warrior up for hire in a town with warring factions, and its sequel, *Sanjuro* (1961). In 1963, Kurosawa directed *High and Low*, a film, also based on an American crime novel, about a kidnapping gone wrong.

Kurosawa seems most at home in the period of postwar reconstruction where his belief in human possibility stubbornly pursued in the face of overwhelming odds—and in the value of classical literature as a means of cognizing reality—appealed to significant layers of the general population in Japan, and elsewhere, and even inspired them. Would it be possible to say that Japan’s recovery, its increasing stature in the world presented problems that were beyond Kurosawa’s scope? Or perhaps it was that a considerable section of his audience no longer found that his emotionalism and his humanism spoke to them. In any event, Kurosawa came to be seen as old-

fashioned, as a new generation of Japanese filmmakers emerged in the 1960s. He seemed to reach an impasse with *Dodeskaden* (1970), a grotesque work that failed with audiences. In December 1971 Kurosawa attempted suicide.

He enjoyed a revival of his fortunes with *Dersu Uzala* (1975), made in the USSR, and his two epics, *Kagemusha* and *Ran*, a version of King Lear, made in 1980 and 1985, respectively. He continued making films into his 80s, directing *Rhapsody in August* (1991), a meditation on the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

European and American influences—from Eisenstein to John Ford—can be seen at work in Kurosawa’s films. He has both been praised and criticized for being the most “Western” of the great Japanese directors. In return, Kurosawa has inspired a great many European and American film directors and trends, including, for better or worse, the so-called “Spaghetti Western.” Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), for example, one of his Clint Eastwood vehicles, is based directly on *Yojimbo*. One critic, contrasting American Westerns with their Japanese and Italian equivalents, noted that Italy and Japan were both defeated nations in World War II and that their film heroes consequently “lack faith in history as an orderly process in human affairs. What Kurosawa and Leone share is a sentimental nihilism that ranks survival above honor and revenge above morality.”

It is no insult to observe that Kurosawa worked within the general framework of melodrama. On the contrary, as another commentator put it very well, the director had “a miraculous gift for ennobling the melodramatic mood, for pulling off situations in which anyone else would have foundered on the shoals of ridicule.” Kurosawa was a serious artist, a major artist. A familiarity with his most significant works ought to form part of the education of anyone who considers him- or herself a student of the human condition.



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