X-raying postwar Japan

Ikiru (1952), directed by Akira Kurosawa

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Ikiru, Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's 1952 classic film, has been remastered and is currently being shown throughout North America. Released only seven years after the end of the Second World War, the film presents a harrowing picture of the social and psychological state of postwar Japanese society.

A cloudy image opens the film. The narrator reveals that it is an X-ray of a carcinomatous stomach. The stomach belongs to Kanji Watanabe, a department head in Tokyo's city government, as yet unaware of his fatal condition. "Too boring to talk about, he has neither initiative nor determination. City hall and its drudgery killed them both," says the narrator. The film then unfolds as a cinematic X-ray of Watanabe's consciousness and spirit, and Japan's.

Watanabe (Takashi Shimura) is the chief of the Citizen's Section with 30 years on the job. Citizen complaints begin with his department, then get shuffled around, with the guaranteed result that no problem will be addressed. A group of poor women, demanding that an unsanitary vacant lot in their neighborhood be turned into a park for children, shout: "What do you take us for, fools? There is no democracy here!" With one rubber stamp, Watanabe blots out any possibility of action, never considering the lives his department touches. Over the years, his humanity has been submerged through a deadening routine.

When the film introduces Watanabe's egocentric son and daughter-in-law, the question arises how much he is to blame for his children's faults. Watanabe is seen by his only son as a "petty bureaucrat," whose only value is as a cash cow. Flashbacks to a time when Watanabe had a close relationship with his son after the death of his wife show a very different man from the obsequious parent unhappily coexisting with an ungrateful son. What will the reaction of all three be to the cancer?

As Watanabe waits in a doctor's office for a diagnosis of his stomach pain, a fellow patient, more akin to an angel of death, clues him into doctor-speak: "If they say you can eat anything you want, that means you have less than a year." When those very words are used by the doctor, Watanabe knows he is doomed. The recurring, intense close-ups of Watanabe's agonized face form the core of the film's power.

Watanabe then does the unthinkable: he does not show up for work. The longstanding joke in his department is that he takes no time off so as not to make apparent to his underlings that they can do without him.

His death sentence has driven him to discover "what I've been living for all these years." In a bar, Watanabe meets a writer of cheap novels who tries to mentor him: "Let's make up for your wasted life—I'll gladly act the part of Mephistopheles tonight." Watanabe buys a sporty hat; he is now ready to be escorted into the bowels of Tokyo's nightlife. He experiences slot machines that, says his guide, "free one from the worries of life—automatic vendors of dreams"; geisha girls and belly dancers "that are more direct than art"; and prostitutes who "are the most avaricious among living mammals." Watanabe's despair, however, is not quelled by this exotica.

This sojourn ends in a honky-tonk. A surrealist-looking piano player and weirdly undulating dancers are performing with over-the-top excitation. Watanabe, as if a creature from another world, stamps out the moment's fire by singing with traumatizing urgency a ballad on the shortness of life, whose refrain is: "Today will never come again." The tempo and look of this scene are unforgettable.

He next encounters a fresh-faced young girl from his office, Toyo (Miki Odagiri). She has been searching for him to get her papers stamped in order to leave civil service for another, more meaningful job. "Your new hat and your absence from work are the only new events," says Toyo. Watanabe replies: "For the past 30 years, I cannot remember what I did at the office. All I remember is work and boredom."

Toyo reveals to her former boss that his office nickname is "The Mummy." She admonishes him when he blames his son for the unhappy state of his life. "All parents think they suffer a lot for their children," says Toyo. "I'm glad I was born, but I'm not responsible for it." She informs him that her new job involves work at a toy factory, which she believes connects her to all the children in Japan.

Irresistibly drawn to her youth and vitality, Watanabe tries unsuccessfully to become Toyo's sugar-daddy. "There's darkness everywhere. I struggle for something to hold onto. There's only you," says the desperate older man. She turns him

away.

Watanabe is now left to himself, but in a somewhat reborn state. He throws himself into accomplishing one real deed as chief of the Citizens Section, running roughshod over the mayor and all reluctant departments in the process. The women from Kuroe-cho finally get their park for the children. Watanabe, having shed his mummified bureaucratic existence, dies on a swing in the park. Through his efforts to improve the world he has regained a certain childhood purity that had been lost somewhere along the way.

Ikiru's climactic scene is Watanabe's wake, in which the impact of his life is examined. Centrally arranged in a shrine is a portrait of Watanabe, finally looking like a real hero. City hall officials and colleagues speculate about why the deceased had so changed. One of the more honest of the colleagues comments: "If Watanabe's zeal cannot be understood then the world is a dark place indeed. Compared to him we are all trash. We live by stealing valuable time. People complain about corruption but that's nothing compared to our tremendous waste of time." The poor people from Kuroe-cho are the only genuine grievers at the wake. In the end, Kanji Watanabe is most appreciated by those for whom he fought against a corrupt and hypocritical society.

Ikiru is an extraordinary film both in its look and content. Each frame, even the most complex, is masterfully composed. The dissolves and flashback transitions are fluid and creatively executed. Deep recesses of the human condition are explored at close proximity, without succumbing to the temptation of sentimentality.

Although the black and white film has the straightforward look of classical realism, its imagery continuously strains beyond the visual surface. Initially a scene appears uncomplicated, but further probing unlocks more profound levels and more expansive truths. Every stage of Watanabe's journey of self-discovery has an outer skin and less apparent essence. The honky-tonk is not really about wild music and wilder dancing. It is more akin to a hellish inferno, referencing something indescribably crazy within society.

Actor Shimura's Watanabe slow-moving physicality aptly conveys both the burden of chronic pain from the cancer and also the burden of an unconscious life; his wide-eyed stare never allows for complacent conclusions.

The film is one in a series of Kurosawa masterpieces made between 1952 and 1963, considered to be the filmmaker's richest period. *Seven Samurai*, possibly his most famous work, was made in 1954 and is about a group of warriors who defend a village against bandits; *Record of Living Being* (1955) is the story of a man driven mad by his fear of nuclear war; *Macbeth*, *The Throne of Blood* was made in (1957), as was his version of Gorky's *Lower Depth's* (1957); Kurosawa examines corruption in the corporate world in *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960).

Kurosawa (1910-1998), who first aspired to be a painter, moved in Communist Party circles as a youth. He submitted watercolor and oil paintings to a "proletarian art exhibition" in 1929 and made "socialist realist" films as a student. During World War II, however, he turned out propaganda films idealizing the Japanese war effort, activity that later apparently caused him to feel ashamed.

The film director remained a severe critic of Japanese society, although his earlier outlook had been shaken by events, including no doubt the evolution of the Soviet Union under Stalinism. It is remarkable to consider that *Ikiru*—which means "to live"—was released only a few years after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the one hand, the film depicts a "normalized" society, with its various institutions back in operation; on the other, in the scenes of Tokyo nightlife in particular, *Ikiru* hints at desperation and hysteria, perhaps a mania to forget, that speaks in its own way to the wartime horrors.

Kurosawa felt the need to set out his own conception of a moral and social compass for postwar Japanese society. Submission to authority, self-abnegation and conformism had led the Japanese to disaster. The social cancer remained, not visible to the naked eye. The filmmaker, perhaps feeling that a radical social transformation was no longer desirable or that its prospects were remote, argues that life can still have significance, despite its tragedies and absurdities, through the individual meaningful act. Nonetheless, he retained enough of his left-wing ideas to include the presence of the neighborhood women as an adjunct or necessary component of this act.

The movie is a melodrama, expertly executed without a trace of self-pity. As one commentator has noted, Kurosawa "has a miraculous gift for ennobling the melodramatic mood, for pulling off situations in which anyone else would have foundered on the shoals of ridicule" (Noël Burch, in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, New York, 1980).

The film's narrative sheds light on the immensity of the struggle to overcome psychic and social odds. Kurosawa never shied away from great dilemmas or contradictions. There is a depth in *Ikiru* that transcends some of the dated aspects of the narrative. To look at the face of Kanji Watanabe is to know that Kurosawa imbued his film with a hatred of all that is unjust and anti-human in the world.