Akira Kurosawa (23 March 1910, Omori, Tokyo, Japan — 6 September 1998, Setagaya, Tokyo, stroke) wrote or cowrote nearly all 31 of the films he directed and edited several of them as well. Some of them are: Ame Agaru/After the Rain 1993, Yume/Dreams 1990, Ran 1985, Kagemusha 1980, Dodesukaden 1970, Yojimbo 1961 (remade in 1964 as Per un pugno di dollari and in 1996 as Last Man Standing), Kakushi toride no san akunin 1958 (remade in 1977 as Star Wars), Kumonosu jo/Throne of Blood 1957 (based on Macbeth), Shichinin no samurai/Seven Samurai 1954 (remade as The Magnificent Seven), Ikiru 1952, Rashomon 1950 (remade as The Outrage), and Nana inu/Stray Dog 1949. Kurosawa received three Academy Awards: best foreign language picture for Rashomon and Dersu Uzala, and a Lifetime Achievement Award (1990). He received a nomination for best director for Ran. The Seven Samurai is his sixth film in the Buffalo Film Seminars.

For much of his career Kurosawa was appreciated far more in the West than in Japan. Zhang Yimou (director of Red Sorghum and Raise the Red Lantern) wrote that Kurosawa was accused “of making films for foreigners’ consumption. In the 1950s, Rashomon was criticized as exposing Japan’s ignorance and backwardness to the outside world – a charge that now seems absurd. In China, I have faced the same scoldings, and I use Kurosawa as a shield.” He directed his first film in 1943 but says Drunken Angel in 1948 was really his first film because that was the first one he made without official interference. Rashomon (1950), the first Japanese film to find wide distribution in the West, made Kurosawa internationally famous.

Kurosawa was equally comfortable making films about medieval and modern Japan or films based on Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorki, and Evan Hunter. He loved American westerns and was conscious of them when he made his early samurai pictures. When someone told him that Sergio Leone had lifted the plot of Yojimbo for A Fistful of Dollars, the spaghetti western with Clint Eastwood, Kurosawa told his friend to calm down: he’d lifted the plot himself from Dashiell Hammett’s Red Harvest (Schlock filmmeister Roger Corman stole the plot back for a sword-fighting science fiction nudie movie, The Warrior and the Sorceress in 1984, and in 1995 Walter Hill copied it again for Last Man Standing with Bruce Willis. The story, as they say in the film business, has legs.)

Directed and edited by Akira Kurosawa
Screenplay by Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto & Hideo Oguni
Produced by Sojiro Moteki
Original Music by Fumio Hayasaka
Cinematography by Asakazu Nakai
Shigeru Endo...instructor: horseback archery
Kohei Ezaki...folklore researcher
Ienori Kaneko...archery instructor
Yosio Sugino...swordplay instructor
TOSHIRO MIYUKE (1 April 1920, Tsingtao, China [now Qingdao, Shandong, China]—24 December 1997, Mitaka city, Tokyo) said of his work with Kurosawa: “I am proud of nothing I have done other than with him.” Leonard Maltin writes that “Mifune is perhaps the screen's ultimate warrior, if only because he's portrayed that type in infinite variety. He has been brash and reckless in The Seven Samurai (1954), stoic and droll in Yojimbo (1961) and its sequel Sanjuro (1962), paranoid and irrational in Throne of Blood (1957), and swashbucklingly heroic in The Hidden Fortress (1958). All of the preceding films were directed by Akira Kurosawa, who is responsible for shaping Mifune's rugged, imposing screen persona. He scored an early triumph in Kurosawa's Rashomon (1950), playing a medieval outlaw, but he's also portrayed a number of contemporary characters including detectives and businessmen. Mifune had originally planned a film career behind the camera as a cinematographer, but wound up before the lens in 1946's Shin Baka Jidai. He first worked with Kurosawa in 1948's Drunken Angel. He made one attempt at directing in 1963, Goju-Man-nin no Isan which was a failure; his production company now makes films for TV. Mifune's forceful personality, projected through baleful expressions and dynamic physical presence, won him international recognition and led to many roles in American productions, including Grand Prix (1966), Hell in the Pacific (1968, in a two-man tour de force opposite LeeMarvin), Kurosawa fan Steven Spielberg's 1941 (1979), and the TV miniseries "Shogun" (1980).”


from Something Like an Autobiography. Akira Kurosawa, Vintage NY 1983

I don’t really like talking about my films. Everything I want to say is in the film itself. ... If what I have said in my film is true, someone will understand.

What is cinema? The answer to this question is no easy matter. Long ago the Japanese novelist Shiga Naoya presented an essay written by his grandchild as one of the most remarkable prose pieces of his time. He had it published in a literary magazine. It was entitled “My Dog,” and ran as follows: “My dog resembles a bear; he also resembles a badger; he also resembles a fox. . . .” It proceeded to enumerate the dog’s special characteristics, comparing each one to yet another animal, developing into a full list of the animal kingdom. However, the essay closed with, “But since he’s a dog, he most resembles a dog.”

I remember bursting out laughing when I read this essay, but it makes a serious point. Cinema resembles so many other arts. If cinema has very literary characteristics, it also has theatrical qualities, a philosophical side, attributes of painting and sculpture and musical elements. But cinema is, in the final analysis cinema.

With a good script a good director can produce a masterpiece; with the same script a mediocre director can make a passable film. But with a bad script even a good director can’t possibly make a good film. For cinematic expression, the camera and the microphone must be able to cross both fire and water. That is what makes a real movie. The script must be something that has the power to do this.

Many people choose to follow the actor’s movements with a zoom lens. Although the most natural way to approach the actor with the cameras is to move it at the speed he moves, many people wait until he stops moving and then zoom in on him. I think this is very wrong. The camera should follow the actor as he moves; it should stop when he stops. If this rule is not followed, the audience will become conscious of the camera.

I think...that the current method of lighting for color film is wrong. In order to bring out the colors, the entire frame is flooded with light. I always say the lighting should be treated as it is for black-and-white film, whether the colors are strong or not, so that the shadows come out right.

I changed my thinking about musical accompaniment from the time Hayasaka Fumio began working with me as the composer of my film scores. Up until that time film music was nothing more than accompaniment – for a sad scene there was always sad music. This is the way most people use music, and it is effective. But from Drunken Angel onward, I have used light music for some key sad scenes, and my way of using music has differed from the norm – I don’t put it in where most people do. Working with Hayasaka, I began to think in terms of the counterpoint of sound and image as opposed to the union of sound and image.

I am often asked why I don’t pass on to young people what I have accomplished over the years. Actually, I would like very much to do so. Ninety-nine percent of those who worked as my assistant directors have now become directors in their own right. But I don’t think any of them took the trouble to learn the most important things.

From the moment I begin directing a film, I am thinking about not only the music but the sound effects as well. Even before the camera rolls, along with all the other things I consider, I decide what kind of sound I want. In some of my films, such as Seven Samurai and Yojimbo, I use different theme music for each main
character or for different groups of characters.

Much is often made of the fact that I use more than one camera to shoot a scene. This began when I was making *Seven Samurai*, because it was impossible to predict exactly what would happen in the scene where the bandits attack the peasants’ village in a heavy rain-storm. If I had filmed it in the traditional shot-by-shot method, there was no guarantee that any action could be repeated in exactly the same way twice. So I used three cameras rolling simultaneously. The result was extremely effective, so I decided to exploit this technique fully in less action-filled drama as well, and I used it next for *Ikimono no kiroku* (Record of a Living Being). By the time I made *The Lower Depths* I was using largely a one-shot-per-scene method.

Working with three cameras simultaneously is not so easy as it may sound. It is extremely difficult to determine how to move them. For example, if a scene has three actors in it, all three are talking and moving about freely and naturally. In order to show how the A, B and C cameras move to cover this action, even complete picture continuity is insufficient. Nor can the average camera operator understand a diagram of the camera movements. I think in Japan the only cinematographers who can are Nakai Asakazu and Saitô Takao. The three camera positions are completely different for the beginning and end of each shot, and they go through several transformations in between. As a general system, I put the A camera in the orthodox positions, use the B camera for quick, decisive shots and the C camera as a kind of guerilla unit.

Editing is truly interesting work. When the rushes come up, I rarely show them to my crew exactly as they are. Instead I go to the editing room when shooting is over that day and with the editor spend about three hours editing the rushes together. Only then do I show them to the crew. It is necessary to show them this edited footage for the sake of arousing their interest. Sometimes they don’t understand what it is they are filming, or why they have to spend ten days to get a particular shot. When they see the edited footage with the results of their labor, they become enthusiastic again. And by editing as I go along, I have only the fine cut to complete when shooting is finished.

*The Seven Samurai (Schichinin no samurai), Akira Kurosawa, Note by Roy Stafford The Ultimate Film Guide Series, Longman London 2001*

...that masterpiece of carnage and courage...*Seven Samurai*: the best of all battle epics...with its just war, hopeless odds, camaraderie of soldiers, and final, lonely fate of the outsider/warrior.

*Michael Wilmington, Film Comment, January 1999, vol 35, no 1*

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) carries a list of the ‘Top250’ movies of all time, based on the votes cast by its ‘users’. In 2001, the Number 9 film on the list was a Japanese film made in black and white in 1954. Set in the sixteenth century and running over 200 minutes, *Shichinin no samurai (The Seven Samurai)* is at first sight an unusual selection for a ‘popular’ list of top films. What explains its status?

In the history of cinema there are very few films that can be seen in retrospect to have marked a change in the use of film techniques and the conception of what cinema can achieve. Such films have influenced succeeding generations of film makers and yet they remain undiminished by time and attempts at imitation: *Battleship Potemkin, Citizen Kane, Roma citta aperta, A bout de souffle* are some such films. *Seven Samurai* belongs in this select category, and its director Akira Kurosawa belongs with Eisenstein, Welles, Rossellini and Godard as a major figure in the history of cinema, whose films are essential viewing.

There are many reasons for the importance of *Seven Samurai*. Its appearance at the Venice Film Festival in 1954 confirmed the quality of Japanese Cinema for international critics and similarly confirmed the stature of its director and its star (Toshiro Mifune), suggested by the earlier appearance of *Rashomon* in 1950. Although set firmly in the past, the film also helped to reintroduce Japan to the west after the terrible humiliation of the postwar American Occupation (1945-52). The combination of exciting action and a strong story, of ‘humanism’ and ‘heroism’, provided the model for much action cinema that followed in the 1960s, and the brilliance of Kurosawa’s filming and editing techniques impressed filmmaker across the world, but especially in Hollywood.

John Sturges ‘remade’ *Seven Samurai* as *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960, but the film that most strikingly employs Kurosawa’s techniques is Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* made in 1969 (‘I want to make Westerns like Kurosawa makes Westerns,’ Peckinpah said). Later in his career, when out of favour in Japan, Kurosawa benefited from the support of fans amongst the so-called ‘movie brat’ generation of George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola.

In Japan, Kurosawa was a controversial figure, often at odds with the studio system and especially with the critics. He found an appreciative popular audience and by the early 1960s his revision of traditional genre formats dominated the Japanese box office. Yet many critics attacked him for making films for the international market. They called him the ‘most American’ of Japanese directors and argued that his films were successful in the West because of their ‘exoticism’. It is difficult to fathom why this view developed. Kurosawa himself remained above such criticism, but his dignity was taken sometimes to be arrogance. His nickname was ‘sensei’—the master, or ‘the Emperor—an ironic title for a devout antimilitarist and humanist. His mastery came from complete devotion to making films and close attention to
For audiences in the west, Kurosawa has been the best known director in Japanese cinema. For film scholars, he has usually been bracketed with two of his contemporaries in the 1950s—Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu. Of the two, Mizoguchi came to the attention of western critics at the same time as Kurosawa and provided a useful contrast, especially with his period films, made in a very different style. Ozu waited longer for recognition in the west, but with Mizoguchi vied for the title of ‘most Japanese’ director in Japan. Ozu’s static camera and Mizoguchi’s elegant tracking shots are quite distinct from the bravura camerawork of Seven Samurai.

It is the vitality of the imagery, the audacity of the editing, the subtle use of sound and the quality of the acting performances that audiences remembers from Seven Samurai. Most of all, over the 200 minutes, there is an astonishing range of cinematography—with long shots and ‘big close-ups’ reminiscent of Eisenstein, ‘deep focus’ interiors and painterly compositions of landscapes, tracking shots and swift wipes, high and low angles and jump cuts. Seven Samurai is like a ‘how to’ manual of cinematic techniques.

In bald outline a formulaic action film, under Kurosawa’s direction Seven Samurai becomes a story of courage and cooperation in the context of a realistic struggle to survive in a harsh economic and social environment. The farmers and the samurai are not natural allies and in other circumstances could be at each other’s throats. There are no moral certainties and the faceless bandits who threaten the village could once have been farmers or even rogue samurai. In an intensely ‘human’ story Kurosawa presents two powerful characterisations: Kanbei, as the ultimate professional man of honour who organises the defence, and Kikuchiyo, the catalyst of the narrative, the orphan farmer’s son who strives to be a samurai (in comic and tragic fashion) and in doing so draws the audience into the complexities of relationships between social classes in the sixteenth century, but also into the quandries facing Japan in the 1950s.

Kurosawa’s triumph is to pull the audience on the edges of their seats in anticipation of the next sequence of action and to intrigue them with a myriad of secondary themes that explore the contrasting lives of farmers and samurai. The film is exhilarating as action, fascinating as visual spectacle and ultimately satisfying as human drama.

“Seven Samurai is not an adventure film from my point of view. It’s about the relationship of the samurai and the farmers and I wanted to describe the character of each samurai.” Kurosawa, 1986

If Seven Samurai was revolutionary in a Japanese context, it perhaps looked more familiar to audiences in the west. The film uses many of the elements of the ‘combat picture’—a subgenre of the war film that dates back at least as far as John Ford’s The Lost Patrol in 1934 and which flourished in British and American Cinema during and after the Second World War. The basic idea involves the selection of a small group of men for a specific combat mission.

KIKUCHIYO: Toshiro Mifune was to some extent Kurosawa’s prodigy and he had become a star in Kurosawa’s 1948 film Drunken Angel. He then appeared as the lead in many of Kurosawa’s later films. Although Takashi Shimura as Kanbei heads the cast list (he was a major star and had led Kurosawa’s Ikuru in 1952), the opening titles announce Mifune as playing Kikuchiyo. No other actor is given this prominence and it is reasonable to assume that Kurosawa will in some way ‘speak’ through the character of Kikuchiyo.

SAMURAI & SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SOCIETY
In his mix of the Western and traditional Japanese culture, Kurosawa was profoundly ‘Japanese’—but his keen eye created something more distinctive from the mix, a style more aware of the power of western aesthetics.

Far from moving away from Japanese traditions, Kurosawa was one of the main innovators, bringing a sense of ‘real’ history to the popular jidaigeki or costume pictures. Kurosawa undertook extensive research into costume and social behaviour in sixteenth-century Japan and far from Americanising a traditional Japanese story, in Seven Samurai he presented a more ‘authentic’ view of Japanese history. Elsewhere in his work, Kurosawa made use of the traditional forms where they served his narrative purposes. In his adaptation of Macbeth (Throne of Blood, 1957) he encouraged his ‘Lady Macbeth’ to adopt the acting style of traditional Noh theatre.

Samurai means, literally, ‘those who serve’, implying the rendering of honourable military service by an élite to an overlord...three factors—military prowess, élitism and service to another—are the keys to identifying the origin of the samurai.

Turnbull, 1996

This useful definition goes some way to explaining some of the expectations of the characters in Seven Samurai. Japan in the sixteenth century had a strictly defined caste system. At the top was the Emperor and the Imperial family—although he did not wield political power, the Emperor’s divine right to be recognised as superior remained. The effective rulers, whose squabbles in this period led to the civil war, were the major landowners, the daimyo. The daimyo were in effect ‘superior samurai’ who had used their status and military prowess to gather power. They in turn ‘retained’ other samurai to act as their generals, leading armies of foot soldiers. The other distinct groups were the monks and priests (Japan has long had Buddhist as well as Shinto priests), the peasant farmers and the artisans and merchants in towns. Beneath all of these were common labourers and beggars.

The samurai retained by the ‘lords’ were a highly privileged group, brought up to follow not only a warrior’s life, learning all the skills of war, but also the cultivation of art and
poetry and music. Samurai were ‘rounded’, cultured individuals, expected to appreciate fine pottery as well as being able to lop off an opponent’s head with precision. Such warriors would expect to marry within their own class and would be feared by the other classes.

A samurai warrior who lost his patron, perhaps when his lord was defeated in battle or disgraced, would become a ‘masterless samurai’, a ronin. At various times and especially in the civil war periods, there were many ronin on the highways of Japan, looking for ‘honourable’ employment. Such are the ‘hungry samurai’ of Seven Samurai. The narrative of Seven Samurai at first sight seems contrived, but the story was developed after considerable research by Kurosawa into how samurai lived in the sixteenth century—what they ate, how they dressed and the details of their daily routine.

[Zhang Yimou, Chinese director, wrote in Time 1990] As a cinematographer, I am awed by Kurosawa’s filming of grand spectacle, particularly battle scenes. Even today I can not figure out his method. I checked our film library and found that he used only 200 or so horses for certain battle scenes that suggest thousands. Other film makers have more money, more advanced techniques, more special effects. Yet no one has surpassed him.

Seven Samurai was originally released in Japan at 207 minutes. It first appeared on international release in a shorter version (155 minutes in the UK, 169 minutes in the US) and was cut again at different times and in different territories. The current DVD version in the UK, runs to 190 minutes, the equivalent of around 198 minutes at film speed, so there are still a few minutes missing.

Although it was at the time the most expensive film ever made in Japan, Kurosawa always complained that the Japanese industry wanted to make films cheaply. He was quite prepared to sit out the long periods during production when the money ran our, confident that as long as his films were successful at the box office, Toho would eventually find the extra money to complete his film, and throughout the 1950s this proved to be the case.