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Akira Kurosawa: IKURU
 1952 140 minutes

Directed by Akira Kurosawa
 Written by Shinobu Hashimoto, Akira Kurosawa, Hideo Oguni
 Produced by Sojiro Motoki
 Original Music by Fumio Hayasaka
 Cinematography by Asakazu Nakai

Takashi Shimura...Kanji Watanabe
 Shinichi Himori...Kimura
 Haruo Tanaka...Sakai
 Minoru Chiaki...Noguchi
 Miki Odagiri...Toyo Odagiri, employee
 Bokuzen Hidari...Ohara
 Minosuke Yamada...Subordinate Clerk Saito
 Kamatari Fujiwara...Sub-Section Chief Ono
 Makoto Kobori...Kiichi Watanabe, Kanji's Brother
 Nobuo Kaneko...Mitsuo Watanabe, Kanji's son
 Nobuo Nakamura...Deputy Mayor
 Atsushi Watanabe...Patient
 Isao Kimura...Intern
 Masao Shimizu...Doctor
 Yûnosuke Itô...Novelist
 Kumeko Urabe...Tatsu Watanabe, Kiichi's Wife
 Kin Sugai...Housewife
 Eiko Miyoshi...Housewife
 Fumiko Honma...Housewife
 Yatsuko Tanami...Bar Hostess
 Yoshie Minami...The Maid
 Kyôko Seki...Kazue Watanabe, Mitsuo's wife
 Kusuo Abe...City Assemblyman
 Tomoo Nagai...Newspaperman (as Tomo Nagai)



Seiji Miyaguchi...Yakuza Boss
 Daisuke Katô...Yakuza
 Miki Hayashi...Second Yakuza
 Fuyuki Murakami...Newspaperman
 Hirayoshi Aono...Newspaperman
 Junpei Natsuki...Hand-Washing Cancer Patient
 Toranosuke Ogawa...Park Section Chief
 Akira Sera...Worker in General Affairs
 Ichirô Chiba...Policeman
 Akira Tani...Bar Owner
 Yoko Kajima...Worker in Sewage Section
 Haruko Toyama
 Mie...Woman in Dance Hall
 Sachio Sakai...Yakuza
 Toshiyuki Ichimura...Pianist
 Harue Kuramoto...Dancer
 Laszlo Székely...Stripper

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 *Nora 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*. *Ikuru* is his seventh 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 filmmaker 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.)

TAKASHI SHIMURA (12 March 1905, Ikuno, Hyogo, Japan—11 February 1982, Tokyo, Japan, emphysema) appeared in 200 films. He was one of Kurosawa's favorite actors. Some of his films were: *Kagemusha* (1980), *Ogin-sama/Love and Faith* (1978), *Shin Zatôichi monogatari: Kasama no chimatsuri/Zatoichi's Conspiracy* (1973), *Zatôichi hatashi-jô/Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman and the Fugitives* (1968), *Furankenshutain tai chitei kaijû Baragon/Frankenstien Conquers the World* (1965), *Akahige/Red Beard* (1965), *San daikaijû: Chikyû saidai no kessen/Ghidrah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Chushingura - Hana no maki yuki no maki/47 Ronin* (1962), *Tsubaki Sanjûrô/Sanjuro* (1962), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Kumonosu jô/Throne of Blood* (1957), *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956), *Shichinin no samurai/Seven Samurai* (1954), *Rashômon* (1950), *Nora inu/Stray Dog* (1949), *Minshu no teki/An Enemy of the People* (1946), and *Chuji uridasu* (1935).

from World Film Directors Vol. I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987 Entry by David Williams.

Akira Kurosawa (March 23, 1910-September 5, 1998), Japanese director and screenwriter, was born in the Omori district of Tokyo. His father, Yutaka Kurosawa, a native of Akita Prefecture and of samurai descent, was an army officer who became a teacher and administrator of physical education. A graduate of the Toyama Imperial Military Academy, he earned a moderate income at the Ebara Middle School, famous for its spartan program. The director's mother, whom he has described as a self-sacrificing realist—'a typical woman of the Meiji era'—came from an Osaka merchant family. Akira was the last of the couple's children, following four sisters and three brothers. The oldest sister had already left home and married by the time Kurosawa was born, and the oldest brother left while he was still a child. The second brother had died before Kurosawa was born, so that Akira grew up with three sisters and the one elder brother who was later to be a great influence in his life. The youngest of the sisters, to whom Kurosawa was closest, died at the age of sixteen while he was in the fourth grade.

Kurosawa characterizes himself in childhood as at first backward at school and physically weak, to the disappointment of his father. In spite of that weakness, he soon came to share his father's enthusiasm for physical challenge, developing a lifelong interest in sports, especially baseball, and an attitude of "single-minded devotion to a discipline." As a child of ten he practiced *kendo*, traditional Japanese swordsmanship, and "assumed all the affectations of a boy fencer." His father's influence extended in another significant direction. In a time when films were considered frivolous entertainment, Yutaka Kurosawa insisted on their educational value, and took his whole family regularly to the movies as well as to traditional storytellers in the music-halls around Kagurazaka. ...

The great Kanto earthquake of 1923 occurred during Kurosawa's second year at the Keika Middle School. His brother took him on "an expedition to conquer fear," forcing him to look at scenes of horrifying destruction. ...He expressed the wish to become a painter. Despite the family's declining fortunes, his father did not object, but insisted that he go to art school...

Kurosawa found it hard to give his mind to his artistic career during the Depression. His family could not afford to buy the materials he needed, and the distractions of those disturbed times were many. He explored literature, especially the works of Dostoevsky and Gorki; he went to the theatre; he listened to

classical music; he became fascinated by movies. In this last he was guided by his brother, who wrote program notes for movie theatres and took part in shows himself as a *benshi*, a professional commentator, specializing in foreign films. Kurosawa was later to list nearly a hundred films that particularly impressed him in the years up to 1929. The list is mainly composed of films from Russia and the West, and includes most of the great names from *Caligari* to Chaplin. In 1929 Kurosawa joined the Proletarian Artists' League, not so much from a commitment to Marxism as out of a fashionable interest in all new movements...He left home at this time, ostensibly to live with his brother, but actually moving between various rented rooms and the homes of Communist friends.

Increasingly disillusioned with the political movement and



with his painting, Kurosawa left the League in the spring of 1932 and went to share the bohemian life of his brother, who lived, to the disapproval of the family, with a woman in the tenement district of Kagurazaka. The movie-going continued, of course, but now came the first of the talkies that would mean the end of Heigo's career. The *benshi* was no longer required for sound films, and the strike organized to persuade the studios to resist the change was doomed to fail. Heigo found himself a leader of the strike, and it was this painful role above all that led, in Kurosawa's view, to his brother's suicide attempt. Kurosawa tried to reconcile Heigo to the family by arranging his marriage to the woman he lived with, but in 1933, at the age of twenty-seven, Heigo's second suicide attempt succeeded. The effect on Kurosawa was profound, and he came to describe the

brother, whom he saw as a more pessimistic version of himself, “as a negative strip of film that led to my own development as a positive image.”

Kurosawa had by this time lost faith in his talent as a painter. He felt himself too easily influenced by the vision of whatever artist he was studying. “In other words, I did not—and still don’t—have a completely, personal, distinctive way of looking at things....Kurosawa answered a newspaper advertisement put out by the newly established PCL (Photo Chemical Laboratory, later to become Toho Motion Picture Company)....Out of more than five hundred applicants, over one hundred and thirty were selected on the basis of the essay, but only seven passed the next test, which involved writing a scenario from a newspaper story. Kurosawa was one of the five who came through the final interview, having already established a rapport with Kajiro Yamamoto, whom he impressed with his knowledge of the visual arts. Kurosawa joined PCL in 1936, when the company was only two years old, a vigorous, open-minded organization that encouraged experiment and trained its assistant directors by giving them every job in the production process. After an uneasy start, Kurosawa joined the group led by director Yamamoto, in whom he discovered “the best teacher of my entire life.”

...Kurosawa now began to win prizes from the Ministry of Education for his filmscripts...Kurosawa resigned himself for a time to turning out formulaic scripts and drinking up the proceeds, usually in the company of his old friend Uekusa, who had come to Tokyo as an extra and stayed on to write scripts himself. The drinking led to a preulcerative stomach condition, which Kurosawa attempted to treat by making strenuous trips into the mountains. One day he saw an advertisement for a new novel, *Sugata Sanshiro*, by Tsuneo Tomita. Reading through the summary of the story, he knew instinctively that here was the subject for a film that would not only be acceptable to the censors but ideal for himself to direct...

Sanshiro Sugata (the Western order for the name) is a Meiji period story about the origins of judo, tracing the rise of one of its first practitioners. The film was made in accordance with national policy dictated by the Information Bureau. Since the film’s content was thus restricted, Kurosawa took the opportunity to concern himself with its form. At a time when the received idea was that a Japanese film should be as simple as possible, “I disagreed and got away with disagreeing—that much I could say.” Several critics remark how many of the characteristic features of Kurosawa’s style are already apparent here. Richie points to the kind of story (a young man’s education), to the tendency to “cyclic form,” to the interest in how things are done (in this case the method of judo itself), and to “the extraordinary economy of the way in which he shows his story.” Already Kurosawa is making use of his favorite punctuation device, the wipe, between scenes....

Kurosawa’s next film, *Ichiban utsukishiku* (*The Most Beautiful*, 1943), belongs to a cycle of “national policy” projects designed to encourage increased industrial production. Unusually for him its subject is women...The style of *The Most Beautiful*, according to Ritchie, was influenced by German and Russian documentary, but he notes also the beginnings of a number of techniques not especially associated with documentary, that Kurosawa was to develop later as his own, such as the “short-cut” for narrative transitions, and a “peculiarly personal use of the flashback.”...

On February 15, 1945, the month *Sanshiro Sugata Part II* was released, Kurosawa married the star of *The Most Beautiful*,

Yoko Taguchi (whose real name was Kato Kiyo), at the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, with Yamamoto and his wife as matchmakers. They were at first very poor, his salary being less than a third of what his wife’s had been as an actress. Their son Jisao was born in December of the same year; a daughter, Kuzuko, was born in 1954. As Japan’s defeat in the war approached, Kurosawa wrote a script for a film called *Dokkoi kono yari* (*The Lifted Spear*), but it was abandoned in the pre-production stage because of a shortage of horses. This led to the hastily assembled production of *Tora no o fumu otokotachi* (*They Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail*), during which Japan surrendered. Kurosawa clashed angrily over this film with the Japanese censors, who had remained at their post even after the government collapsed. They pronounced it an insult to Japanese traditions. The American censors who succeeded them also banned the film, some say for its feudalism, but according to Kurosawa because the Japanese had failed to submit it for approval....American soldiers were in the habit of visiting the set during production, among them on one occasion John Ford, who left a message which Kurosawa never received. He only learned of the visit when the two met at last in London years later....

Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, 1950, was a landmark, not only in his own career but also in the history of Japanese cinema and its relation to the cinema of the West....

Kurosawa has acquired the reputation among his collaborators of being, as his production chief Hiroshi Nezu said, “the best editor in the world.” He sees editing as the most important phase of production, giving life to the film, while pointing out that nothing can rescue a bad script. His method is unusual. Instead of shooting scenes in random order of convenience, he prefers to shoot chronologically, following the script, as far as possible, scene by scene. He then edits the rushes when each day’s shooting is over, so that he can maintain the involvement of his crew in the film’s progress, and so that “I have only the fine cut to complete when the shooting is finished.”...

Once Mizoguchi’s new films began to appear, from 1952 on, he and Kurosawa became the opposite poles in critical debates among French New Wave critics, generally to the detriment of Kurosawa. But *Rashomon*’s influence was wide: Robbe-Grillet declared it had inspired *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and Bergman called his own *Virgin Spring* (1959) “a pale imitation.” The Japanese were equally confused by *Rashomon*’s foreign success, suspecting uneasily that the film appealed in the West because it was “exotic,” or alternatively because it was “Western.” At any rate, according to Kurosawa, Toho were still reluctant to send his next film *Ikiru*, abroad, for fear of its not being understood; this although it was an immediate popular and critical success at home, was placed first on the *Kinema Jumbo* list for 1952, given the Mainichi Film Concours award for best picture and best screenplay, and awarded a Ministry of Education prize. When the film was finally shown abroad, it was very well received, and at a 1961 Kurosawa retrospective in Berlin, it was awarded the David O. Selznick Golden Laurel.

Ikiru (*Living*) tells the story of Watanabe, a minor official in the city administration, widowed and alienated from his married son. He learns that he is suffering from cancer and has only six months to live. ...The film is full of changes of tone and mood, as well as of narrative and visual method. It begins with an x-ray picture of Watanabe’s stomach and the narrating voice tells us about his cancer....

Richie calls the theme existentialist, comparing Dostoevsky and quoting with approval Richard Brown: “It consists

of a restrained affirmation within the context of a giant negation.” It is clearly possible in interpretation to emphasize one strand more than another in the structure of this very various film. Burch, in considering it “Kurosawa’s first full-blown masterwork and the most perfect statement of his dramatic geometry,” also finds it “somewhat marred by its complicity with the reformist ideology dominant in that period.” ...Kurosawa saw himself reaching “a certain maturity” in this film, which he felt was the culmination of the “researches” he had carried out since the war; nevertheless the film left him dissatisfied, and it contains blunders that still embarrassed him when interviewed in 1966 by *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Asked if he considered himself a realist or a romantic, he replied, “I am a sentimentalist.”

Kurosawa collaborated on the script for *Ikiru* with two other writers, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni. Since the earliest films he had preferred not to write alone, because of the danger of one-sidedness in interpreting a character, for a character is usually the starting point. The process of writing Kurosawa describes as “a real competition.” The team retires to a hotel or a house isolated from distractions. Then, sitting around one table, each one writes, then takes and rewrites the others’ work. “Then we talk about it and decide what to use.” Although he finds scriptwriting the hardest part of his work, he lays great emphasis on its importance. It is the first stage in an essentially collaborative process, of which the next is the careful rehearsal with the cast before any filming takes place. The scripts are often written with particular actors in mind. “We don’t just rehearse the actors, but every part of every scene—the camera movements, the lighting, everything.”...

On January 29, 1959, Kurosawa gave his first press interview and announced the formation of his own company, Kurosawa Productions. Toho was to put up one million yen in an agreement requiring three films over two years, with profits and losses to be shared equally with Kurosawa. It was the first independent company headed by a working director in the history of Japanese cinema....

In 1961, Kurosawa said his aim as a filmmaker was “to give people strength to live and face life; to help them live more powerfully and happily.” At the time of *Kagemusha* he said, “I think it’s impossible in this day and age to be optimistic,” but that, seeing the possibilities still in the medium of film, “I would like to be able to create hope somewhere.” He believes that to treat contemporary questions directly is impossible in Japan today. A film like *Ikiru* would be suppressed as too critical. But with a head full of projects still, he does not think of retirement. “When I die I prefer to just drop dead on the set.”

from *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 3rd edition. Donald Ritchie. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1998.

“Sometimes I think of my death,” Kurosawa has written: “I think of ceasing to be...and it is from these thoughts that *Ikiru* came.” The story of a man who knows he is going to die, the film is a search for affirmation. The affirmation is found in the moral message of the film, which, in turn, is contained in the title: *ikiru* is the intransitive verb meaning ‘to live.’ This is the affirmation: existence is enough. But the art of simple existence is one of the most difficult to master. When one lives, one must live entirely—and that is the lesson learned by Kanji Watanabe, the petty official whose life and death give the meaning to the film.

Kurosawa’s example is an extreme one. Watanabe not only knows that he is to die, he also knows when. He says to the doctor: “Be honest with me....Tell me the truth...tell me it is cancer.” When he leaves, the doctor asks the intern: “If you were like him, with only half a year to live, what would you do?”

The film answers the question, and we are shown the snares and delusions to which man in crisis is subject. Watanabe’s first reaction is fear. In bed that night he cries, huddled under his blanket. His second is to lose himself in his family. He cannot. His son—the person closest to him since his wife is dead—has married, become different, alienated. Finding no solace there he begins, for the first time in his life, to doubt; and to doubt means to feel, to begin to live. He doubts the office, doubts his twenty-five years of faithful service, and—most difficult of all—doubts his son.

Awakened by knowledge of his death (for, as the narrator has observed, “he is like a corpse, and actually he has been dead for the past twenty-five years”), it is approaching death which makes him realize for the first time that freedom is his, life is his, has always been his, and that he cannot avoid it. He is alone and free. All of his habits, those regular comforts which made life bearable, the empty eight hours at the city office which seemed to give meaning, the presence of a son which seemed to indicate companionship, all of these no longer offer solace...

As with *The Drunken Angel* and *High and Low*, Kurosawa chose to break *Ikiru* in half. In the 1948 film the reason was that he was tracing a parallel between doctor and gangster; in the 1963 picture, he was concerned with practice and theory (and illusion and reality) on a very large scale. In *Ikiru* it is important that the second half become posthumous because much of the irony of the film results from a (wrong) assessment of Watanabe’s actions made by others after his death. Or, to put it another way, we have seen what is real—Watanabe and his reactions to his approaching death. Now, in the second half, we see illusion—the reaction of others, their excuses, their accidental stumblings on the truth, their final rejection of both the truth and of Watanabe.

Perhaps for this reason Kurosawa insists so much upon the ‘reality’ of the first half, and uses all cinematic techniques to make certain we become absolutely convinced of this reality. Not that he insists upon the literal, far from it. He, along with the writer whom Watanabe meets, knows that “art is not direct.” Rather he uses a variety of styles (expressionistic, impressionistic, etc.) in conjunction with almost all of the techniques of which the camera is capable....

The second half of the film is almost all in Watanabe’s room (now practically unrecognizable in its funeral trappings) and consists of the all-night wake. Here, all is still, there is very little movement and nothing of the visual prodigality of the first half. It is like *High and Low* in this way (though the final half of that film is the busy one)—and the reasons are the same: we have seen various kinds of reality, now we will see illusion—and compare....

Like Sartre’s Roquent, like Camus’ ‘foreigner’ (who also knows he is going to die), like Kafka’s Gregor and Dostoevsky’s Prince Myushkin, Watanabe has discovered what it means to exist, to be—and the pain is so exquisite that it drives, it inspires him. He conceives the plan which will save him, though in the simplest of terms it is a form of insurance against having “lived in vain. He rescues the petition from certain oblivion and turns wasteland into a park. He has flung himself onto this one thing which will keep him afloat. He forces the park into being.

During the wake and its successive revelations it has become gradually clear that Watanabe has found his vindication

through action. The park was only a pretext for this action. It makes no difference now that the department of parks or the deputy mayor claim credit for the finished park. Even the small voice of the one fellow-worker who stands up for Watanabe has no real meaning.

The meaning is that Watanabe has discovered himself through *doing*. Perhaps without even grasping the profound truth he was acting out, he behaved as though he believed that it is action alone which matters; that a man is not his thoughts, nor his wishes, nor his intentions, but is simply what he does. Watanabe discovered a way to be responsible for others, he found a way to vindicate his death and, more important, his life. He found out what it means *to live*.



from Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema. James Goodwin. The Johns Hopkins U Press. Baltimore & London 1994

Kurosawa has made the general observation that “there is nothing more dangerous than a worthless bureaucrat who has fallen prey to the trends of the times” (*Autobiography*, 119). The breakup of large business trusts, or *zaibatsu*, and reform of the civil service bureaucracy were primary goals during the Allied occupation of Japan in the years 1945-52. By the late 1950s, however, the *zaibatsu* had regained significant control and exerted powerful influence on government, a situation Kurosawa dramatizes in *The Bad Sleep Well*. And despite its initial goals, the Allied occupation administration implemented reform of civilian government indirectly, through many of the same agencies in power during wartime. Consequently, a majority of the bureaucrats remained in place and those at the top were given responsibility for the restructuring that was originally intended to remove them from government.

The company vice president at Toho judged the last scenes in *Ikiru*, after the funeral and back in the government office, to be an unnecessary continuation in the criticism of bureaucracy, but Kurosawa refused to adhere to the studio’s instructions to remove them. The director threatened that if those sequences were tampered with he would insist that all the office scenes be taken out. Two years earlier the president of Daiei studios had complained that *Rashomon* was incomprehensible, but he claimed credit for the film after its international success. These professional experiences confirmed Kurosawa’s distrust of the power structure in contemporary Japan’s bureaucracies. ... The bureaucracy of Japan in the period of its reconstruction is shown to defeat the purpose of reform and to serve the purpose of self-promotion for a few higher officials. In its scenes concerning the office worker Toyō and

Watanabe’s son Mitsuo, *Ikiru* also finds that the younger generation’s absorption in material life has made them indifferent to suffering and ungrateful for the sacrifices of their parents.

The X-ray image that opens *Ikiru* is accompanied by a narrator’s explanation, in voice-over: “This is the stomach of the hero of our story. There is stomach cancer, ...but the man himself doesn’t know this yet.” From a clinical point of view, a tumor has been discovered inside this man. From ethical and philosophical points of view, there remains the unanswered question of what lies inside man. When the writer in the bar asks Watanabe if his stomach hurts, Watanabe replies that his pain is greater than that and he clutches at his chest. The gesture evokes an image of emotional and spiritual pain at the heart of humanity. In *Ikiru*, as in *Rashomon*, there is great frequency in the use of dramatic closeups. In both cases, two dimensions of meaning to the human face are made evident. One is the face as a social mask, the other is as a mirror to the individual’s spirit. These two films treat the face in closeup as a social and psychological site. This usage contrasts with films where closeups appear infrequently, such as *Throne of Blood* and *The Lower Depths*, whose tone is by comparison distant and emotionally austere.

From an X-ray image that presents Watanabe as an apparition, the narrative is inaugurated with an account of his virtual nonexistence in his professional and social life. In the course of its duration, the narrative reiterates the statement that Watanabe has existed like a corpse or a mummy for over twenty-five years. Our understanding of Watanabe and his self-understanding advance by means of the existential paradox that this spiritless man will discover a meaning in life only on the brink of death. The paradox thus offers a promise and an argument that emerges from the narrative: even a nearly lifeless individual, such as this mummy within the bureaucracy, contains the potential for change and action as long as he is alive.

A modest thematic statement of this paradox is made through the Japanese love ballad popular among Watanabe’s generation, “Life is Short,” a lyric commentary that evolves in meaning within the film. The refrain of the ballad states: “Life is so short/ Fall in love.../ Before you can no longer love.” It is from the prospect of nonexistence that *Ikiru* draws existence into focus. Kurosawa explains the inception of this original film story as follows: “Sometimes I think of my death. I think of ceasing to be...and it is from these thoughts that *Ikiru* came.”...

Given the intertexts disclosed through *Something Like an Autobiography*, this narrator can be recognized as an adaptation of the *benshi*’s functions. More intimately, the narrator of *Ikiru* (a word that translates “to live”) can be recognized as Kurosawa’s means of commemorating his brother Heigo, the negative image in counterpart to the positive image of continued life....

The flashbacks make apparent the existential paradoxes of Watanabe’s life at its end. As his physical strength diminishes, his social effectiveness increases. The park to which he devotes his new-found energies becomes his tomb on the snowy night when he died. Seen in X-ray image as an apparition and a phantom in the beginning, Watanabe is revealed by the plot in the end as a pure and intense soul....

Where the narrative to *Rashomon* leads to a charitable act taken in the face of humanity’s corruption and deceptions, the narrative to *Ikiru* results in human inaction. But the finale to *Ikiru* is an image rather than a scene of events. In the closing sequence, Kimura visits the small city park Watanabe succeeded in having built. In the gathering darkness, just after the children are called

home, the empty swings are still in movement. Their gentle, harmonic sway is a sign of the modest mark Watanabe has left on the world. This movement is a final iteration of the wipe cut figures, which have come to suggest the potential for change in the plot of a man's life. No monument marks this realized potential. Rather, Watanabe's legacy is contained in the humble, lyric beauty of the moving swings.



from Kurosawa Film Studies & Japanese Cinema. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Duke University Press. 2000.

Ikiru has attracted the attention of many critics mainly for two reasons. First, the film deals with the existential question of how to confront death squarely and find meaning in one's life. Second, the film presents this story in a complex narrative structure created by flashbacks, voice-over narration, and narrative ellipses....

Ikiru much more clearly articulates what *Rashomon* accomplished with its use of multiple threads of narration. *Rashomon* deals with the problem of narration in terms of subjectivity and perspective. It shows that no neutral narration is possible, particularly when the narrators themselves appear in the story that they are narrating. Because of its peculiar narrative structure, in which four different characters recount basically the same event in their own flashbacks, *Rashomon* does not thoroughly

explore the question of a self-referential narration and can therefore be, and has been, interpreted as a film that examines the question of whether humans are too egoistic and self-centered to tell the truth. *Ikiru* is different from *Rashomon* in that it much more lucidly demonstrates the problematic relation of narration and subjectivity. In *Ikiru*, it is not that the self-centered ego contaminates a self-referential narration or confession to preserve its self-interest. Watanabe's inability to confess his illness to his family does not simply signify that what he wishes to confess is an unspeakable topic, his own death. What *Ikiru* shows is that the self-centered ego or a particular mode of subjectivity does not preexist as a fixed entity; that confession, only a mode of discourse, does not have any privileged connection to truth or the innermost thought and feeling of the subject; and that subjectivity is an effect of the act of a self-referential narration or confession, not the other way around....

In the past, death was something that happened or could have happened to others, but this time, it is different. Watanabe is confronted with his own death, and he realizes that he must deal with his impending death alone.

Moreover, it is not only Watanabe but also the film's audience who are caught off guard by death. Although there is no way of knowing exactly when his death will come, we expect Watanabe to die toward the end of the film. Cinematic conventions frequently use a protagonist's death to seal a film's ending, to create a clear sense of narrative closure. Thus when the protagonist of *Ikiru* abruptly disappears about two-thirds of the way through, his death surprises us as something utterly shocking, even though it is totally expected. Death, in the end, comes unexpectedly for everyone. There are elements of anticipation and surprise at the same time. How can the film continue without the protagonist? Both Watanabe and we know that everybody, without exception, will die someday. Yet when he learns his life will be over in six months or so, Watanabe is shocked. We are also shocked when Watanabe dies as predicted. We are shocked not because something unexpected happens but because something expected really happens as expected. We assume that biological death and closure of our lives somehow coincide with each other. What surprises us is that this is hardly the case. It seems that death is always untimely, no matter how well prepared we think we are.

FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Oct 16 Jiří Menzel **Closely Watched Trains** 1966
 Oct 23 Buñuel **That Obscure Object of Desire** 1977
 Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972
 Nov 6 Charles Burnett **Killer of Sheep** 1977

Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987
 Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989
 Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002
 Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 2000

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 ...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to mailto:addtolist@buffalofilmseminars.com
 ...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

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