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, and Rashomon 1950 (remade as The Outrage). 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.

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.)

Toshirô Mifune (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
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. That is the way it was with The Quiet Duel. Apparently most people did not grasp what I most fervently wanted them to, but a small number did understand very well. In order to make my point more clearly, I decided to make Nora inu (Stray Dog, 1949), I think the problem with The Quiet Duel was that I myself had not thoroughly digested my ideas, not did I express them in the best possible way. Maupassant instructed aspiring writers to extend their visions into realms where no one else could see, and to keep it up until the hitherto invisible became visible to everyone. Acting on this principle, I decided to take up the problem of The Quiet Duel one more time in Stray Dog, pressing my vision to the point where everyone would see what I saw.”


The story of this film is based upon something which really happened. “The anecdote is quite true,” says Kurosawa: “The original idea for the picture came when I heard about a real detective who was so unfortunate during those days of shortages as to have lost his pistol.” Taken with the idea, and seeing its possibilities, Kurosawa decided to write a novel about it—and did so, though the novel remains unpublished. “I am very fond of Georges Simenon,” he says” “And I wanted to do something in his manner.”

What most appealed to Kurosawa in the original anecdote was its adaptability, its possibilities. Many of his films take the form of the search....When he heard the anecdote, Kurosawa first thought of Simenon for all detective stories are variations of the quest.

Further, the detective searches all over downtown Tokyo, and Kurosawa has always like closed worlds, microcosms.

...Kurosawa originally had intended to film the search in four representative sections of Tokyo: Asakusa, Ueno, Shinjuku, Shibuya—that is, from the “lowest” circle to the “highest.” He and De Sica had the same idea at the same time. Bicycle Thieves is the more complete allegory (and is a picture which so impressed Kurosawa that he mentioned it in his speech accepting the Venice prize for Rashomon) because the extraordinary typhoons of 1949 made it impossible for him to film the Shinjuku and Shibuya sections. As social allegory Stray Dog stays in “hell.”

This, as it turns out, suits the picture. Always fond of extremes Kurosawa began his novel with: “It was the hottest day of the year...” Thereafter there is not an image that is not drenched in sweat: perspiration is beaded upon brows; armpits are sticky; shirts cling to backs; the girls come running off the stage and at once collapse, their breasts heaving, sweat running down their temples, sweat caught in their mascara. The screen is continually fluttering with the motion of fans, folded newspapers; handkerchiefs are worn around the neck to catch the sweat; one of the men carries an electric fan in front of him. Everyone is wearied, snappish, exhausted by this great and unnatural heat. It is interesting that Kurosawa again uses extreme heat when he again wishes to show a whole city exhausted, fearful, defenseless, in Record of a Living Being. His comment, in both films, is that people are prostrated: in the 1955 film by fear of atomic disintegration; in the 1949 picture by the long war and the new carpet-bagger civilization.

The character of the detective (the only living among the dead) is extremely interesting. When he loses the pistol he feels unmanned—worse, he feels unidentified. A detective is not a policeman. He has no uniform. His only identity is his pistol. If you take that away from him you take everything...If he loses his position, he has no place in society. He becomes a stray.

This is the beginning of the purposeful confusion between cop and robber, between Mifune and the criminal, which so enriches this film. We have taken for granted that the title refers to the criminal and the policemen often so describe him. Shimura says: “Stopping his next crime is important. Once does not make a habit, but twice...a stray dog becomes a mad dog. Right? Later, when Mifune is feeling the strain, the older detective turns to him.

Shimura: Cops who are all nerves are no good.

Mifune: I feel like I’m about to break down.

Shimura: It looks as though you already have. Look, killers are like mad dogs. You know how a mad dog acts. There is even a saying about them: ‘Mad dogs can only see what they are after.’

This, ironically, applies to Mifune as much as it does to the killer. Mifune can only see his lost pistol and what it means to him. The reason he is about to break down (and he actually does go “mad” when Shimura is shot—that is, for a time he loses all restraint, weeps, slides into a deep depression) is that he takes upon himself the crimes of the criminal—because it was his gun which was used.

This confusion between cop and robber, however, is based upon something much deeper than Mifune’s feelings of guilt. The detectives visit the house of the murderer...and find part of a journal where he writes that he had killed a cat simply because the cat’s mewing annoyed him. Then he adds that the cat was worthless, just as he himself is worthless.

The detectives see him as a mad dog; he see himself as a worthless cat. Dogs chase cats and cops chase robbers. By association Mifune is the dog. Later, when they finally meet, the recognition is mutual and instant. The criminal does not even stop to look closely. Animal-like, he knows and the chase that began the film thus ends it. It is as though Mifune knows too,
and—further—knows that since both are human the fact that each assumes the identity of dog or cat, cop or robber. Is accidental. That, in fact, they are not different.

Shimura: My house isn’t much, but his place was horrible. No place for a person to live.

Mifune: You mean bad surroundings make bad men?

Shimura: ‘There are no bad people in this world—there is only bad environment.’

Mifune: ‘I’ve heard that someplace. In a way I’m sorry for him.

Shimura: You cannot afford to feel sorry for him. We all tend to feel that way because we’re always chasing them. But we mustn’t forget how many sheep get hurt by just one wolf. After all, we are the guardians. Let the writers analyze the criminal mind. For me—I have to hate it. Evil is always evil.

Mifune: I can’t think that way yet. During the war I saw how easily good men turned bad. Perhaps it is the difference in our ages, yours and mine—or perhaps the times have changed, but...

Shimura: You understand him too well.

As indeed he does. And so does Kurosawa and so—therefore—does the viewer. There have been indications of this mutuality before....Men are not cats and dog—whose hatred is instinctive. Man’s fight against evil is artificial, man himself is both hero and villain, in himself.

What saves a man, and makes him less a hero, is the knowledge that he must compromise his own virtue, his own understanding, his own compassion. Shimura in Stray Dog understands this. He speaks of the criminal as though he were someone Mifune had loved (as indeed, in a very special way, he did)—the final dialogue in the picture is:

Mifune: The whole case was my fault...

Shimura: Still thinking about that gun. Actually, thanks to you, we have collected over a thousand illegally owned pistols.

Mifune: But sometimes I feel that he—

Shimura: Yes, I remember I once felt like that. It is hard to forget one’s first case. But, you must remember that there are many more men like him than you think. Don’t worry. In time you will forget about him.

By suggesting that good and evil, cops and robbers, are one, he has shown us that we are all ourselves both good and evil, both cop and robber. The difference among these is not one of essence. It has to do merely with identity. The character of the murderer is indeed the most important because it is only he (among all the others in the film) who made the choice not to hunt, not to find himself, not to persevere, not to believe. It is through him that Mifune himself decides and comes to realize that compassion and understanding are not enough. One must act, one must oneself choose.


The name of the criminal, Yusa, is rather unusual. The racketeers’ mistress says during questioning by the police that she couldn’t read the name on a rice ration card because of the difficult Chinese characters. What is foregrounded by her remark is the question of legibility of writing as sign and of Yusa as a character....The name “Yusa” suggests two opposite possibilities of action: to float around without committing oneself to any constructive purpose (Yusa), or to help others realize a better future (Murakami). The difficulty of reading the name, as experienced by Honda’s mistress, is therefore the difficulty not only of understanding Yusa’s character but also of making a right choice.

The last but not the least important aspect of the name “Yusa” lies in its inscription of the historical context. Although Stray Dog was made in occupied Japan, there is no overt reference to this sociopolitical situation because of strict censorship by the American Occupation forces. As if to elude the American censorship, the film contains a number of textual details and figures that allude to the shadow of America. ...The American censorship is inscribed on the textual surface of the film in the image of Yusa’s personal note as a self-reflexive allusion. Yusa’s writing is significant not only because it shows his disturbed state of mind but also because it contains a number of blacked-out mistakes, which cannot but remind us of school textbooks in the immediate postwar years. As Carol Gluck writes, the “Americans immediately forbade ‘false history,’ ordering children to ink out passages about sacred emperors and sacrificing samurai from their textbooks. They suspended historical instruction in the schools and began their censorship of the press.” Finally, Yusa himself is strongly marked by the signifiers of America. The anonymous criminal becomes Yusa when his identity is revealed by his rice ration passbook, or beikoku tsuco: the word beikoku means “rice,” but it homonym beikoku signifies the United States of America. Is the persecution of the criminal (Yusa) an unconscious textual inscription of the imaginary resistance against the U.S.A.?...

In Stray Dog, Yusa appears as a return of the repressed, something many Japanese simply wanted to forget, and what the official discourse tried to erase. Yusa must be repressed for Japanese to be able to believe in the radical newness of postwar democratic Japan or to continue the incomplete project of imperial Japan as if nothing had happened in the last few decades. At the very end of the film, Sato urges Murakami to forget Yusa, but Murakami is still reluctant to follow Sato’s advice wholeheartedly. It is by concluding the film with Murakami’s hesitation that Kurosawa urges us to remember the past and use memory as a moment of intervening in the present social condition.

AKIRA KUROSAWA, FROM SOMETHING LIKE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. KNOPF, 1982

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 philosophic 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 counterpart 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.

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**Gary Morris, Images Film Journal, "Kurosawa"**

Much of Kurosawa's inspiration came from American and European artistic forms. Stray Dog (1950) was influenced by the work of Georges Simenon, and in a curious process, Kurosawa first wrote it as a novel and then adapted it into a film. As in the work of Simenon, Stray Dog is based on a real-life incident, and a seemingly insignificant one: a thief steals a rookie policeman's gun, and the policeman spends the entire film trying to recover it. Kurosawa loads this small story with telling incident, expanding it into a superb mix of noir and neo-realism.

Critics have often remarked on Kurosawa's films as quests, and much of Stray Dog is taken up with the desperate attempts by Detective Murakami (Kurosawa stalwart Toshiro Mifune) to retrieve his gun, which is being used to commit murder. Murakami spends much of his time in literal frantic pursuit, chasing his quarry and accomplishes through the ragged streets of heat-drenched Occupied Tokyo. Like many a noir hero, Murakami is a good man drawn into a criminal demimonde, here the squalid world of postwar profiteering, corruption, and murder. And like these heroes, he has an unsettling link to that world in the form of his gun, which makes it impossible for him to return to normal life. Kurosawa uses his quest to explore a series of seedy tableaux, from opium dens to western-style grindhouses, and the social casualties that populate them. He even provides a classic doppleganger for Murakami in the form of the thief; much is made of their similar backgrounds and very different, but inextricably joined, fates.

**Stray Dog** was Kurosawa's tenth film and it showcases his ability to orchestrate a complex story without losing the viewer. In one alarming sequence, the thief's girlfriend, unhinged by Murakami's relentless pursuit of him, puts on a beautiful stolen dress and begins to dance in a circle with increasing frenzy, obviously in the midst of a breakdown. The eloquent unspoken question, a common one in neo-realism, is why shouldn't an impoverished girl have a beautiful dress, by whatever means? In a just world, the film seems to be saying, this would be possible. But the world of Stray Dog is anything but just, and the viewer's experience of it parallels Murakami's awakening. This Christlike figure stands in for Kurosawa when he says sadly, "There are no bad people in the world, only bad environments."

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**Film Noir, from filmsite.org**

Film Noir (literally 'black film or cinema') was coined by French film critics (first by Frank Nino in 1946) who noticed the trend of how 'dark' and black the looks and themes were of many American crime and detective films released in France following the war. It was a style of black and white American films that first evolved in the 1940s, became prominent in the post-war era, and lasted in a classic "Golden Age" period until about 1960 (marked by Orson Welles' Touch of Evil (1958). Strictly speaking, however, film noir is not a genre, but rather the mood, style, point-of-view, or tone of a film.

Film noir is a distinct branch, sub-genre or offshoot of the crime/gangster and detective/mystery sagas from the 1930s (i.e., Little Caesar (1930), Public Enemy (1931) and Scarface (1932), but very different in tone and characterization. Notable film noir gangster films, such as They Drive By Night (1940), Key Largo (1948) and White Heat (1949) each featured noir elements within the traditional gangster framework. Titles of many film noirs often reflect the nature or tone of the style and content itself: Dark Passage (1947), The Naked City (1948), Fear in the Night (1947), Out of the Past (1947), Kiss Me Deadly (1955), etc.

The themes of noir, derived from sources in Europe, were imported to Hollywood by emigre film-makers. Noirs were rooted in German Expressionism of the 1920s and 1930s, such as in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919) or Fritz Lang's M (1931), and in the French sound films of the 30s. These films, from German directors such as F. W. Murnau, G. W. Pabst, and Robert Wiene, were noted for their stark camera angles and movements, chiaroscuro lighting and shadowy, high-contrast images - all elements of later film noir.

Classic film noir developed during and after World War II, taking advantage of the post-war ambience of anxiety, pessimism, and suspicion. These films reflected the resultant tensions and insecurities of the time period, and counter-balanced the optimism of Hollywood's musicals and comedies. Fear, mistrust, bleakness and paranoia are readily evident in noir, reflecting the 'chilly' Cold War period when the threat of nuclear annihilation was ever-present. The criminal, violent, misogynistic, hard-boiled, or greedy perspectives of anti-heroes in film noir
were a metaphorical symptom of society's evils, with a strong undercurrent of moral conflict.

The earliest film noirs were detective thrillers, with plots and themes often taken from adaptations of literary works - preferably from best-selling, hard-boiled, pulp novels and crime fiction by Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, or Cornell Woolrich. Very often, a film noir story was developed around a cynical, hard-hearted, disillusioned male character [e.g., Robert Mitchum, Fred MacMurray, or Humphrey Bogart] who encountered a beautiful but promiscuous, amoral, double-dealing and seductive femme fatale [e.g., Mary Astor, Veronica Lake, Jane Greer, Barbara Stanwyck, or Lana Turner]. She would use her feminine wiles and come-hither sexuality to manipulate him into becoming the fall guy - often following a murder. After a betrayal or double-cross, she was frequently destroyed as well, often at the cost of the hero's life. As women during the war period were given new-found independence and better job-earning power in the homeland during the war, they would suffer -- on the screen -- in these films of the 40s.

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Oct 11 Vittorio de Sica **UMBERTO D** 1952 (35mm)
Oct 18 Robert Bresson **A MAN ESCAPED/UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ OU LE VENT SOUFFLE OÙ IL VEUT** 1956 (35mm)
Oct 25 Luis Buñuel **DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID/LE JOURNAL D'UNE FEMME DE CHAMBRE** 1964 (35mm)
Nov 1 Andrei Tarkovsky **ANDREI RUBLEV/ANDREY RUBLYOV** 1966 (DVD)
Nov 8 Peter Yates **BULLITT** 1968 (35mm)
Nov 15 Woody Allen **ANNE HALL 1977** (35mm)
Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder **MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN/DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN** 1979 (35mm)
Nov 29 Terry Gilliam **BRAZIL** 1985 (35mm)
Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti **THE LEOPARD/IL GATTOPRADO** 1963 (35mm)

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October 6 (Introduction by Bruce Jackson): **A Panther in Africa**, Aaron Matthews. 2004. 71 min. (Tanzania); **a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert**. Coco Fusco. 2004. 31 min. (U.S.)

October 27 (Introduction by Sarah Elder): **Margaret Mead: A Portrait by a Friend**. Jean Rouch. 1978. 30 min. (U.S.); **Jaguar**. Jean Rouch. 1957. 92 mins. (Niger/Ghana)


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