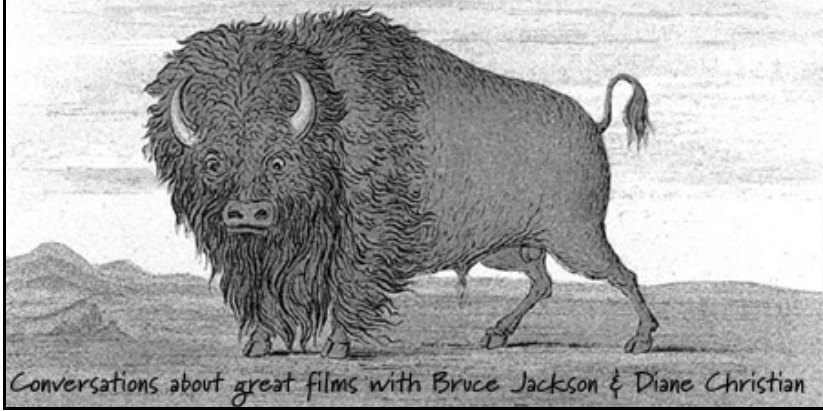


# The Buffalo Film Seminars



**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, *Kagemusha* 1980, *Dodesukaden*



1970, *Yojinbo* 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 *Yojinbo* 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.)

**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 Samurai* (1954), stoic and droll in *Yojinbo* (1961) and its sequel *Sanjuro* (1962), paranoid and irrational in

March 30, 2004 (VIII:11)



## **Throne of Blood/ Kumonosu jô (1957), 105 min.**

Toshirô Mifune...Taketori Washizu  
Isuzu Yamada...Lady Asaji Washizu  
Takashi Shimura...Noriyasu Odagura  
Akira Kubo...Yoshiteru Miki  
Hiroshi Tachikawa...Kunimaru Tsuzuki  
(as Yoichi Tachikawa)  
Minoru Chiaki...Yoshiaki Miki  
Takamaru Sasaki...Kuniharu Tsuzuki  
Kokuten Kodo...Military Commander  
Kichijiro Ueda...Washizu's workman  
Eiko Miyoshi...Old Woman at castle  
Chieko Naniwa...Old Ghost Woman

Directed by Akira Kurosawa  
Writing credits: Shinobu Hashimoto,  
Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa,  
Hideo Oguni, based on *Macbeth* by  
William Shakespeare.  
Produced by Akira Kurosawa and Sojiro  
Motoki  
Original Music by Masaru Satô  
Cinematography by Asakazu Nakai  
Film Editing by Akira Kurosawa  
Production Design by Yoshirô Muraki  
Costume Design by Yoshirô Muraki

Also Known As: *The Castle of the Spider's Web*, *Cobweb Castle*, *Macbeth*, *Spider Web Castle*.

*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)."

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE** (Stratford-upon-Avon, England, April 1564—23 April 1616). Playwright (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Henry IV*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Richard II*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*) and poet (*Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and *Sonnets*) whose work has often been found suitable for adaptation by the film industry, here and abroad.

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**AKIRA KUROSAWA, FROM SOMETHING LIKE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. KNOPE, 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 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 Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Duke 2000**

The original script of *Rashomon* (*Rashomon*, 1950), possibly the best-known Japanese film outside Japan, was written by Hashimoto Shinobu, who first became interested in the art of film script when he was hospitalized for tuberculosis. . . . Kurosawa was shown some of Hashimoto's scripts, and one of them caught Kurosawa's attention. It was an adaptation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke's short story "In a Grove" (*Yabu no naka*, 1921). The script was too short to be made into a feature-length film, and Hashimoto was asked to expand the script further. To respond to Kurosawa's request, Hashimoto decided to add to his original script another Akutagawa story, "Rashomon" (*Rashomon*, 1915), consisting of three confessions by the bandit, the wife, and the husband. It was Kurosawa's idea to create a new character. The woodcutter, as an eyewitness to the crime. The final version of the script was written by Kurosawa alone.

from *Kurosawa Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Duke U Press, 2000.

*The Search for Japaneseness*

*Throne of Blood* (Kumonosujo, 1957) is one of the most frequently discussed Kurosawa films. This is not surprising when we think about the film's remarkable beauty and formal precision. Almost every aspect of the film (e.g., sets, acting, camera work, editing) demonstrates the originality and superb craftsmanship of Kurosawa as a filmmaker. In other words, the film has a number of intrinsic merits that justify the kind of attention it has received critically. Yet they are not the only reasons why *Throne of Blood* has been regarded as a unique film among Kurosawa's work. The popularity of *Throne of Blood* as an object of critical analysis is inseparable from the fact that it is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and it is precisely this relation that has gotten the most attention. Kurosawa criticism has meticulously noted and enumerated the similarities and differences between Kurosawa's film and Shakespeare's play partly because of the following "paradox": *Throne of Blood* is regarded as the best adaptation of Shakespeare's work into film, yet at the same time among many Shakespeare adaptations it departs from Shakespeare's text most radically.

Frank Kermode simply refuses to consider *Throne of Blood* in his review Shakespearean films because he sees it as "an allusion to rather than a version of, *Macbeth*."

*Macbeth* is not the only original source to which *Throne of Blood* is compared. Another source mentioned frequently by critics is Noh. In fact, the study of the film's connection to Shakespeare's text and the study of the film's borrowing of Noh conventions are often pursued simultaneously. For many critics, the influence of Noh in the film is precisely what makes it unique and successful. They agree that Kurosawa's superb use of Noh makes *Throne of Blood* an aesthetically complete, yet unlike other Kurosawa films from the same period, anti-humanistic film.

In short, the film's possible sources, whether Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Noh, traditional Japanese ink painting, or Japanese history, do not solve interpretive questions arising when we see the film but raise more questions that need to be dealt with in our interpretation of the film.

Adaptation is one of the least-explored topics in contemporary film theory. As a critical topic, it is mostly ignored, and sometimes even stigmatized, as an obsolete issue. What makes adaptation a questionable topic is the implied notion of fidelity; that is whenever adaptation is discussed, the adaptation's fidelity to the original almost inevitably comes up. Yet fidelity is a misleading and unproductive notion because it establishes a hierarchical relation between original and adaptation, and also because it assumes that there is some uniform set of standards for comparing the two artworks in different media. What is ignored in both is not only the specificity of the adaptation but also that of the original....In what I shall call the discourse of adaptation, the original is always valorized over the adaptation, which is never granted autonomy regardless of its aesthetic value. The discourse of adaptation is therefore less the discourse of aesthetics than that of power.

The reception of Shakespeare in modern Japan is inseparable from the questions of Western imperialism and hegemony maintained by the unequal production and

distribution of cultural capital.

Despite its use of Noh and other types of traditional Japanese art, *Throne of Blood* has little to do with the affirmation of Japaneseness. Nor is it an attempt to create a new national film style. Instead, Kurosawa simultaneously tries to expand the possibility of film form and reexamine the specific history and genre conventions of Japanese cinema. *Throne of Blood* is a unique film made by a true innovator of cinema.

**from *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. James Goodwin. Johns Hopkins Baltimore 1994**  
*Throne of Blood*

The film dialogue makes no attempt to transpose Shakespeare's poetry into Japanese. Instead, the visuals create the film's metaphoric imagery. The film characters speak only from the necessity of a present situation. They are not developed through the reflective thought Shakespeare provides in asides and monologues.

In the representation of the Forest Castle setting, the film's compositions are designed to foreshorten and compress visual perspective. Extensive use of the telephoto lens was favored by Kurosawa to achieve an effect that "effaces distance, cancels all perspective and gives to the image a weight, a presence almost hallucinatory, making the rhythms of movement emerge." In collaboration with scenic designer Yoshiro Muraki, the director decided that for Forest Castle the location should be high on Mount Fuji, because of the fog and the black volcanic soil. But...we created something which never came from any single historical period. To emphasize the psychology of the hero, driven by compulsion, we made the interiors wide with low ceilings and squat pillars to create the effect of oppression.

In its modulations of compositional scale, the film depicts events as progressively larger than the individual's power to control them.

The passage of time, which is extraordinarily accelerated in the Shakespeare play, is hastened further in *Throne of Blood*. As messengers report to Tsuzuki and his war council at the outset, the wipe cut is utilized as a visual figure for precipitous change in the course of events.

Kurosawa has stated that his intentions for *Seven Samurai* and for this film were to present *jidai-geki* [period dramas] that are historically informed at the same time that they are visualized in a completely modern and dynamic manner. His concern for history, however, is not limited to matters of authenticity in sets and costumes. In all his *jidai-geki* Kurosawa demonstrated a preference for eras of disruption in samurai culture, of massive social upheaval, or of civil war. For *Throne of Blood* he had in mind the Sengoku period of civil wars (1467-1568) when there were frequent incidents of *gekokujo*, the overthrow of a superior by his own retainers.

Another indication of Kurosawa's reorientation of tragic meaning in the film is its elimination of nearly all the scenes of *pathos* and acknowledged guilt in *Macbeth*. In the context of a conclusive pattern of defeated ambition and vain effort, of absolute futility, heroic fate is impossible. Tragedy in this film is mankind's general heritage rather than an individual destiny. From the distant, almost geological, perspective in

time that the prologue and epilogue establish, dramatic action becomes less experiential and more elemental, more emblematic.

Kurosawa values Noh for its symbolic range, dramatic compression, manner of understatement, and its fusion of form and substance. Noh has taught the film director much about the dramatic impact of economy in acting, set design, and sound accompaniment:

In Noh there is a certain hieratic property: one moves as little as possible. Also, the smallest gesture, the smallest displacement produces an effect truly intense and violent.

Now, Noh actors are all veritable acrobats....But in general the actors conserve their energy, they avoid all unnecessary actions. There, to my mind, lies one of the secrets of Noh.

Through its ceremonial, elemental, and contrastive method of presentation, Noh makes the properties of stillness and vehemence coexist on the stage. *Throne of Blood* achieves similar visual and dramatic rhythms that measure blank expanses against character movement, stillness against recklessness, passivity against vitality, and sparse sound signals or silence against shouts and sounds of battle.

Kurosawa's uses of Noh forms and sources remain modern and deliberately intertextual in his film.

Kurosawa prepared each principal actor by assigning a Noh mask for the basis of characterization. For Toshiro Mifune's performance as Washizu the model was the *Heida* mask, by tradition the face of the warrior in his prime. In the context of *Throne of Blood*, there is an ironic discrepancy in this image, since the *Heida* mask indicates a man of greatness who conquers evil spirits. The mask named *Mika-zuki* (crescent moon) is the face of a wrathful warrior and it may have inspired Kurosawa's choice of the symbolic crescent moon to mark Washizu's reign.

The use of facial closeups in *Throne of Blood* is noticeably sparing, particularly in comparison to psychological interpretations of Shakespeare such as Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971). Polanski relies on the closeup to visualize a play of emotion and consciousness on the faces of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, often while their most revealing thoughts are delivered through voice-over. In his own cinema of the early 1950s—particularly in *The Idiot* and *Ikuru*—there is great dependence on the closeup and the reaction shot in dialogue scenes for the disclosure of character psychology. The human face in *Throne of Blood*, most often seen at a distance that objectifies its appearance, is a social mask. The character

motives behind such a mask are to control the social meaning of one's presence and to control the interpersonal situation.

Kurosawa recognized that in *Throne of Blood* he violated the norms of intimate drama:

I tried to show everything using the full-shot.

Japanese almost never make films in this way and I remember I confused my staff thoroughly with my instructions. They were so used to moving up for moments of emotion, and I told them to move farther back. In this way I suppose you would call the film experimental.

Such experimentation with the camera's remoteness from the dramatic center of action had been by that time conducted rigorously in the cinema of Kenji Mizoguchi. When a sequence in *Throne of Blood* does cut to closeup, the face is fixed in expression in the character's reaction to events for the duration of the shot.

Kurosawa has described characterization on the basis of the mask as "the opposite of acting." In Western theatrical traditions that follow the method of Constantin Stanislavsky, the actor develops and impersonates the unique individuality of the character through analysis of the psychology of that particular personality. The Noh actor, through study of the *omote* ("outside") or dramatic mask, expresses and exterior image of the spirit or essence of character. The mask represents a transformation of character into symbol. In assuming the mask, the Noh actor places a symbolic image on the *surface* of character. As a consequence, the presentation of a Noh character's experience is based upon ideas rather than personality and upon an image of emotion rather than raw emotion itself. Masked drama produces a "distancing effect" between character and audience, and this quality has figured prominently in modern Western cultural innovation by writers as dissimilar as Ezra Pound and Bertolt Brecht.

Kurosawa's adoption of Noh methods for *Throne of Blood* facilitates the creation of an unheroic film tragedy. Its protagonist is not depicted as the sole or even primary agent of dramatic events. Audience understanding of his character is developed through objective, external means rather than through emotional identification. Washizu is not possessed of any greatness, either inward or outward, that would enable him to withstand and govern the forces that propel him. Not once does he voice his inner drives. The spinner-prophet and Lady Asaji dictate to him the urgings of ambition that *they* attribute to his own desires. The stature of Washizu's feelings, thoughts, and actions is further diminished by the film's impersonal scale of events and the unworldly scope of time.

The standard reference book on Kurosawa's work is Donald Ritchie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*

### Coming up in Buffalo Film Seminars VIII:

April 6 Luchino Visconti, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and his Brothers*, 1960

April 13 François Truffaut, *Jules et Jim/Jules and Jim*, 1961

April 20 Sergio Leone, *C'era una volta in America/Once Upon a Time in America*, 1984

Contact Bruce: [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)

Contact Diane: [engdc@buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@buffalo.edu)

To be placed on the Buffalo Film Seminars email list: [addtolist@buffalo](mailto:addtolist@buffalo)

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