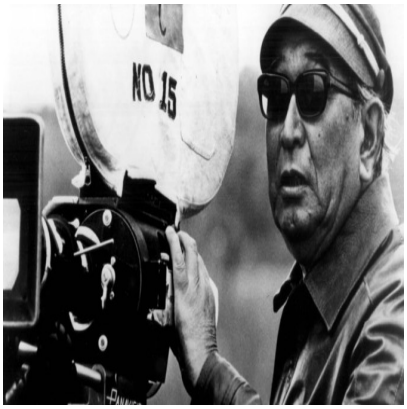
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Akira Kurosawa: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Description

Paper by Lawrence Gleeson.

I will be analyzing the three films, *Rashomon* (1950), *Seven Samurai* (1957), and *Ran* (1985), in relation to how these Akira Kurosawa films represent men and their relationship to social structures, and to violence in reference to historical truth and to socio-economic realities. In *Rashomon,* Kurosawa breaks the traditional narrative mold of his earlier films with Arthouse Cinema depicting a murder of a samurai and the rape of his Lady by a bandit. The samurai is depicted as a clean cut, upright guardian as he walks carrying the reigns of the horse that his properly attired Japanese Lady rides upon in traditional ruling class attire complete with hat and facial netting protecting her delicate, porcelain-like skin from the harmful rays of the sun. The bandit, on the other hand, is dressed with tattered garb, no shirt, unshaven and a general unkempt appearance and he is frequently swatting and defending himself from the attention of big flies evidenced by his scratching and swatting at the loud buzzing of the flies. As the samurai and the Lady make their way through the woods, the bandit slowly watches like a snake watching his prey. Eventually, the bandit confronts the samurai in broad-action, sword dueling scenes and in hand to hand combats as daggers are brandished and eventually the bandit subdues the samurai and forcefully takes the Ladyâ??s honor. (People: Akira Kurasawa)



The men this film is focusing on are men that take care of the weaker sexed women and use violence to get what they want and need. (Prince) The use of violence to protect the weak and to get what is wanted will be seen again and again in *Seven Samurai,* in *Ran,* as well as in the remainder of *Rashomon,* as four varying versions of the same crime are presented with one version containing a hidden secret. In my opinion, this film is a reflection of Japanese society in 1950. The Japanese samurai has been killed as democratization is the driving force behind the new society and that the new culture is at risk of becoming a society of thieves and bandits. (People: Akira Kurasawa)

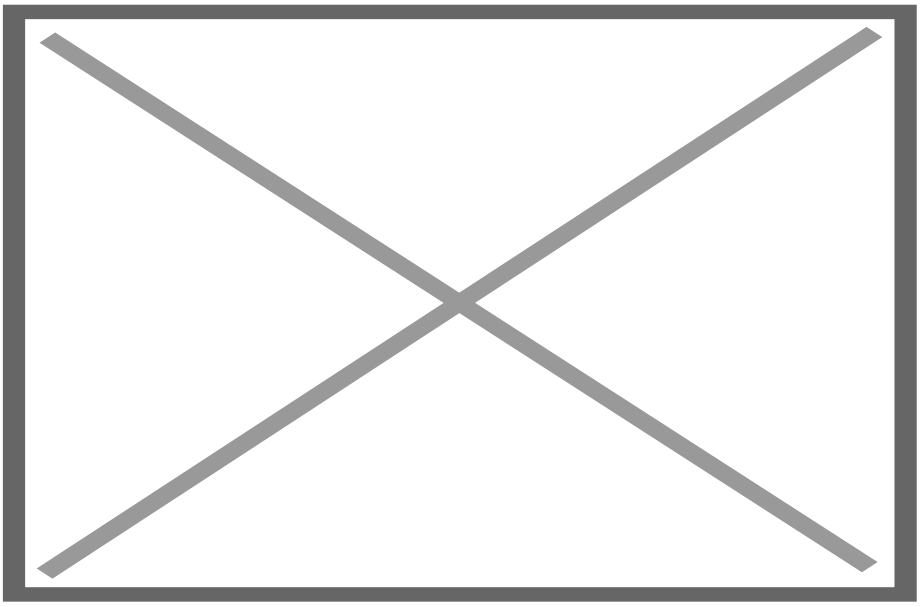
Americanization has been taking place with a new constitution being implemented. Furthermore, the Japanese â??sword,â?• the army, has been removed. It is my belief the four versions represent varying perspectives on WWII. Yet, by the end of *Rashomon,* an acceptance of the past has taken place and hope for the future is being put forth symbolized by the wood cutterâ??s willingness to trade the valuable, pearl-handled dagger he kept for himself, in return for the safety and well-being of the newborn. (Prince, The Warriorâ??s Camera: The cinema of Akira Kurosawa) This, in my opinion, is Kurosawa showing through the woodcutterâ??s action that there is there is hope for the future of Japan without the weapons of the samurai and the army.



With the 1955 film *Seven Samurai,* ten years have passed since the end of WWII. Japan is struggling to find itâ??s own identity. For the most part, Japanese society has all but turned its back on the samurai way and is leaning heavily toward a full embrace of Western ideals and economics. Kurosawa sees the ideals of the samurai as a way for Japan to embrace the past taking the strong, good ideals of the legendary samurai and reinventing the samurai as a present day, or contemporary figure as he fears Japan is losing its identity. (People: Akira Kurasawa) The film opens with the bandits coming to rob the peasant farmers of their grain and barley. The peasants canâ??t defend themselves and fear for their survival. They decide to hire a samurai to protect and help defend them from the marauding bandits. Interestingly, Kurosawa depicts the first samurai as out of work true to a struggling contemporary Japanese economy. The samurai prepares himself as a priest and rescues a baby from a crazed kidnapper. The kidnapper is impaled by a sword and stumbling from the hut and in slow-motion drops dead to the ground. The samurai emerges and holds the baby aloft. The samurai uses violence to protect and safeguard the baby. I believe Kurosawa uses the baby again here in *Seven Samurai,* as he did in *Rashomon*, to foreshadow a hopeful future for Japan.

The men in *Seven Samurai,* are distinctly drawn into two classes, the upper class samurai and the peasant farmers and bandits. Kurosawa depicts the samurai living almost exclusively by a code of loyalty, duty responsibility and honor. He embodies these men as transcending selfishness and individualism, sacrificing themselves to protect the peasants. In addition, he includes a peasant who was not born into the samurai class as the possibility of social mobility in post WWII Japanese society and through the samurai and the hard work, sense of duty and fighting loyalty of the peasants victory is possible. Kurosawa uses violence as abstract realism. The fight scenes are very physical, very kinetic. His use of the long lens and camera angles draws the viewerâ??s eye in and creates a very contemporary feel. (Giddens) Furthermore, in the final scenes, Kurosawa is linking the ideals of the samurai at the filmâ??s end with the buried samurai on the hillside with the future of Japan. As Japan is struggling to find its identity Kurosawa is showing them a way through the abyss- the dirty, muddy fight scenes â?? through the surviving samurai tradition of loyalty, self-sacrifice and sense of duty. In the closing moments of *Seven Samurai,* the surviving samurai agree that they survived and that the

peasant farmerâ??s are the ones who have won. Kurosawa is saying that the Japanese can have a better future if they are willing to reach for it and work for it.



With his final epic film, the Shakespearean Japanese interpretive, *Ran,* based on â??King Lear,â?• Kurosawa has pulled away from such overt optimism of *Seven Samurai,* and the darker themes from his earlier Shakespearean Japanese interpretive, *Throne of Blood,* based on Shakespeareâ??s â??Macbeth,â?• have taken hold. Kurosawa sees his government taking sides with huge corporations at the expense of the Japanese people. A truly authentic Japanese identity post WWII is becoming very difficult. Kurosawa has for all intents and purposes lost faith in the Japanese government and itâ??s chance at a more hopeful, authentic Japan based on the ideals of the samurai society. Kurosawa has seen the Japanese samurai ideals subverted almost entirely into the corporation. (Nolletti) His film *Ran,* (1965) is a white flag to the winds of fate â?? the lost hope of an independent, authentic Japan. (IMDB: Akira Kurosawa) The sons of Lord Hidetora are, in my opinion, representative of the sons of Japan after WWII. Not to be content with their individual kingdoms, each is driven to conquer, capture and unify the people by a woman, Lady Kaede who is hell bent on revenging her familyâ??s demise at the hand of Lord Hidetora years earlier. A case can be made Japan had come full circle from the civil warring era that Kurosawa sets these films, with serfdoms battling one another and samurais waging the battles for the lord of the serfdom, much like the warriors that served the three castles and the Lord of each castle to the economic juggernaut that Japan became in the 1970â??s and early 1980â??s following WWII. (Prince, â??Remaking Kurosawa: Translations and Permutations in Global Cinemaâ?•)

Seemingly, Kurosawa has thrown his hands up in the air with *Ran,* and has reached the conclusion that Japan is fated and his efforts to see his native country return to, or even evolve into, a strong, masculine state again will not be fulfilled. Japanese suffering is just the way the world works. Kurosawa conveys this with the image of a castle burning with horsemen rushing in and killing is everywhere. Moreover, the ending of *Ran,* depicts Taramaru on the top of his familyâ??s burned out castle ruins. A drastic cut pull out gives appearance Taramaru is part of the ruin and poses the adage that Justice is blind. Seemingly, Kurosawa feels modern Japan, like, the Japan depicted in *Ran,* is being decided on the whims of a feminized bureaucracy attempting to avenge a humiliating defeat through the economic windfalls of hue corporations. Kurosawaâ??s films after this period moved into dreamlike states and

fantasia.

The messages Kurosawa sets forth in these masterpieces are relevant today. Economically, Japan is struggling due to a global recession, a major earthquake and a resultant three-story tsunami (possibly fate) along with a nuclear release of radioactive material occurring at the Fukushima nuclear power plants. Notwithstanding, Japan as a culture, has succeeded in maintaining aspects of the samurai culture in its work ethic and in its value of loyalty. Nevertheless, as a nation, Japan did not invite the international community to participate in assessing and containing the nuclear spillage nor in rectifying the leakage from the Fukushima Daiichi reactor. As Kurosawa elegantly, and eloquently shows, the Japanese people are a people steeped in a strong, rich and powerful tradition. One can only hope that when they need to, they ask for help in overcoming an adversary to ensure the health and survival of its people despite class differences. In closing, I believe Japan still looks to the West before it charts its course for the future â?? much like Kurosawaâ??s western genre influence in these films. And despite the great film directorâ??s dismay, the Japanese people and the strong ideals of the samurai remain vibrant, alive as they work, struggle and fight for a better future.

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