

## **Title of the Module:**

### **Akira Kurosawa**

Akira Kurosawa (1910—1998), the acclaimed filmmaker from Japan, is the first name from Asia to be heard in the innately Western ears of film pundits across the globe. As an auteur of international cinema, he could redefine the limits of visual culture crossing the western syntax of cinema. Since the advent of *Rashomon* in Venice Film Festival in 1951 to the days of digitalisation of films now, he is called “the warrior with a camera” for his distinctive filmmaking process and inimical oeuvre. Deeply conscious of the cultural roots, he took Japan’s folktales, drama, traditional performance and music into his films and the very idea of adaptation took a new meaning by his experiments with literature. His adaptation of western canonical texts like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* or Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* might be the best example to prove Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cinema as adaptation of nation state. In other words, Kurosawa reconstructed Japan that was destroyed in World War II in his films and gave new direction to the art of cinema by bridging the gap between Western cinematic sensibility and Japanese cultural landscape.

#### Learning Objectives

To enable the learner to:

- 1) understand Akira Kurosawa as an auteur
- 2) comprehend the distinctive features of Kurosawa’s filmmaking practices
- 3) understand the filmography of Akira Kurosawa
- 4) comprehend and critically respond to Kurosawa’s film *Seven Samurai*

Akira Kurosawa was born in Tokyo on March 23, 1910. His father was a former military officer turned an athletic instructor at the Imperial Army's Toyama Academy. His mother was from an affluent merchant family. "My mother was a very gentle woman," Mr. Kurosawa said, "But my father was quite severe." His brother Heigo was very much interested in traditional storytelling, *kodan*, which featured tales of samurai and often involved intricate, stylized swordplay. He used to take young Akira to movies and Heigo later became a narrator for silent movies of the time. But when synchronous sound practices were adopted by cinema, he lost his job and eventually set out a trip to the mountains and committed suicide. The incident made a great impact on Akira’s mind. He decided to learn painting and enrolled in the Doshusha School of Western Painting in 1927, but he could not achieve his dream of becoming a painter due to financial difficulties.

Kajiro Yamamoto, the towering director of that time, hired Akira as an apprentice assistant director at the age of 26 and Kurosawa worked seven years with him. Finally, in 1943, he was given the chance to direct his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, a typical judo fight film that became a box-office hit. Following his directorial debut, films like *The Most Beautiful*, a blending of documentary and dramatic scenes about Japanese women factory workers; and *Sanshiro Sugata, Part II*, another huge hit, established Akira Kurosawa’s name in Japanese cinema industry. But his mind was after the style of Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica and he wanted to portray something more real on reel and create aesthetically more beautiful films.

In 1946, Kurosawa directed *No Regrets for Our Youth*, a film about persecutions in post-war Tokyo by the Japanese right wing. "It was the first film in which I had something to say and in which my feelings were used," Kurosawa said later. *Drunken Angel* (1948) telling the story of a drunkard doctor who works for the poor showed life in the slums of Japan and received critical acclaim. The recurrent appearance of a sump between the segments with associated

symbols like a broken doll pointed to the decadence of modernity and the human plight. Kurosawa's film, *The Quiet Duel* (1949), is based on Kikuta Kazuo's play *The Abortion Doctor*. Kurosawa directed movie, *The story of Stray Dog* (1949), centres on a young homicide detective, Murakami (Mifune Toshiro), and his quest to recover his stolen handgun. This film illustrates the commodity fetishism of capitalist society from an obviously Marxian perspective. Kurosawa's *Scandal* (1950) is a social protest film condemning the irresponsibility of yellow journalism. All these films mentioned here made the overture for *Rashomon* that changed the history of Japanese film.

*Rashomon* was an adaptation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke's short story "In a Grove," which was a rereading of an 11<sup>th</sup> century Japanese folk tale from multiple perspectives. The story comprises of three confessions, by a bandit, the wife, and the husband, each one contradicting the other two confessions. The polyphony of the story is befitting to convey the idea of multiple reality and multiple truths. Kurosawa added another character, a woodcutter as an eyewitness and wrote the screenplay himself. "During that time the gate was growing larger and larger in my mind's eye. I was location-scouting in the ancient capital of Kyoto for *Rashomon*, my eleventh-century period film. The Daiei management was not very happy with the project. They said the content was difficult and the title had no appeal. They were reluctant to let the shooting begin. Day by day, as I waited, I walked around Kyoto and the still more ancient capital of Nara a few miles away, studying the classical architecture. The more I saw, the larger the image of the *Rashomon* gate became in my mind (180)", wrote Kurosawa in his autobiography, *Something Like an Autobiography* (1983). Despite the negative reviews at home the film received unprecedented acclaim abroad and soon became a classic in the history of world cinema.

A close analysis of the filmography of Kurosawa reveals certain distinctive signature styles and practices adapted by him. His mastery over an impeccable and excellent registering of Japanese topography through a well-choreographed cinematography has to be noted first of all. The pace of visual idiom followed by Kurosawa ranges from extreme slow motion, to naturalistic rhythm, to high level fast pace. Kurosawian slow motions are intended at portraying consequences of previous actions in detail. Each of Kurosawain character normally does not cross-over into another character's cloak. The frame transition known as swipe is one of the noted cinema stylistics frequently followed by Kurosawa. Kurosawa always worked in close collaboration with his technical team including cinematographers, editors, actors and sound composers etc. thereby forming a special cluster of artists and technicians which was later labelled, the "Kurosawa-Gumi". Violence—with many manifestations of it like personal, institutional, class psychological, gender—is another prominent feature which can be detected across Kurosawa's filmic oeuvre. A consistent thematic thread which could be explored across many of Kurosawa's films is Heroism. Kurosawa creates cinematic plots which demand the necessity of characters who are heroic; and these characters establish their heroic status primarily to protect an otherwise unheroic community. Film critic David Desser says that "According to the cliché, Kurosawa is 'Japan's most Western director' (1172). ... and *Seven Samurai* is probably the most oft remade, reworked, referenced film in all of cinema history" (1173). Genre-wise Kurosawa can be called as the master of "Eastern Western", as commented by David Desser.

Akira Kurosawa's most politically significant cinematic grand-scale epic arrived in 1954 with the release of *Seven Samurai*. Plot-wise, it depicts the successful armed resistance of farmers of a mountain village under the leadership of seven hired samurais against 40 heavily armed bandits on horseback who often raid the village to loot crops. Creation of a disciplined and

confident nation out of a diffident defenceless disorderly agrarian community becomes the major political subtext of *Seven Samurai*. The revival of Japan as self-confident nation after the catastrophic nuclear demolition in 1945 could be the political mission Kurosawa was trying to undertake with this film. In order to recharge the political will of contemporary post-nuclear twentieth century Japan, Kurosawa relies on a particular episode in Japanese cultural history of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the Sengoku Era. *Seven Samurai* is a cinematic political parable throughout, structured to resurrect the nation's honour internationally. Frederick Kaplan says that, "In *Seven Samurai*, Kurosawa uses cinematic technology to explore the dialectic between time and history; he deal cinematically with the past in order to deal ideologically with the present and future, and, more specifically, with class struggle and the role of intellectuals in that struggle" (42). The sheer length of the film, running into almost three hours and thirty minutes, justifies the epic claim of *Seven Samurai*. The length of the film itself is a directorial statement which makes it clear that in order to regain the nation's lost honour, the Japanese have to understand their cultural history in detail, which is a time-consuming effort; therefore, *Seven Samurai* could not be designed as a crisp, capsular cinematic text. The film is all about conversion of a fragile agrarian hamlet into a powerful military bastion for defence and survival of a community of people. In other words, *Seven Samurai* depicts the militarisation of a mass. It also has to be noted that, during the process of equipping the agrarian community to fight back, the same community's rich tradition of militarism gets discovered, the discovery of which boosts the morale of the community further. The discovery of the community's valiant past is a historical validation of their ability to defend and attack.

A Samurai is a warrior-administrator of noble birth who serves a master, often a feudal lord. Samuraiship comes with a higher-class position and a higher administrative rank. When the master discharges him of his duty and rank, he becomes a Ronin, a declassed, jobless man. Therefore, the ronins in Kurosawa's film are to be equated with the proletarian farmers for the protection of whom they reach the village. In the film actually there are no Samurais, but only seven Ronins: Kanbei, who takes up the command of the fight; Katsuhiko, the youngest of the samurai and a disciple of Kanbei; Kikuchiyo, the most funny but active of all samurais, who is not initially accepted by the group as a samurai because of suspicion on his claims of noble birth; Gorobei, who makes a unique flag which has got six circles, a triangle, and a syllable ta, which represents the village; Heihachi, who loses his life while raiding a bandit hamlet; Kyuzo, who seizes the enemy's gun raiding their village; and Schichiroji, an old companion of Kanbei. They are all masterless, jobless, hungry Ronins hired on the advice of the village elder who was a miller by profession.

Professor Bert Cardullo of University of California at Berkley makes the following comment on the deeper philosophical sub-text of the film. "The 'force of circumstance' is clearly at work throughout *The Seven Samurai*. But the film is hardly a treatise on man's helplessness before circumstance, his dwarfing by it. The art of the film, for me, is in man's playing out his destiny before circumstance, at the same time circumstance seems to engulf him. The farmers fight and die for their freedom. The samurai defend the farmers no differently than they would defend themselves: nobly and fiercely. The bandits fight to the last man, against in the end unbeatable odds, apparently forgetting that their initial objective in storming the village was to seize the farmers' crops: it is their own honour and fighting ability that have become the question. We see the ironies in the situation, but the farmers, the samurai, and the bandits do not, or they do only in passing. They act, and in action are ennobled. That, perhaps, is the sense in which this is truly an 'action' or 'epic' film: action does not occur for its own sake, or for the sake of mere spectacle; instead, it ennobles" (113).

During the development of the cinematic plot, the village girl, Shino, who was ordered by her father to transvestite as a boy to escape from the sex-lust of samurais, develops physical relationship with Katsuhiko, one of the samurais. The film implies an impregnation of Shino, which suggests the sowing of the aggressive samurai biological seed within an otherwise passive rural populace of the village for their protection from further external threats in future. Woman as a protector of community's family honour and community's racial purity is also a sub-text of *Seven Samurai*. *Seven Samurai* is another war film which also portrays woman as a commodity which could be protected or possessed to maintain the patriarchal male honour and sexual lust in times of conflicts.

Anne Billson, of British Broadcasting Corporation, describes a few reasons for how and why Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* topped the BBC's 2018 culture-poll list of hundred foreign-language films ever made. "After all this meticulous scene-setting, the film's final hour-and-a-half unfurls in an escalating series of skirmishes. The climactic battle, drenched by torrential rain, is a miracle of brilliantly choreographed chaos: combatants running hither and thither through the mud, galloping horses, spears, arrows and the occasional bullet, all filmed with multiple cameras, which insert the audience into the thick of the action. We always know who's who, where everyone is, what they're doing and – thanks to an infographic-style banner – exactly how many bandits there are left to kill at any given moment. There are casualties among the samurai, too, and, because we have come to know them, every death hits hard."

Kurosawa aesthetically paces *Seven Samurai* in different tempos at different times. The initial slow pace suggests the slow passive rural life pattern. However, the final fast tempo of the film suggests the reenergised vigour of a militarised, disciplined collectivism of sub-nationality. Surgical pre-emptive military strike at the enemy camp as a defence strategy is also portrayed by Kurosawa, making the film a text book for strategic army building, maintenance and management, command control, developing military cartography, bastion fortification, guerrilla warfare and troop deployment. Kurosawa's cinematic prowess as a film editor is also revealed in *Seven Samurai*. Continuity editing is consistently followed in this film with lots of cut and reverse cut, eyeline matching cuts, wiping transitions and establishments shots.

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