



REVIEW

Style of "the Pictorial Shakespeare"

— Auteur Theory Applying to Akira Kurosawa's Work

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ABSTRACT

By investigating the cinematography and thematic concerns of Akira Kurosawa's work under the auteurist criteria, it can be argued that Kurosawa is an auteur whose work possesses three distinctive authorial signatures: the active involvement of nature, the strong sense of stage-performance, the editing on movement; and the consistent visual style has corresponding meaning concerning his personal experience and socio-historical circumstances.

1. Introduction

In 1990, Akira Kurosawa became the first Asian filmmaker who won the Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement. Commented by Steve Spielberg as "a maestro to every generation of filmmakers", Kurosawa is the most influential Japanese film director in western world for the masterpieces he has created over the career spanning half a century. Like a Shakespeare's work can be recognized through its distinctive characteristics, as "the pictorial Shakespeare", Kurosawa has his artistic trademarks on films he made. This essay will scrutinize how Kurosawa's work fit in with the auteur theory by analyzing the visual style and thematic concerns within his films.

The term auteur theory was first used by American film critic Andrew Sarris. In his work *Note On The Auteur Theory*, Sarris put forward three premises for a director to become an auteur: (1) technical competence; (2) distinguishable style; (3) interior meaning arising from the tension between personality and material. Prior to Sarris's discourse, some French directors who focused on adaptations of classic novels were attacked by François Truffaut for being "literary" rather than "cinematic", and Truffaut, agreeing with Sarris on this point, defined film auteur as "one who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of merely producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material".

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In the auteurist point of view, one crucial condition for becoming an auteur is to become an eligible director, suggesting an auteur has to be endowed with the fundamental ability to use cinematic devices properly. Secondly, there must be consistency within an auteur's work, in other words, an auteur has a highly stylized way of managing and projecting elements on screen, in terminology, *mise-en-scène*. The third and the ultimate proof of an auteur is that the ideologies and individual preoccupation arising from the conflict between his personality and the given material. Kurosawa is a perfect fit for the first two criteria of Sarris's auteur theory; however, the third one cannot be applied to him successfully. The ideological values of Kurosawa's films are presented through Japanese national allegories and cultural codes, not as Sarris has asserted (that the personality of the director is valued according to "the barriers to its expression").

Rather, this essay will refer to the pattern presented by Wollen. Wollen placed auteur critics into two main schools; he argued that auteurs are supposed to be directors: (1) who show a consistency of style or (2) those who insisted on expressing a core of meanings. Additionally, the discourse of Bazin that textual analysis cannot overlook the social determinism will also be taken into account in this essay.

Consequently, in following parts, the first two criteria of Sarris's theory will be adopted, while the second, "the interior meaning" of an auteur, is construed by placing him into the socio-historical context according to Bazin's view.^[1] From this perspective, Kurosawa's work has three distinguishable authorial signatures: the active involvement of nature, the strong sense of stage-performance, and the editing on movement. These three consistent characteristics compose Kurosawa's personal style, and each has the corresponding interior meaning of its own.^[2,3]

2. Tale of Nature: Active Involvement of Weather and Natural Landscapes

In fact, Toshiro Mifune is not the most collaborated actor with Kurosawa, there is a performing artist who has starred in all the Kurosawa's films— nature. Natural elements such as weather and landscapes play a much important role before Kurosawa's camera.

It has become a cliché that weather is used to create or enhance a certain vibe. Of course, Kurosawa's weather functions in this conventional way, but what makes Kurosawa unique is that the weather acts as the drawer of attention rather than the insignificant background. Robert Altman described the rain in *Rashomon* (1950)^③ as

an "emotional trigger" because "it gives another layer to something excessive so that the audience can relate to sensually". In the opening scene of *Rashomon*, the shots of rain span nearly two minutes: there is no dialogue, no gestures, and no plot-unfolding but only the rain photographed from different distances and angles. Kurosawa made the rain so dense to see and so loud to hear that spectators have to "treat it seriously", then a sense of mystery is evoked. The rain seemingly becomes one of those characters projecting their emotions to audience through facial expressions and physical movements. Certainly, Kurosawa did not have the magic to make the rain speak or dance; he simply magnified its aural and visual existence in order to elevate the weather to a leading role. This expressionist technique was commonly used in Kurosawa's samurai films, and natural elements serve as the extension of persona image in most of the fight scenes. In *Yojimbo* (1961),^⑤ during the final fight between Sanjuro and a group of gangsters, there comes a blast of dusty wind. It is impossible for a Japanese town to witness such strong sandy wind; however, in this case, the unrealistic wind follows Sanjuro's movement as if it were a dynamic decoration on his costume, visualizing his heroism and mythicism.

Apart from magnifying the role of natural elements, Kurosawa endowed them with metaphorical meanings. Forest is one of the major settings in *Rashomon*: rape, killing, adultery, liars...all those sins are committed under the shade of the forest, and the woodcutter did not unearth (part of) the truth until he explored into the dense woods for a long time. Kurosawa photographed the foliage shadows casting on the back of characters from spying angles to represent the forest as the facade of human nature, these shots, in Kurosawa's own words, lead the viewer "into a world where the human heart loses its way." The sun is the symbol of the bare desire inside humans. On the scene where the bandit raped samurai's wife, Kurosawa made a bold attempt to point the camera directly to the sun and the beam of light suggests the exposure of filthy human lust in broad daylight.^[4]

The reason why nature has such active involvement in Kurosawa's films is related to the Shinto belief in Japanese culture. Japan has four distinct seasons and frequent natural disasters, which contribute to people's reverence towards nature. Shinto bares the core of animism that every objects and creature in nature possesses a spiritual essence. This ideology is explicitly portrayed by Kurosawa in the film *Dersu Uzala* (1975),^① in which the protagonist refers to the sun, wind, and rain as "powerful people". Kurosawa's early experience of the great Kanto earth-

quake in 1923 may have enhanced his understanding of the natural power, which he represented through camera afterward.

3. Films On Stage and Canvas: Sense of Stage-performance and Panting Colors

When watching Kurosawa's films, the audience will always find something not so cinematic, some shots are even like the recording of stage performances; and sometimes when you press the pause button, you will find the frozen frame look exactly like a painting. The strong sense of stage-performance and tableau can be found in most of the Kurosawa's films, especially ones made in the color-film era.

Kurosawa liked to employ "double frame" in his films, which is to place a frame-shaped item such as a door or a window in the shot to create a picture-in-picture effect, and it is always in companion with the over-the-shoulder shot. In the scene in *Yojimbo* where Sanjuro and the hostel man spying the bribery through the window bars, they act as if they were watching an opera, when the audience identify themselves with the two characters and feel a strong sense of interaction. Besides, the exaggerated acting style coming from traditional *noh* operas contributes to the sense of stage-performance as well.

Kurosawa made his frames look like paintings by using contrasting and vibrant hues. The ultimate display of Kurosawa's ability to manipulate colors is *Ran* (1985).^② Unlike most of the filmmakers who present color realistically, Kurosawa is an alien who used colors in an expressionist and abstract way: three primary colors were used to signify three confronting factions. At the end of the battle scenes, ghostly Hidetora walks down the building while armies of his two sons are fighting with each other. In the frame, white (Hidetora's rope), red and yellow (flags of two sons) provide a hyper contrast, transferring the screen into a dynamic painting.

Ideologically, the sense of stage and tableau indicates the parallelism in Kurosawa's work. Kurosawa was dubbed "Japan's most Western director" by Donald Richie, which is not so exact since Kurosawa was trying to combine the visual expression of Japanese traditional opera (namely *noh* and *kabuki*) with the knowledge of western color theory he learned as a painter in early years. According to Kurosawa himself, "Things from Western Europe and those from Japan are of equal importance for me". This integration of different visual styles and genres is an epitome of "Western twist" in modern Japan since the Meiji Restoration.^[5-8]

4. Aestheticization of Violence: Cutting On Movement

Kurosawa has the genius to master movements especially in terms of editing, which can be viewed as another trademark of him. Kurosawa is one of the few directors who worked as his own editor, and his editing is renowned for being fluid and "invisible". This is because Kurosawa made cuts particularly on movement by taking advantage of two visual principles: "optical center" and "dynamic inertia". The first principle is that if audience concentrates on a certain point on the screen, they will naturally ignore other elements including the jump to another frame. So the point is: to draw people's eyes by a certain item and let it appear continuously on screen. In the war scene of *Ran*, Kurosawa plans to link a close-up, a medium shot and a long shot of warfare, so he picked a burning tower as the eye-catcher: the flames to which spectators will pay attention keeps flickering in three different frames while it is moving further and further, in the meantime frames transfer from one to another smoothly. With this cunning technique, the editing plays tricks with audience's eyes and makes itself seamless. Another impressive example comes from *Seven Samurai* (1954):^④ when a samurai is climbing up to stick a flag on the roof, the flag stands out for its bright color, so Kurosawa used its movement to smoothly cut into a different angle. In this case, the second principle, dynamic inertia, is demonstrated as well. Dynamic inertia unveils another secret about the movement of Kurosawa's editing: to manage the moving item's trace in the way people's eyes predict according to the last frame. This technique also can be found in the war scene of *Ran*: in the first image, soldiers are shooting arrows from the outside; in the subsequent image of the inside, those arrows come right from the position where they have disappeared in the last frame. Besides these editing techniques, Kurosawa created "the wipe" (a line moves across the screen, "wiping" off the last image while simultaneously revealing the next scene). The wipes not only indicate the passage of time and shift of settings but also create a sense of aggression. As Richie observed, even with transitional devices, which are gentle and literally "transitional" in popular usage, Kurosawa chooses an "aggressive" way. In *Yojimbo*, when Sanjuro walking from suburb to the street, there is a wipe indicating the lone-wolf hero is about to bring an upheaval to this town.^[9,10]

Kurosawa highlighted movement mostly in fights and battles, suggesting a recurring theme of his cinema—the aestheticization of violence. In Japanese *bushido* (the moral codes of samurai), martial arts mastery and self-sacrifice are highly regarded, and these qualities can only be

proved through violence, so violence is justified (and not a negative notion anymore) because of its relevance with bushido. For example, in the death scene of Lady Kaede in *Ran*, the explosion of blood does not tend to make people horrified but presents a stunning visual effect instead. In Kurosawa's films, violence depicted through fluid cutting is graceful and glorious as a celebration of bushido.^[11,12]

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- ① *Dersu Uzala*. Dir. Akira Kurosawa (1975), Atelier 41, Daiei Studios, Mosfilm.
- ② *Ran*. Dir. Akira Kurosawa (1985), Greenwich Film Productions, Herald Ace, Nippon Herald Films.
- ③ *Rashomon*. Dir. Akira Kurosawa (1950), Daiei Motion Picture Company.
- ④ *Seven Samurai*. Dir. Akira Kurosawa (1954), Toho Company.
- ⑤ *Yojimbo*. Dir. Akira Kurosawa (1961), Kurosawa Production Co., Toho Company.