PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH AN ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH: A STUDY OF AKIRA KUROSAWA'S *IKIRU* ON ITS FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

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ABSTRACT: Akira Kurosawa's film 1952 *Ikiru* (the intransitive verb ''to live'' in Japanese) presents the viewer with a seeming paradox: a heightened awareness of one's mortality can lead to living a more authentic and meaningful life. While confronting these existential issues, our hero Watanabe traces the path of the Hero's Journey as described by the mythologist Joseph Campbell among others. Simultaneous to this outward arc, Watanabe experiences an inward arc of transformation of consciousness taking him from the individual persona to the transpersonal. Kurosawa skillfully blends aesthetic concepts and sensibilities both Western (Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Goethe's *Faust*) and Eastern (Noh, Zen Buddhist) to create one of the greatest of cinematic masterworks.

Prologue

''Awareness of death is the very bedrock of the path. Until you have developed this awareness, all other practices are obstructed.''
—The Dalai Lama

''Whoever rightly understands and celebrates death, at the same time magnifies life.''
—Rainer Maria Rilke

''As long as you do not know how to die and come to life again, you are but a poor guest on this dark earth.''
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

''Eternity is in love with the productions of time.''
—William Blake

''Sometimes I think of my death. I think of ceasing to be ... and it is from these thoughts that *Ikiru* came.''
—Akira Kurosawa

Introduction

Ikiru is a 1952 Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa, who is widely acknowledged as one of the cinema's greatest directors; the screenplay was written by Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni. It depicts the healing spiritual journey of Mr. Kanji Watanabe, an aging civil servant (the head of ''the Citizen's

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Section'') in contemporary 1950's Japan, initiated by his realization that he will die in six months from stomach cancer. Within the first moments of the film, an omniscient narrator describes him starkly as actually being ''dead for 25 years,'' living an inauthentic life, since he completely identifies himself with his social role (Persona in Jungian psychological terms), which has deadened him. He has no feeling, no will and drifts along linear clock time (he pulls out his pocket watch twice in the initial scene). After coming to understand his fate, he grapples with the four existential issues eloquently discussed by Irvin Yalom, Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford, in his 1980 book *Existential Psychotherapy*: death, meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom. In so doing, he begins to live authentically for the first time. A widower now for about 20 years, he has lived to raise his son, who ironically, as a result of his misunderstanding of Watanabe's situation, is alienated from him. Rediscovering a neglected proposal authored by the Kuroe-Cho Women's Association to drain a swampy area to build a children's playground, Watanabe summons the energy and will to shepherd its construction through the maze-like city hall bureaucracy. He finally arrives at a serene transpersonal state of consciousness as he gently sways on a swing in the new playground as snow is falling. He dies at midnight, while singing peacefully a 1920's song (''Life is so short/Fall in love, dear maiden'') he had sung earlier in the film filled with great despair. This scene evokes for many the film's greatest epiphany: although curing a disease to extend a person's lifetime on earth may not always be possible, healing of a person's spiritual wholeness is always possible.

Literature Review

Two articles about *Ikiru* with contributions by the present author appeared in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1987 (Weimer & Lu; Lu & Heming). The first showed the similarity in the narratives of the film, the fairytale Rumpelstiltskin, and the story of a psychiatric patient. The second was an experimental study that demonstrated that an audience that had viewed the film had a significant reduction of death anxiety as compared to a control group that had not seen the film over a six-month timespan. No other articles concerning the film were found with the keyword ''ikiru'' in the PsycINFO database (social sciences) from 1952 through October 2005. The same search process with PsycINFO (arts and humanities) did reveal 10 publications. Two articles were found in the PubMed database for the same time span (Yamada, Maskarinec, & Greene, 2003 and Young-Mason, 2004). This article goes beyond all of these (including the two previous ones by the present author) by showing both the Western and Eastern aesthetic principles that underlie the film to cross-gird its transpersonal meaning.

The Outward Arc and the Inward Arc

In the course of the film, Watanabe becomes a hero not only for the women of the Association for whom he pushes through the playground for their children, and after his death, to his fellow bureaucrats, but also for the film audience as well. Watanabe's trajectory can be understood as a manifestation of the Hero's Journey

as described by Joseph Campbell, who wrote works of great scholarship that showed how historical mythology from throughout the world over eons of time functioned at psychological, sociological, and transcendental levels of meaning still resonant for us today. In his seminal 1948 book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he describes ''the Monomyth'' of the Hero figure in which he or she would: a) listen to a call to adventure, b) leave the usual everyday world–crossing of the threshold to the unknown, c) descend into an underworld through a series of trials and tribulations and with the help of key persons, d) make an important transformative discovery, and e) bring back a gift or what Campbell called a ''boon'' to humanity. This work influenced filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas as they wrote their screenplays and directed their films. The Hero's Journey concept was further applied to screenplay writing by Vogler (1998) and Voytilla (1999).

While Watanabe traces the path of the Hero's Journey, which I refer to as an outward arc, at the same time he experiences an inward arc of transformation of consciousness described by the transpersonal psychologist Frances Vaughan (1986) among others. Both of these arcs start with a very unusual call to adventure—death. Watanabe undergoes numerous tests while being aided by two helpers: an unnamed writer of cheap novels and Toyo, a young woman who just left his office section to become a factory worker making wind-up toy rabbits. In Jungian psychological terms, they can be seen to represent Trickster and Anima figures; they help him individuate by gently uncovering virtuous qualities within himself (i.e., courage, a sense of humor, humility, perseverance, gratefulness, wonder) that transform his profound despair about his fate (''to die'') to felt moments of aliveness (''to live''). Through these brief relationships, Watanabe's suffering is heard, he is less alone, and he can begin to bear the unbearable. For example, after hearing Watanabe's story, the writer is inspired to help him reframe his situation:

> You know, you're very interesting. . . . I see that adversity has its virtues—man finds truth in misfortune . . . Man is such a fool. It is always just when he is going to leave it that he discovers how beautiful life can be . . . Up until now you've been life's slave, but now you're going to be its master . . . The greed to live is a virtue. (Richie, 1968, p. 33–34)

In *The Power of Myth* interviews with Bill Moyers, Campbell remarked that ''One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss, comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light'' (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 37). So too with our hero, as he experiences what is in Zen Buddhism is called Satori, a moment of sudden enlightenment, that is the dramatic turning point of the film. In a coffee shop on their last meeting, he reveals to Toyo for the first time that he has cancer and will die soon. After intense struggling he eventually realizes his wanting to be with her stemmed from his desire to emulate her aliveness. But then he says to Toyo with intense despair ''It's too late,'' reflects inwardly a few moments and then states with renewed energy ''It's not too late. There is something I can do if I'm determined!'' Despite his few days on earth, he realized he still had the freedom to choose an activity that would bring meaning to his life and a deep

connection with others. Richie pointed out this transformative moment, which culminates the first two-thirds of the film:

> Watanabe discovers himself through 'doing.' Like Dostoevsky's Myushikin, like Sartre's Roquetin, or Camus's Rambert, he has discovered what it means to be and the pain is so exquisite that it drives him to action, to conceive a plan which will 'save' him. Perhaps without even grasping the truth he is acting out, he behaves as though he believes that it is action alone which matters; that a man is not his thoughts, nor his intentions, but *is* simply what he *does*. (Richie, 1968, pp. 7–9)

As if to underline this birth of new consciousness, Kurosawa slyly arranges to include the song "Happy Birthday" twice: a) At the moment in the coffee shop after Watanabe says "It's not too late" and grabs the toy rabbit, descending the stairs, as a young woman ascends the stairs to her party (Gorbman, 1995), b) In the scene immediately following, at work, at the exact moment Watanabe begins his project of building the playground (played by brass instruments, in a slow tempo). Now the outward arc of the Hero's Journey really comes into its own because the hero of *Ikiru* is able to give back to the world; from his struggles with his mortality, Watanabe is now able to bring back to the everyday world a gift. This gift would not only be his facilitation of the eventual completion of the playground, but also through the spiritual inspiration he would become to his colleagues (and to the film audience) as he is poignantly remembered at his wake during the latter third of the film.

But there is also an inward arc of self-discovery and renewal of psychic energy that gives a deeper meaning to the transformation that the hero is able to achieve outwardly. In *Ikiru*, the young woman Toyo, as symbolized by the wind-up toy rabbits she makes in her new job, embodies the Anima, the life-force energy, which greatly inspires Watanabe to bring forth his own aliveness through selfless altruism before physically dying. The toy rabbit is seen not only at the Satori coffee shop scene, but also as part of Watanabe's composed still life at the end of the wake sequence, along with a wind-up alarm clock and the twenty-five year work commendation certificate seen earlier in the film, symbols of linear time, now transformed through the Anima. This still life represents Kurosawa's response to the Uncle's comment just preceding this image ("I guess there was no woman involved" [in Watanabe's sudden change]). Kurosawa tells us that most definitely women were involved—Toyo, not as a romantic sexual object as imagined by the Uncle, but as the Anima, as well as the women of the Kuroe-cho Association, who had initiated the proposal and wept at his wake (Fitzsimmons, 2002). As the Rabbit is reborn in the Moon (as a Buddhist fable recounts), Watanabe dies to live on as a spiritual presence in our memories. It is said in Japan that people who gaze up at the moon on a clear night see the Rabbit pounding mochi, the essence of rice, the sustainer of life. The analogy to the Anima (often symbolized as a rabbit and the moon), which Jung described as the archetype of life, are evident (Beebe, 2005).

Western Aesthetic Influences

The film is remarkable for gently evoking in the audience an attitude of compassion for the tremendous suffering of our hero by Kurosawa's melding together of Western

and Eastern archetypal aesthetic themes. He constructs a space where the audience can share his artistic perspective as described in his words: ''To be an artist is never to avert one's eyes'' (1990 Academy Awards, when he received an honorary Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement). Kurosawa had read much of Western literature, and his favorite writer was Dostoyevsky, who, not unlike the writer of cheap novels in the film, saw that suffering could paradoxically bring about a greater aliveness. In the night-town sequence, the writer observes that Watanabe is like Christ carrying the cross of cancer. He would eventually die at the end of the first section, only to be re-born in the funeral wake section through our collective memory. The plot of *Ikiru* also resembles Leo Tolstoy's short story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886/1981): a man, confronting mortality, undergoes a spiritual transformation.

In addition, Carr (1996, p. 274–275) comments in her remarkable essay that ''Kurosawa in *Ikiru* has followed Goethe's *Faust* with minute faithfulness to the structure, characters, episodes, and general intent of the original, but has transformed it into a vision of man's place on 'this earth' and in the 'yonder' that is uniquely his own . . . the structure of *Faust* and *Ikiru* is exactly the same–two parts so distinct that the reader/viewer must take notice of the division.'' Kurosawa notes in his autobiography that F. W. Murnau's *Faust* (1926) was one of nearly a hundred films that had impressed him (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 73). The writer even jokes about his role before they embark on their night-town journey: ''Let's find that life you have thrown away. Tonight I'll be your Mephistopheles, but a good one, who won't ask to be paid'' (Richie, 1968, p. 34). Toyo plays a role analogous to Margaret in *Faust*. Faust in *Faust (Part II)* as well as Watanabe in the funeral wake section (2nd flashback) reclaim land. Most significantly, Watanabe's journey in the funeral wake section parallels the one of Faust's soul to Heaven, which Faust finally enters through the comforting encouragement and inspiration of the Eternal Feminine—the Anima—as does Watanabe! At that numinous and glorious moment at the very end of *Faust (Part II),* in words of the Chorus Mysticus, salvation has been achieved:

> All that is transitory
> is but a parable;
> The unattainable
> is here attained;
> The indescribable,
> here is accomplished;
> The Eternal-Feminine
> draws us on high. (Hamlin, 1976, p. 308)

Finally, there is yet another significant Western echo in the film. The Austrian composer Gustav Mahler would make the final scene of *Faust (Part II*) the libretto of the second and final part of his 8th Symphony (1906). Mahler's biographer Henry La Grange argues that the choice of *Faust* was understandable since Goethe ''had always been one of his literary gods'' (Nikkels & Becque, 1992, p.134). Mahler wrote to his wife Alma, to whom he dedicated this symphony, the following about the Chorus Mysticus on which his symphony ends:

> Only the transitory lends itself to description; but what we feel, surmise but will never reach . . . the intransitory behind all appearances, is indescribable. That

> which draws us by its mystic force ... The eternal-feminine has drawn us on–we have arrived–we are at rest–we possess what on earth we could only strive and struggle for. Christians call this 'eternal blessedness' ... (Mitchell, 1969, pp. 320–321)

I believe that Goethe's Chorus Mysticus as also depicted at the end of Mahler's 8th symphony corresponds to Kurosawa's swing scene of Watanabe in the playground as Carr (1996, p. 278) comments: "the controlling word of Goethe's poem [*Faust*] is 'Werdelust,' joy in the *process* of becoming, not in the attainment of a goal. Watanabe in his final scene also becomes the epitome of the ultimate of humanity, 'Werdelust'."

Although I found no references that document the direct influence of Mahler on Kurosawa, I wanted to note that the two-part structure of the 8th Symphony is in fact paralleled by the structure of *Ikiru*. The first movement is set to the 9th century Latin hymn, "Veni Creator Spiritus" ("Come, Creator-Spirit"), which is part of the liturgy for Pentecost, the festival that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples (Acts 2). Mahler musically links the climax of the first movement "Accende lumen sensibus, Infunde amorem cordibus" ("Kindle our Reason with Light, Infuse our Hearts with Love") to key sections of the second movement set to the final scene of Goethe's *Faust (Part II)* (Mitchell, 2002, p. 607) so as to evoke the transpersonal as he wrote in a letter to Mengelberg in August 1906: "Try to describe the whole universe beginning to ring and resound. These are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 591). Philip Barford has commented on this two-part structure:

> The old prayer *invokes* inspiration, brings it *down,* so to speak, into mind and heart, and even literally into the physical body as a generative agent, which Mahler clearly understood. Yet spiritual psychology recognizes that the force, which has descended, must reascend. What has come down to earth as grace has to be raised up to heaven through a progressive sublimation of energies. The physical life is transmuted through the heart's aspiration and a spiritual rebirth follows the transmutation of Eros. (Barford, 1970, p. 48)
>
> Mahler's masterstroke is to bring back the 'Veni Creator Spiritus' theme at the end of the instrumental coda [of the Chorus Mysticus]; but its initial interval of the seventh is now transformed into a major ninth by trumpets and trombones blazing through E flat harmony like a triumphant flame. Thus they seem to say, that which descends onto the substance of man must reascend through man to complete the work of the manifesting spirit. (Barford, 1970, p. 52)

Japanese Buddhist Aesthetic Influences

We now turn to Kurosawa's use of Japanese Buddhist aesthetic principles, which Kurosawa studied and greatly admired after World War II:

> During the war, I had been starved for beauty, so I rushed headlong into the world of traditional Japanese arts as to a feast ... I went to the Noh for the first time. I read the art theories the great fourteenth-century Noh playwright Zeami left

behind. I read all there was to read about Zeami himself, and I devoured books on Noh. (Kurosawa, 1983, p. 147)

Through these principles, he crafts a film that reveals the beauty found in the very transience of life. The audience experiences a deepening sensibility from ‘‘Mujo’’ (an awareness of the transience of life) to ‘‘Sabi/Wabi’’ (finding beauty in the lonely and in the old) to finally ‘‘Yugen,’’ which conveys to us the transpersonal, the mystical and the ultimate mystery.

The music helps the film audience identify empathically with Watanabe’s mortal fate. As Richie (1999) has pointed out, this happens most profoundly during the night-town piano bar scene where Watanabe stares straight out at the audience while initially singing this song, tears welling up in his eyes:

Life is so short,
Fall in love, dear maiden,
While your lips are still red;
Before you can no longer love–
For there will be no tomorrow.

Life is so short,
Fall in love, dear maiden,
While your hair is still black,
Before your heart stops–
For there will be no more tomorrow. (Richie, 1968, p. 36 and 45)

Immediately after Watanabe’s Satori and his return to his workplace to begin his project, the narrator states ‘‘five months later, the hero of story has died’’ while Kurosawa shows us a close-up portrait of Watanabe at his wake. In the final third of the film showing Watanabe’s wake in his home, we would subsequently see the portrait forty-one times within the film frameshots so that his spiritual presence would eventually envelope the entire room and the consciousness of all there (including the film audience). Similarly as the gathered civil servants reveal in fourteen Haiku-like flashbacks Watanabe’s moments of lived time focused on building the park over those past five months (imbued with the virtuous qualities discovered in his encounters with the writer and Toyo), the past becomes present through memory. This narrative process was actually foreshadowed much earlier in the film when Watanabe’s contemplation of his deceased wife’s portrait at a small altar in the same bedroom evoked his own poignant memories of her hearse (seen through a car’s windshield wipers flicking) and the earlier loving relationship with his son as he was growing up.

We progressively achieve, through Kurosawa’s method of artistic detachment (Odin, 2001), a more contemplative form of empathy, which greatly facilitates our eventual experience of ‘‘Yugen’’ in the final flashback described by a policeman who was the last person to see Watanabe alive in the park. He has come to the wake to return Watanabe’s hat, left at the playground. This symbol of Watanabe’s previous life had been left behind for a new life, and it too has a mythic parallel: ‘‘The power of life causes the snake to shed its skin, just as the moon sheds its shadow. The serpent

sheds its skin to be born again, as the moon sheds its shadow to be born again. They are equivalent symbols.'' (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 53)

While looking straight out at the audience, like Watanabe earlier in the piano bar scene, the policeman tenderly observes that ''He seemed so happy, singing sadly, a song that went straight to my heart.'' Pianissimo violins heighten the significance of Watanabe's serene singing of ''Life is so short.'' At that moment, Watanabe has become one with the swing, yet moving like a pendulum in a way that was foreshadowed by the swaying curtain beads in the earlier piano bar scene and even the flicking of the windshield wipers. As Barford noted about Mahler's ending of the 8th symphony, the eternal and the temporal are simultaneously evoked. We experience an epiphany beyond mere beauty, which encompasses what Campbell and others have termed ''the Sublime'' and which transcends the pairs of opposites such as happiness/sadness, past/present, self/no self, life/death, and time/timelessness. The implied thought is quite beautifully expressed in the first lines of ''Auguries of Innocence'' (1804) by the English poet William Blake:

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower;
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
> And Eternity in an hour.

As William LaFleur, Professor of East Asian Studies at Princeton, has written (1986), at such climactic moments in Noh drama, we experience one of the most profound teachings of Mahayana Buddhism: ''samsara'' (the birth-and-death of everyday life) and ''nirvana'' are one, like two sides of the same coin:

> In many nō plays . . . the audience has a strong sense of mental and emotional relief as the play comes to a close. This relief seems to derive from a clear sense that the character on the stage, while still theoretically moving downward in the ranks of cosmology, has in some real way been released from what had seemed sheer tragedy. That is, the actor or actors have communicated a sense of *profound tranquility* . . . Yūgen moves beyond the text to reveal, through the tranquility it captures, the presence of nirvana in the midst of samsara, not as an abstract principle but in the concrete actions of the characters on the stage. (LaFleur, 1986, p. 130–131)

This can also be seen in the words of the 13th century Japanese Zen Buddhist priest Dogen, whose writings provided the very basis for Noh drama: ''Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death.'' (Loy, 2001, p. 25)

And this same sensibility is also seen in the words of Shunryu Suzuki, a more contemporary Japanese Zen Buddhist priest, who came from Japan to found the San Francisco Zen Center in the early 1960's and who would also die of stomach cancer in 1969:

> If I die, the moment I'm dying, if I suffer, that is all right, you know; that is

suffering Buddha. No confusion in it. Maybe everyone will struggle because of the physical agony or spiritual agony, too. But that is all right, that is not a problem. We should be grateful to have a limited body. . .like mine, or like yours. If you had a limitless life, it would be a real problem for you. (Suzuki, 2002, p. 149)

Ikiru was one of his favorite films. (Rand, 1988 and Ogui, 1995)

Note

Ikiru was released in January 2004 in a restored print DVD by Criterion Collection; it contains a second disc of supplementary materials. Mahler's 8th Symphony played by the Vienna Philharmonic and conducted by Leonard Bernstein in a 1975 performance was released on DVD in November 2005 by Deutsche Grammophon.

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Kurosawa remains unchallenged as one of the century's greatest film directors. Through his long and distinguished career he managed, like very few others in the teeth of a huge and relentless industry, to elevate each of his films to a distinctive level of art. His Rashomonâ€"one of the best-remembered and most talked-of films in any languageâ€"was a revelation when it appeared in 1950 and did much to bring Japanese cinema to the world's attention. Kurosawa's films display an extraordinary breadth and an astonishing strength, from the philosophic and sexual complexity of Rashomon to Kurosawa, with the help of Hashimoto and Oguni, wrote the screenplay for the black and white film at age 42. The film, widely recognized as one of Kurosawaâ€™s masterpieces, must be understood within its historical and cultural contexts. Ikiru emerged during Japanâ€™s postwar reconstruction, as the country sought to adapt to its newly inherited capitalism and democracy. Calling for forms of cultural upheaval and self-scrutiny, the film may be viewed as political cinema. Specifically, Ikiru affirms the pride and power of the individual. It promotes breaking traditional ties to larger social groups,