"Akira Kurosawa's Dreams, a Critique of the Misuse of Science and Technology, and a Reflection on Living in Harmony with Nature"

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Abstract

This paper explains how the artful film Akira Kurosawa's Dreams is a reflexive lesson about our ecosystem's destruction due to the misuse of science and technology, and how Kurosawa views an alternative for a harmonious human "Natural Way of Life". Through the first two parts of the film we are shown the beauty of the Earth and water, juxtaposed air with pollution, and plant-life mutations resulting from nuclear contamination, as well as the desolation of war. In the last part which last five decisive minutes, Kurosawa presents his "hope-dream" about the natural way of life that portrays the full, multigenerational participation of the villagers in their community's traditions, and their integration with nature and life. From this film, young generations can learn that the integrity of the air, land, and water and the health of social and economic life are both sustainable.

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In the astonishing film Akira Kurosowa’s Dreams (1990), Kurosawa denounces the destruction of nature resulting from the misuse of science and technology. By portraying an alternative natural way of life, he leads to persuade his viewers to preserve a healthy ecosystem for future generations. Born in Japan, Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) is considered one of the world’s greatest film directors. Initially trained as painter, and after trying several other closely related occupations, his talents as a filmmaker were revealed with the release of Rashomon which won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1950. As reported in the DVD Movie Guide, Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams is one of the last of Kurosawa’s 30 films, and given that its title includes the filmmaker’s own name, we can conjecture that he regarded it as a personal statement of his worldview. As it is also explained, the film is:

> one of the most visionary and deeply personal works in the 60-year career of the master behind Rashomon. . . Featuring eight episodes rich in imagery and insight, it explores the costs of

war, the perils of nuclear power, and specially humankind's need to harmonize with nature.

The film is a collection of eight dreams connected to each other by the theme of a journey that starts with a young boy's contemplation of forests, rainbows, peach orchards, and flowers. The sequence of dreams then follows to witness the consequences of the evils of war, and the environmental disaster brought on by nuclear power, weapons, and economic greed. Following these disturbing scenes, the film ends with a traveler encountering a community that lives in peace and harmony with nature.

In this visually striking film, the link between humanity and the ecosystem's rich inheritance is revealed. It is the artistically compelling articulation of this possibility in the context of increasing peril for the environment that makes this film so valuable. Echoing this appreciation, Eric Kats in The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature explains: "We value an art work in part because of the fact that a particular artist, a human individual, created the work at a precise moment in historical time. Similarly, we value a natural area because of its 'special continuity with the past." (391) As shown in this film, Kurosawa's personal love of nature, particularly his fondness for landscapes, arises from his life experiences

and artistic inclinations, and his sensitivity towards the worldwide events of his lifetime. In fact, according to a film reviewer, in DVD Movie Guide: “[Kurosawa] claims that the sequences were actually dreams that he personally experienced over the years and turned them into a poetic screenplay”.

The first two episodes, “Sunshine through the Rain” and “The Peach Orchard,” allow the viewer to experience a surreal journey through flowered forests and orchards from the perspective of a Japanese boy’s eyes, who represents an unspoiled human connection with nature. It is hard not be moved by the powerful visual impact of these scenes, which achieve almost as close as the dazzling visual experience on the viewer that David Abram describes in The Spell of the Sensuous is that: “so, the recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded.”(65)

In the next episode titled “The Blizzard,” four lost alpinists come close to freezing to death on an icy mountain when the leader falls asleep out of exhaustion and cold. Instead of dying, he has a dream where a White Goddess reassures him and motivates him to carry on, helping him and the group to reach the camp and survive. In

this dream, the White Ice Goddess represents Mother Nature who is capable of comforting and preserving human life.

The maladies of war are presented in “The Tunnel,” where we meet a lonely commander returning from war. As he enters a dark and dirty tunnel, he meets with his third battalion, and one of his soldiers’ ghosts. Knowing that these soldiers died in the fields, he orders them to go back and rest, because they are dead. Traumatically depressed, the commander wishes to be dead, questions his being alive, and recounts his memories about torture and destruction. He has to endure solitude, sadness, as well as a furious attack by a dog carrying explosives. Human extermination, mental imbalance, and unnecessary desolation are consequences of war masterfully depicted here, making the viewer appreciate family, home, peace, and solidarity.

In the next episode, “The Crow,” the viewer is introduced Vincent Van Gogh who is painting one of his most brilliant landscapes. Van Gogh is trying to capture as much beauty as he possibly can, in the hope that the magnificent art of nature, which might not be here tomorrow, will be preserved in his paintings. Apparently, Kurosawa treats Van Gogh’s painting as a symbol for the kind of artistic instruments that keep alive the best of Nature. Kurosawa himself follows Van Gogh’s example with this film,

presenting an enduring artistic critique, setting a role for other artists, and calling on them to integrate into their art a reference to the greatest masterpiece, our Earth.

In “Mount Fuji in Red” and “The Weeping Demon” Kurosawa reveals his censure towards the misuse of science and technology by portraying the destructiveness of nuclear war, radioactive fallout, pollution and economic greed. Invading fumes appear to signal the eruption of Mount Fuji. It turns out, however that it is a nuclear plant explosion that is creating the confusion, and despair in the city’s misinformed population. Following these initial scenes we see a major confrontation between the nuclear scientist responsible for the functioning of the nuclear complex, and a mother who seeks the truth, and in the process discovers the negligence, and sheer irresponsibility involved in the accident. Maybe this is Kurosawa’s way of calling into question society’s belief that science is always truthful and reliable. This belief is founded on science’s image as an area where objectivity and cooperation are highly valued. As Susan Haaks comments in Defending Science-Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism,: “the value of trustworthiness in science, where progress depends in part on each scientist’s being able to rely on others’

work, is obvious.” (306) In this tense episode, the character of the mother challenges the credibility of the plant’s personnel who inculcated the notion that the plants were totally safe, and that it did not threaten the surrounding population’s existence, and health. She protests that her infant should not die, because her child did not have the opportunity to live a full life. The mother and the child symbolize the present generation and their link to the future. In this case, the dead child is not the only victim; the mother also suffers the destruction of her own contribution to the future. What are scientists contributing to the world? Phillip Kitcher in Science, Truth and Democracy poses this very question:

> So, do we construct the world? In the sense often intended in fashionable discussions, we do not. There is a difference between organizing nature in thought and speech, and making reality . . . we should not confuse the possibility of constructing representations with that of constructing the world. (51)

The mother’s grief reflects the emptiness and desolation that nuclear meltdown brings in its wake. The words of the plant’s scientific director, who blames himself for the disaster, capture his impotency to stop the destruction.

The words of the mother echo the voice of the 12 year old Japanese Canadian girl, Savern Cullis-Suzuki, who asked the world leaders to match their words with actions at the Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992:

> I am only a child, yet I know that if all the money spent on war was spent on ending poverty and finding environmental answers, what a wonderful place this world would be. In school you teach us not to fight with others, to work things out, to respect others, to clean up our mess, not to hurt other creatures, to share, not be greedy. Then why do you go out, and do things you tell us not to do? You grown-ups say you love us, but I challenge you, please to make your actions reflect your words.”

In the episode “The Weeping Demon” we see a land full of ashes, where the water and air have been polluted, and plant-life mutations have resulted from nuclear contamination and other chemical abuses over the land, water, and air. Not only is nature disfigured, but humans are also sick and deformed, reduced to cannibalism in order to survive. Kurosawa’s script conveys the devastation caused by over-harvesting, using the images of giant dandelions, and human demons to symbolize the effects

brought on, by the misuse of scientific and technological knowledge. In Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence against animals and the Earth, Andree Collad and Joice Contrucci explain that humans must reconnect with nature in order to prevent its further destruction:

> Alienated, fragmented and possessed, modern man is as rootless as a plant 'grown' in sterile soil-and often just as life-less. Human dependency on nature's processes has been replaced by dependency on man-made, insane products - products developed and maintained at the cost of plant and animal pain, at the cost of human decency. The new gods of 'our' depersonalized, dehumanized societies are the practitioners and popularisers of reductionict science and technology – whose 'achievements' are peddled by the media, and legitimated in the schools. . . . unless man learns to relinquish his hold on his rationalizations, and face the reality of his acts against life, 'closing the circle'- as Barry Commoner has named this reconnection- will remain an ecologist's dream. (28)

The film introduces ideas on how massive production and consumerism are responsible for damaging the environment which resonates to what Rachel Carson has to say in this regard, besides radiation, the chemicals resulting from extensive manufacturing activity are “the sinister and little-recognized partners . . . in changing the very nature of the world- the very nature of its life.” (6)

In contrast to this disturbing portrayal of desperation, chaos, and destruction, the last episode, titled “The Village of the Watermills,” shows the possibility of life in peace, harmony, and health. Here we are presented with a clean, fertile, flowered, peaceful and beautiful village, surrounded by pristine waters and tall trees, and where we meet an old man who is fixing one of numerous watermills that are part of the landscape. A visitor, who enters this community, is greeted by a group of children who are placing flowers over a boulder resting by the way. The visitor runs into the old man, and they begin talking about the characteristics of the village, the connection between human life, environmental health, and the village’s natural way of life. The old man explains that in the village there is no need for machines, or electricity, because they live naturally. In fact, the old man finds arrogance in science and scientists, explaining

that: “Scientists believe that they very smart, but they are hurting nature, they are so proud of their inventions, but they are loosing nature, clean air and clean water are polluted for ever, dirtying in the process the hearts of men for ever.” His stance opposes the view of science as salvation, or as a universally important ideal. This position has gained greater relevance among intellectuals nowadays. For example Mary Midgley points out in Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning that:

> We tend to believe that it is the duty and hope of all of us all to be in some way scientific, and this is certainly not seen just as a matter of practical convenience. Science is seen as having a special kind of value to which we all owe allegiance. People who want to list the glories of civilization are almost sure to list science- meaning primarily physical science- among them, along with art. And the special value of science, like that of art, is not supposed to reach only the few who produce it, but also the public which receives it. (3)

In this episode, Kurosawa depicts two burials which stand as examples of respect, and consideration for the dignity of human life. The two burials are for the male traveler,

who dies while visiting the village, and for an old lady of the community, who dies at ninety-nine years of age. In both instances, children and the community offer the best that the land produces, natural flowers.

A sign of loving connection between the cycle of life and death is symbolized in the cycle of renovation and maintenance of the watermills, contributing to the village's abundant clean water. In contrast to the tragedy that war, particularly nuclear war, and the war industry, bring in their wake, Kurosawa presents a happy, colorful, and musical tribute to the old woman who died after living a long productive life; her last walk is taken by the entire community, and with great dignity and care her remains are taken to her resting place. Children, men, and women celebrate her life, with music, and a vibrant ritual dance, praising her for living a good life. In her burial procession, the community honors her with love, waving flowers, playing drums, and performing a lively dance that demonstrates love, consideration, respect, and admiration. There is a strong contraposition between the death of a village woman, and the sad death of the soldier fallen in duty far from family, and community. The memory of these soldiers is compromised unlike the case of the old village

lady whose memory survives in the minds and memories of the community.

Guidelines for respect and preservation of natural ways of life are presented when the old villager speaks about the daily cycle of day and night and highlights the lack of need for electricity, and machines. In this sense, Kurosawa reflects his admiration for the night's beauty, and the possibility of contemplating the stars. As the old man goes on, he explains that for combustion and energy there is plenty of fallen natural foliage, and animal dung suits the purpose just as well; machines are not necessary in agriculture, the bulls or horses' force will do. Here is another way in which ethical values regarding the misuse, bad use, and abuse of science are considered. In "the Village" contrary to technological answers for obtaining more water, the villagers clean masterfully their water sources. Wilson comments on the efforts of science to fix everything and in the process damage these very ecosystems:

> Humanity's best efforts will include every technological fix for an overcrowded planet that genius can devise . . . The water crisis might be eased by desalination of seawater with energy from controlled fusion or fuel cell technology. Perhaps as polar ice shelves break from global

> warming, more fresh water can be drawn from icebergs herded to dry coasts. (316)

The target audience of this film is humanity, governments, politicians, and anybody who can benefit from Kurosawa's reflective examination of scientific and technological discoveries and their impact on the environment. A wise and healthy 105-year old man describes his lack of resentment towards the lady who just died, who was his first love and broke his heart for another man. Kurosawa makes sure that the dialogue and the images deliver his ideas, reaffirming what he said about his own work, in his Biography we find the following statement: "In all my films, there's three or maybe four minutes of real cinema… [and all his characters in his films] Try to live honestly and make the most of the lives they've been given"

To better understand Kurosawa's message, we should consider his sensitivity to Japanese tradition, particularly the aesthetics of Japanese gardening. Accordingly, the "Village of the Watermills" represents a fine example of a Japanese garden, where water, planting, boulders, and earth are distributed to conform with Japanese gardening philosophy which holds that "nature is the ideal that you must strive for. You can idealize it, even symbolize it, but you must never create something that

nature itself cannot.” The respect for vegetation in Japan is based in the idea that plants and flowers “are considered to have a very special life of their own as an expression of nature.” In the Helpful Gardener we find out that The Japanese people respect and admire the wonderful blooming stages of plants and fruit-trees. In the “Cherry Blossoms Festival”, for example, honoring nature, and what nature gives to us shows respect.

In Japan water plays a significant role, not only because as an island Japan is surrounded by the sea, but also because Japan is blessed with abundant rain. Water is fundamentally engraved in the Japanese tradition and it is an important part of Kurosawa’s film. This also reflects the fact that Japan has been confronting serious problems with water pollution as mentions The World Factbook: “air pollution from power plants emissions [which] results in acid rain, acidifications of lakes, and reservoirs degrading water quality and threatening aquatic life. By 1990, when this film was produced, water pollution was still a pressing issue in Japan; despite many efforts it has still not been corrected.

Also relevant to our understanding of this film, is the fact that Kurosawa was 35 years old in 1945, when the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs were dropped on Japan.

It would be very likely that he had a close or first hand experience in the devastation that the atomic bomb caused the Japanese people. The horror that followed the atomic bomb is described in Hiroshima:

> Hiroshima is Japan's sixth largest city; at 8.15 AM, August 6, 1945, the city's growth as a leading military and commercial center came to an abrupt halt. "Little Boy' the US atomic bomb carried by Enola Gay exploded some 590 meter above the bustling entertainment district near the heart of present Hiroshima. Roughly 80,000 people are believed to have perished as the bomb's immediate after-affect, another 60,000 died from burns, radiation, and other horrors associated with the atomic weapons." (4 November 2004)

Around the same time, World War II was coming to an end, and Kurosawa must have been very aware of the annihilation and destruction that this war brought to the world. When a few years latter Kurosawa was asked by 20th Century-Fox to direct a film about Pearl Harbor, he ended up not directing the film, which was named Tora! Tora! Tora! The ostensible reason for Kurosawa's pulling away was that he had encountered problems with artistic control, however this

episode gave rise to “rumors that he was mentally unfit [and] seriously hurt his carrier.” as described in Biography. Although Kurosawa did not direct Tora! Tora! Tora! he incorporated his knowledgeable of the unnecessary destruction of human life and the environment in his *Dreams*, contrasting this dark prospects with the alternative of living naturally and preserving the ecosystem for future generations.

Having been a painter, Kurosawa employs a technique where two long-focal lenses are able to film open space. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in Film Art: An Introduction: “longer lenses flatten space along the camera axis. Cues for depth and volume are reduced. The planes seem squashed together, much as when you look trough a telescope or binoculars.”(231) This control of perspective makes the viewer aware of space and color, drawing attention even to the cold, and the breeze. Distinctively the last minute of the film is dedicated to a vision of the whole village enjoying abundant crystalline water and participating in the burial of one of the mothers of the community.

In conclusion, this film depicts two possible paths for humanity, one in which human life and behavior is in harmony with the ecosystem, and another in which the misuse

of science, and technology together with an attitude of arrogance in the part of scientists, governments, and corporations compromise the future of humanity. Integrating his own perspective of the world, and combining his experience as a filmmaker, with his environmental philosophy, Akiro Kurosawa delivers a powerful ethical lesson and offers a reflection regarding the inheritance we are bequeathing our children, and grandchildren. The vision and compassion inherent in this masterful film urges us to rethink our connection with Mother Nature and life. Kurosawa’s environmental philosophy is evident in his criticism of the misuse, abuse, or bad use of science and technology over the ecosystem and humankind. In order to reverse this trend, we must be capable of feeling respect, and consideration for the Earth, as well as compassion for the human suffering of others. Once we have adjusted our feelings we must also orient our actions to assure the well-being and peace of future generations.

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